Teens, SCREAMS and Acolytes

THIS HORROR THRILLER WALKS THE LINE BETWEEN ART FILM AND GENRE FILM WITH MIXED RESULTS, WRITES Alexandra Heller-Nicholas.

PICTURED: JAMES (JOSHUA PAYNE), CHASELY (HANNA MANGAN-LAWRENCE) AND MARK (SEBASTIAN GREGORY). ALL IMAGES © ACOlyTES
Jon Hewitt’s Acolytes (2008) is less a ‘teen flick’ than it is an adult genre film about teenagers. On what feels like a regular venture into truancy, apparent everyteens Mark (Sebastian Gregory), Chasely (Hanna Mangan-Lawrence) and James (Joshua Payne) wander out of their cardboard box-like suburban Queensland world into a deserted theme park on the edge of the bush.

CLEARLY BESOTTED with Chasely, Mark slinks away while she and James make out, and by chance he witnesses Ian Wright (Joel Edgerton) burying an unknown object.Propelled by their fascination with the disappearance of their peer Tanya Lee (Holly Baldwin), the three return to the scene and dig up a body. Through clues and luck, they discover that Wright is a serial killer. Instead of contacting the police, the blackmail plan leads them to a deserted theme park on the edge of the bush.

Just as the action begins to ramp up, Wright seeks to punish Mark not be like someone. Follow in their footsteps … an amateur.’ As is made explicit later in the film, Wright seeks to punish Mark not only for a poor attempt at blackmailing him, but for stepping on his turf. The title is well chosen: aside from Wright’s own consideration of Mark as a beginner who is well out of his league, it also evokes notions of ritual, ceremony and tradition. These are three concepts that even the least articulate of horror fans intuitively hold sacred in their lightning-speed ability to separate the horror frauds and posers from the bona fide Real Things. So what will they make of Acolytes?

In 2009, it is almost impossible to write about a film like Acolytes without the phrase ‘after Wolf Creek’ making an appearance. In this sense, there is a more subtle, even cheeky, aspect to the title. It seems patronising at best (and ignorant at worst) to suggest that genre stalwart Hewitt, who teamed up with Richard ‘Melbourne Underground Film Festival’ Wolstencroft for his debut feature, Bloodlust, in 1993, is anything even close to a trainee, bowed and humbled in the Church of Mclean. Wolf Creek was undeniably huge-ly important, for the local industry and horror as whole, with its canny (and long overdue), driving subversion of final girl clichés. But it is also important to remember how the beatification of Wolf Creek in a film like Not Quite Hollywood (Mark Hartley, 2008) has effective-ly re-written Australia genre history. It is no small paradox that in the process of rescuing some titles, Hartley’s documentary has effectively deleted a whole slew of important (although not necessarily financially successful) genre films from the popular memory for the simple crime of not fitting in with the epic Ozploitation Renaissance narrative: both Bloodlust and Philip Brophy’s gloriously flawed Body Melt (1993) are glaring omissions.

There is no argument that Hewitt earned his stripes in the no man’s land of 1990s genre filmmaking in Australia. It may have seemed that Acolytes deserves praise simply for proving Hewitt had the mettle to survive the local industry long enough for horror to finally come back into vogue. If the media quotes in the Acolytes promotional material are anything to go by, the film’s praises have been sung enthusiastically in a range of credible tenors. The official Acolytes website quotes Variety as calling it ‘savagely misanthropic, unsettlingly ethereal’ and Twitch observing that it is ‘wickedly smart … driven by powerhouse performances’. While it would be unfair to hold anyone involved in the making of a film responsible for the more creative urges on the part of the promotional team, it is often revelatory to compare press quotes with the quotes in their original context. Here the originals emphasise both the strengths and weaknesses of Acolytes. While Russell Edwards is commenting in Variety on the ‘savagely misanthropic’ tone, the ‘unsettlingly ethereal’ aspect refers solely to the ‘HD lens-ing [that] is slicker than it initially appears’. Todd Brown at Twitch is also careful to clarify his praise, and while he does celebrate ‘powerhouse performances’ in Acolytes, he is careful to articulate that this is only in relation ‘to its two adult leads’. It is also of note that the ‘wickedly smart’ comment, like Edwards’, deliberately focuses on the strength of film’s formal components: ‘beautifully shot and wickedly smart in execution’.

While it is not surprising that promotional material might imply a broader context for the quotes used for marketing purposes, it is curious that these quotes used for Acolytes so strongly emphasise the film’s formal aspects. If Acolytes is to be considered a great film, it must be almost purely on the nuts-and-bolts mechanics of its construction. There is a fluidity of form that dominates this film, and its carefully constructed soundscapes saturate its elegant digital cinematography.
Initially, the middle-of-the-road blandness of the unidentifiable yet glaringly familiar pop-rock soundtrack seems only distracting, but its excessiveness suggests that if it isn’t deliberately playing with ideas of genre, saturation and glut on a broader level, then it is without doubt one of the film’s most unintentional thematic strengths.

