

Possession (1981) (France & West Germany)
Written By: Andrzej Żuławski & Frederic Tuten
Directed By: Andrzej Żuławski
Stars: Isabelle Adjani & Sam Neill
IMDB Rating: 7.3/10 Stars
Rotten Tomatoes Audience Score: 78%

Plot Synopsis: The relationship between an international corporate spy (Sam Neill) and his wife (Isabelle Adjani), who begins exhibiting increasingly disturbing behavior after asking for a divorce. Obsession, Possession and Suspicions of infidelity soon give way to something much more sinister and disturbing.

My Review: This 2-hour and 4-minute movie may very well be one of the more disturbing psychological horror movies I have ever seen. How I never saw this growing up or during my fascination with disturbing conceptual films in film school I may never know. On 9/23/2022 I sat down to watch **POSSESSION** eyes wide open with no expectations.

This movie has been listed in many lists for best horror and/or best psychological thriller ever made. I have seen this film mentioned so many times in the past 2 years watching movie reviews and conversations about thrillers/horror on the **INTERNET** that I couldn't ignore it any longer. What, in the past, chased me away from this was the age and length. At 2-hours and 4-minutes, that is a slow burn and some older movies can be hard to watch at times, but I finally got to it and boy does it **NOT disappoint...**

Before I go on with my review, analysis and thoughts about the film there are going to be heavy **SPOILERS** ahead and my **WARNING** that kids and younger teenagers probably should not see this movie till they are older. It is that disturbing that even my 13-year-old version of myself would have been left terrified. This is right up there with *Altered States* (1980), *The Entity* (1982) and *The Thing* (1982) as far as conceptual horror goes. Conceptual horror would be those things you think you see in the darker corners of your room at night that you cannot really make out but you know it is there and you know that it wants you to be afraid of it... And it is that feeling that just terrifies you to a point you cannot sleep...

That Kind of HORROR...

My initial and first viewing of the movie I had no expectations going into it. I knew the basic plot that you can find on Google, IMDB.com, Rotten Tomatoes and other movie review websites. The basic plot is above and most of these sites word it basically the same way, which I did pull from. After the credits rolled I was left somewhat confused. I immediately went on YouTube and look for videos that explain what it was I actually just saw. Most of the videos all said the same stuff that you can look up on Wiki. None of the video reviews really got into what I was thinking was happening, but that is the beauty of conceptual horror is that there are no wrong answers here.

I think the best way to watch *Possession* is to watch it blind without knowing what others think is actually happening. At this point if you have not seen the film and you want to see the film before you dive into this, then stop here and go watch it and come back.

SPOILERS AHEAD...

This movie is very complicated to just summarize. The only way to understand it is to watch it for yourself. Due to the availability of this movie over the 5 decades it has been around most who have not seen it have no clue what this movie is and at best have only vaguely heard about it. And/or that you've watched it and are wondering what in the hell you just saw. There are a few moments in the film that just make you question what the hell is actually going on here.

The movie starts like we have already been sitting there watching for 15 minutes. Sam Neill's character (Mark) returns to his home in West Berlin from a work related trip. It wasn't very clear exactly what he does, but it has something to do with corporate espionage and it is not clear if his job is related to the plot or not, but there are some clues something is at play. Once he gets home his wife Anna, played by Isabelle Adjani, asks him for a divorce.

Some of the time transitions are not very well established. We do not know if days/weeks go by but it feels like days. Mark agrees to leave to give Anna time while leaving their son Bob in her care. Mark becomes obsessed with trying to find out why Anna wants a divorce as Anna stresses there is not another man, but cannot explain why she wants the divorce. Mark learns from Anna's only friend, Margie, that Anna was seeing another man while Mark was gone playing corporate spy.

Eventually, Mark composes himself and goes back to his apartment where he finds the place a mess and their son, Bob uncared for, neglected and left to his own vices. Mark furious with his wife for abandoning their son takes over the home, cares for his son and no longer allows his wife to be alone with their son, all while there are long stretches of time where Anna disappears to places unknown.

This is now the first "what the hell" moment and things start to get super weird from here on out. How one perceives *Possession* is totally up to them, but I find it a bit easier and less metaphoric if you assume what Mark sees is what is actually happening. This does not suggest that the things we see are not real, by any means; just that it is easier to connect the dots if you follow the plot through Mark's perception of it.

