

Jovanka Vuckovic, Annie Clark, Roxanne Benjamin, and Karen Kusama. *XX. Magnet Releasing and XYZ Films Productions, 2017.*

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1 Given the low number of women contributors to horror, a genre anthology of “four deadly tales from four female filmmakers” (Magnet Releasing) is a disappointingly unique concept. This is what *XX* (2017) promises, with four dramatically different horror shorts. However as an anthology, the film lacks consistency in style and tone, as the only commonality is the gender of the filmmakers.

2 Based on a short story by Jack Ketchum, “The Box” is the first of the collection. Directed by Jovanka Vuckovic, Gemini-award winning visual effects artist and former Editor-in-Chief of *Rue Morgue Magazine*, “The Box” manages a sophisticated level of atmospheric dread given the short run time. On the way home to the suburbs, a young son peeks into a stranger’s red gift box on the train. He then stops eating without explanation, and the food refusal soon spreads to his sister. Relationships between the rest of the family and the mother (played by Natalie Brown) rapidly deteriorate, as she desperately struggles to connect with her family, their newfound affliction, and the box, before everyone’s self-starved demise. Her husband reacts to the situation with anger and blames her for continued composure and measures of self-care. In the most unsettling scene of the collection, the mother is literally consumed by her family on their suburban dinner table, a gory and macabre dreamscape through which she softly smiles. Her family members starve to death in hospital one after another, and she never receives an explanation of the contents of the box beyond “nothing”. The viewer also does not learn the origin of the mystery. Identifying with the maternal confusion, dread, and disconnection is exactly what makes this piece disconcerting.

3 The second installation, “The Birthday Party”, is the directorial debut by Annie Clarke (aka St. Vincent). On the morning of her daughter’s birthday party, an anxious housewife (Melanie Lynskey) finds her deceased husband alone in his study. Her sadness over his presumed suicide is truncated by the planned events of the day and her inability to fully grieve. She conceals the death from both her malign housekeeper and nosy neighbour, annoyingly contrived women characters. A series of irrational, trauma-driven

decisions ends with her hiding the body in a plush panda costume and setting it up as a prop at the party. The short ends with the accidental discovery of the body by partygoers and a filmic postscript that comments on the daughter's future therapy and difficulties with intimacy. Channelling *Weekend at Bernie's* (1989) black comedic absurdity, "The Birthday Party" explores themes of humiliation, loss, and fears around childrearing. The cattiness of the characters also highlights how subtle and entrenched patriarchal expectations encourage women to be awful to each other. Less traditionally horror than the other shorts, the plot's irreverence does not make it out of place in the collection, and the mid-century aesthetics and St. Vincent's ambient pop soundtrack give it a unique take on the genre.

4 After contributions to *V/H/S* (2012), *V/H/S/2* (2013) and *Southbound* (2015), Roxanne Benjamin's filmography is largely composed of horror shorts. "Don't Fall" is a classic fabled creature feature, where four characters on a camping trip trespass on cursed land and one becomes a flesh eating monster as a result. After an accidental skin puncture while hiking, the gullible and easily scared character (played by Gretchen Wool) quickly transforms and brutally murders all of her friends. Of the four pieces, this is the most straightforward horror, with ample gore and jump-scares. It intentionally draws on the tropes of horror, right from the over-the-top title sequence, but subverts the final girl narrative. Building folklore from the ground up is difficult in a short and it results in something that feels like a campfire story with problematic and vague references to 'maybe Native American' roots.

5 The last segment by Karen Kusama, "Her Only Living Son", is a strong finale, envisioned as an alternative trajectory for *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). In the original, Dr. Hill returns Rosemary to her husband as an exercise of his medical (and patriarchal) authority, assuming she is insane. In this reimagination, the Dr. Hill character believes her and helps her escape the coven of Satanists. The segment explores the fraught relationship between single mother (Christina Kirk) and son, who is coming of age, influenced by considerable sins of his father. There is palpable tension between the mother's love and fear of her son, highlighted in a scene in the principal's office, where the son is let off for brutally attacking a girl. The viewer cannot help but draw parallels to many university sexual assault cases, where the perpetrator and his bright future are the

central considerations for the disciplining powers. The piece ends in a beautifully tragic moment where mother and son die together in an act of agency separate from paternal Satanic forces.

6 The transitional animation by Sofia Carrillo (*La Casa Triste*) unites the anthology in wraparound segments with deconstructed and monstrous dollhouses, playing with truly creepy decaying representations of femininity. Though three out of the four shorts address motherhood (and its perversities) in some manner, there is little thematic cohesiveness in the way that constructs a typical anthology. Like many reviewers who applauded the compilation of a female-directed genre anthology, Peter Howell refers to *XX* as “signed, sealed and delivered as a form of empowerment” (Howell). There is definite novelty in an all-female directed collection, given the genre dominance of men. However, citing empowerment at any incarnation of female filmmakers undermines attempts at normalizing their presence in the genre (Miller). Overall, the film is worth watching for the quality of each vignette and centrality of women protagonists; but each should be consumed separately without expecting continuity throughout the anthology.

Works Cited

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