Visually, Acolytes is equally as strong: its aggressive palette of blues and greens indicates a sense of aesthetic confidence that the weaker aspects of the film may otherwise belie. The impact of the film’s narrative climax is predicated almost solely upon its confident cinematography and lighting. While such comparisons are always subjective to some degree, there might be an identifiable Bill Henson-like ambience to this sequence, as light seems to emit from bodies rather than falling upon them. With the film’s emphasis upon teen sexuality, this may be an unexpected intertextual reference that exists beyond directorial intent.

The work of Gus Van Sant also provides a useful point of reference to Acolytes. While not exactly derivative of Van Sant, Acolytes has a very similar cinematographic sense of wandering—a haunting kind of meandering coldness to the film’s surface that, when combined with the teen focus of the narrative, is highly reminiscent of both Elephant (2003) and Paranoid Park (2007). Another key point of comparison is Van Sant’s famous casting of ‘real’ teenagers in both of these films. In Acolytes, too, the three teenage leads are all played by relative unknowns, roughly the same age of their characters. But while the casting comes across as authentic and intense in the two Van Sant films, in Acolytes it seems simply patronising and stagey. Surely it takes more than iPods, graffiti, untucked shirts and mentions of ‘Vinnies’ to create an accurate vision of Australian youth today.

In particular, a clumsily scripted scene in a playground feels like it is more a role-playing exercise in an undergraduate sociology class than any true insight into the human experience. Even more awkward is the inclusion of a very poorly executed sex scene: embarrassing for all the wrong reasons, it is a rare moment of formal sloppiness in this film. Perhaps Acolytes is so caught up with patting itself on the back for its brave attempts at ‘being real’ that it is unable to see that the emperor (like Chasely) is somewhat scantly clad.

One can’t help but tune in to other elements that are broadcasting on the same not-quite-right frequency. While ordinarily a necessity in horror film, the harder the film attempts to prove its ‘street cred’, the more difficult it becomes to forgive its little foibles. Why does Wright call home and leave a message for ‘baby’ when his wife is deaf? (Or is it actually a message for their actual baby despite making no sense at all?) So much of this film hinges upon a sympathetic engagement with its teen characters, but at too many points it just misses the mark. The broader privileging of them as ‘real teens’ contains a presumption that we should forgive the film as a whole a slew of other mis-calculations. In short, there is a very strong sense in this film that the script itself is trying to overcompensate for its inexperienced teen actors. In practical terms, these performances could have benefited hugely from less dialogue-heavy moments of communication; it feels that the script itself (and/or the director) simply lacked faith in those chosen to perform it (indeed, it is this kind of overzealousness that explains the weird formal glitch of the aforementioned sex scene).

It is therefore no coincidence that the two adult leads were allowed to be quieter, their physical presence given as much narrative weight as their words. The inexplicable campiness of Joel Edgerton’s costume aside, as Wright he presents a taut—and if not believable then at least consistently villainous—presence that gives the film enough narrative propulsion to glide over the clunkier aspects of its teen ‘social issue melodrama’ components. But without doubt, the strongest of all the performances is Michael Dorman as the thuggish Gary Parker. Electrifying in every shot, he transcends the swastika-wielding cliché of his narrative function to become nothing less than an intangible and violent blur of pure class fury.

It is difficult to not smother with praise a film so formally sophisticated, and Acolytes is a beautiful film to experience on this sensory level alone. But it strikes trouble on a more conceptual level when it tries to balance genre with art. The film appears to acknowledge that there is a long history that relishes the tensions between art and horror: European cinema can trace the lineage from Häxan: Witchcraft Through the Ages (Benjamin Christensen, 1922), through to Jean Rollin and Dario Argento, to current genre auteurs like Alexandre Aja and Tomas Alfredson. But Acolytes fundamentally lacks directorial faith in its ability to get the tension between genre and art to really work in its favour, and it really lets go of its assumed generic constraints to frenetic in its clear passion for formal experimentation. Combined with its pushy conceits regarding ‘real teens’, the final product is coated in a calculated but emotionally barren slickness. Alfredson’s Let The Right One In (2008) illustrates just how liberating a genre-like horror can be for those with a real flair for formal adventurousness and an interest in awkward kids. But ultimately, Acolytes sacrifices its intuitive abstraction for an uninspired and conservative rendering of ‘Australian youth’, and this results in a less than memorable addition to the horror genre.

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Endnotes