At this point in the story Mark is taking care of his son while he meets Bob's school teacher, Hellen, who looks identical to his wife, but with Green eyes (*played by Isabelle Adjani as well*). This is sort of important once you see how the movie unfolds. They spark up a sort of relationship. He desires her and she desires him, but she has no expectations from him other than him giving her a chance. It is never stated. More like shown through their interactions. Anna has blue eyes, while Hellen has green eyes. Anna seems to be always wearing a blue dress while Hellen wears all bright or light colors other than blue. Anna acts out with erratic behaviors, while Hellen seems very balanced, a natural nurturer.

Mark has met Anna's other lover, Heinrich, and they get into a short lived fight where Heinrich destroys Mark. Heinrich understands Mark's rage and only beats him up out of self-defense and has a sense of respect for Mark. Heinrich seems just as confused as Mark does as Heinrich has not spoken to Anna in weeks and makes Mark wonder where Anna has been disappearing to.

From Anna's point of view we do not really know what is going on with her, but she is acting very odd and erratic when she randomly comes home. After the fight with Heinrich Mark returns home to find Anna during one of these occasions she comes to the apartment to make Bob a sandwich. Her and Mark begin to fight and

he gives her the Sean Connery treatment of a few slaps to the face. Anna storms out, bleeding from the mouth. Mark goes to hire a private investigator to follow Anna and get to the bottom of it all.

This is where we have no real setups to prepare us for what comes next. We later find out that Anna is sheltering a Lovecraftian creature in an abandon building that we have absolutely no backstory about, full of tentacles. The creature starts as a shapeless mass, but as Anna kills the following investigator and his lover, another investigator and it is assumed she is feeding the creature their body parts. The creature begins to take a more human shape. At this point the movie goes right off the rails of what is considered cohesive and warranted expectations from what we have seen up to this point to when the creature is seen for the first time.



When I saw this I had absolutely no clue what was happening anymore. There were no setups at all that gave me a suggestion Anna is hoarding a Lovecraftian creature that she allows to mate with her. The creature seems to have some sort of telekinesis powers when it senses potential danger and seems to have corrupted Anna to a point that she tried to hold off the creature mentally but fails. This effect on Anna is what seems to be causing all her behavioral issues.

She eventually goes back to Mark and describes a sequence that happened while he was gone on his work trip where she describes a violent miscarriage she had in the subway. They show the scene in full and it is quite disturbing and a brilliant piece of acting by Isabelle Adjani. She won the César Award for best actress for her performance in this film. We are unsure if it is Mark's baby or one of her other lovers, as during her fights with Mark she says she has been with multiple people other than Heinrich.

I am not sold on some other analyses' that the creature is not actually a real tangible thing in reality. We are given cues throughout the film that the monster is real. What/How/Why, that seems to be the part that is hard to dissect in this film. Because of its metaphoric nature and not being a true creature feature, along with being the only English-spoken film in the director's works up to this time we are left with a lot of WTF questions inside the narrative.

I feel like all the metaphors of division and relationship turmoil are at play here along with a different style of telling the story of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" meets a "Lovecraftian-type story" with the monster, its mind control powers, its origins, why sex is so powerful for it and its victims and transformations.

At the end, some sort of attack, battle, or invasion is happening in the real sense of the word, but because we only see the story through Mark and Anna we are unsure as to how much of this is at play and/or if there are other elements at play it being West Berlin and all with the wall being in full view in some scenes of the film.

This movie is full of metaphors, so many that most of the commentaries about the movie solely focus on them and not on the possible Alien invasion part of the story that could be at play here as well. Mark notices he is being watched several times by his former employers. Heinrich's role is also interesting and the voice on the phone that talks to Mark about Anna being with him and not Mark where Mark assumes it is Heinrich, but it isn't.

There are a lot of metaphors here for division among people and relationships, as it is openly known the writer/director of the film wrote this during his own turbulent divorce. Hellen, the doppelganger teacher, that Mark is having a sexual relationship with may or may not be a copy manifested from Mark's desires to have his wife, be a normal wife. Hellen throughout her role in the story is there for Bob whenever Mark needs someone for Bob and is there for him, whenever he needs that feeling of normalcy in his love life.

The whole doppelganger theme is heavily at play here as well. The Blue and the Green of Anna's and Hellen's eyes, but it is never explained and could be, probably is, just another metaphor for change in a relationship. Anna is never worried about losing Mark, but she is worried that Mark "won't like her, as a person anymore." Anna attempts to be a normal wife and mother at random times, but due to her contamination of the creature's influence on her she reacts only in disturbing and erratic behaviors. There are signs she knows this is happening and tries to keep her family from being exposed to the creature. Anna kills her only friend, Margie. Mark attempts to cover it up. Mark then kills Heinrich and makes it look like a drug fueled accident.

Heinrich's mother seems to know her son has been killed and wants Mark to explain it to her. They have a short chat while she consumes poison and slowly passes away. She knows Mark is there to kill her, but doesn't give him that satisfaction nor is it really explained. Mark at this point is doubling down with his wife. He will do anything to keep her. He returns to Margie's house and hears moaning and screaming noises where he stumbles upon the creature for himself having sex with his wife. It is unclear whether or not the creature is raping her or it is a mutual joining. The creature at this point appears part dog and part man. Lower parts look more like a dog and the upper body looks more human-like. There are tentacles wrapped around Anna's legs and arms pinning them down. We get both screams of pain and pleasure coming from Anna while she repeats over and over again "**almost...**"

The next day Mark is wondering the streets on Heinrich's motorcycle. When Mark's former employers along with the police start to track down Anna's doings Mark creates a distraction and kills one of the cops so Anna can escape. He himself is injured and attempts to flee when after a few miles he wrecks the bike and stumbles into a building with a spiral staircase. As he is climbing up the staircase Anna and a man follow him up.

Mark, beaten, bloodied and probably dying from his injuries sees Anna and a doppelganger of himself. Mark raises his gun to shoot it but he and Anna are gunned down by a hail of bullets from the police below. The doppelganger of Mark is not touched by the bullets and escapes through the roof, but not before using his mind control powers to seduce another woman and gives her the gun and she begins to shoot to create a distraction for his escape.

Creature Mark goes to Hellen's place while she is babysitting Bob when the doorbell rings. Bob implores over and over again to her not to open the door, but Helen ignores him. From outside, the sound of sirens, planes,

and explosions fill the air. Bob races up the stairs to the bathroom, where he drowns himself in the bathtub. A silhouette of Creature Mark is seen from the frosted glass door. Helen stares, her eyes wide and the movie fades to black. None of the other analyzations take any of this stuff in account and chalk it all up to more relationship metaphors of division.

Me... This is “**Invasion of the Body Snatchers**” just told from a point of view of a dysfunctional relationship. I feel like there are other cues besides the metaphors for division and dysfunctional relationships here with how Anna’s friend Margie says she hates Mark, but tries to make passes at him whenever she can. Hellen being a possible doppelganger/alien/creature of Anna manifested by Mark yearning for a normal and loving wife and mother. The 2 gay detectives that see the creature and are killed and fed to the creature. The miscarriage in the subway. Anna’s deteriorating erratic behaviors towards her family. The origins of the creature Anna “possesses.” How sex is portrayed in the context of the story.

The title itself, “**Possession...**” I always thought from the basic plot summary that possession meant demonic possession, but after seeing this and seeing how Mark’s initial reaction to Anna’s behavior I thought the title was a play on words for “**Obsession.**” However, throughout the film Anna keeps talking about things in the context of **possession** as in, **it possesses her or she possesses it**, the creature. If I watch the film through my eyes and not Mark’s or Anna’s POV, then I feel like this is some sort of play on a Lovecraftian creature, doomsday movie or an Alien invasion story. Along with all the metaphors for division with the movie taking place in West Berlin and dystopian type tones with how everyone lives. All the stuff with dysfunctional relationships as well. All this could and probably is at play.



A Twilight Zone/Black Mirror-type reimagining of this story could be very interesting in the 2020s if done right. I cannot believe I am only now just seeing this movie for the first time. I was left very unsettled and it has been a quick minute since I got that from a horror flick. Horror movies are designed to scare you, but to make you think the whole time, all while freaking you out is like something David Cronenberg and David Lynch did to me in the 80s and 90s.

If you want to see something so bizarre and freaks you out along with brilliant character acting I highly recommend to check out Andrzej Żuławski’s “**POSSESSION**” (1981)... Finding this on legitimate stream sites may be problematic. I could not find it on the main ones. The only place I could find this where it is 100% legal was purchasing the DVD from Amazon at \$30 and up. I had to download the film using “other” services

in order to see it without restrictions. So if you wanna see this film and you cannot find a way to see it. Just send me a message and we'll figure it out. My copy is about 1.92 gigabytes in size.

Possession is more an unsettling experience than being scared out of your socks before bed. Its scares come more from the unnatural flow of the narrative and unpredictability. The projection of what others think you should be over actually being who you are. We do not envision people for who they are always.

More times than not we tend to envision people as movie trailers. We will behave different to different people. We'll behave different in the particular environment we are in. People will act different in concern to us, for us. You may know someone for years but do you actually know them? You may date them, marry them, have children with them and still never really know them. Not all believe in possessing a person, but most, at some point in their life will treat another or many like they are a **"possession..."**

Review of: "Possession" (1981)

by David-Angelo Mineo

9/24/2022

3,132 Words