

MOVIE REVIEWS

You Have To Die To Cross... THE ABYSS

The good thing about being ol' Monty, is that the motion picture industry and related careers don't live and die on your words. This relieves your *T-Bird* critic of a lot of unnecessary responsibility, frees him to indulge some little luxuries that simply aren't given to the Siskels and Eberts of the world. For instance, though this review of *The Abyss* only appears in these gages now (so you'd assume MT simply waited to rent the cassette rather than frequent the theatre run during its "critical" days) the fact is Monty caught it on its theatrical junket and simply decided to delay the review till the tape was out. This decision wasn't at all due to any ambiguity or indecision about the movie; Monty knows an MT - meisteerwork when he sees one. It was merely an option draw upon those special luxuries granted a critic whose word isn't breathlessly awaited, whose effusions aren't quotably crucial to the box office fortunes of a major studio investment. There is neither love or revenue lost to a Gail Ann Hurd, a Ridley Scott or Tim Burton when as in this case one withholds from the general cache of negotiable epithets (i.e. "the feel good movie of the year", "made me leave the theatre a better person for the experience") some toothsome turn of phrase such as "we have to dig into the Dream Psyche of this epic screen-symbolization in order to understand the *extravagant dissociations* in linear logic and developmental motivation"... etc. (gushes MT of the *Thunderbird Chronicle*).

This positively venal liberty with Time allows your friendly reviewer the rare opportunity to function in the form of "critic to the critics" as well, since what the given work elicits in the *reviewing psyche* has always seemed very bit a principal part of the filmic phenomenon. There is just as much going on, so ol' Monty would argue, in the emotions and reactions provoked in the Analytic bosom as can be derived from any isolated screening alone.

But is this *fair*? (we needn't ask whether this is a way to ingratiate oneself with one's colleagues). We can only posit such a question in the first place if we presume that there is a distinct *frame* surrounding the subject-matter of criticism and review like a picture in a gallery; we tend to assume the convention that the relation between a work and its critique is formally set, standardized according to fixed principles so that everything automatically finds its bearings within that framework, "knows its place"; *this* is the artistic/commercial offering, and *this* is what the refined eye of criticism has to say about it. It seldom seems to occur to anyone that such a formal or standardized relation is *itself* an "aesthetic" phenomenon and loans itself to the displaced perspective of an *encompassing* critique.

Yet it follows that a given device of art isn't fashioned in a vacuum; it is *an expression of* consciousness, and takes consciousness as its *object*; it's created with reference to a distinct *polarization* of cognition between "sending" and "receiving" terminals of consciousness, so that the receiving (i.e. in this case critiquing) terminal of consciousness is always an integral if implicit magnitude of the creative act. (We must realize that even the dedicated solipsist honors *himself* as observer and as a consequence is not without his audience, if only the one lonely occupant of a theatre seat in the empty-ringing hall; given just an "audience" of one however we're at liberty to multiply a millionfold, for the ontological relation in consciousness is established through just that "one" and holds good thereafter regardless the additional zeros. In other words, given the allegedly "problematic" solipsistic premise, we're magically restored in a stroke to the "real world" of polarized perspectives in consciousness.)

Isn't then the *relation* between sending and receiving terminals of consciousness essentially that of education? Isn't such a pattern basically one of feedback, so that a mutual *learning* process is allowed to take place? And if this is so, may not this process of *education* so central to the presentation of any artwork be an authentic subject of analysis and examination itself, rather than simply one arbitrary *pole* of the process? Isn't it in a certain sense illuminative of a whole domain of function to recognize that the work of the artist is to educate the receptive eye, and that the receptive eye is reciprocally authorized to educate the artist as to what's been seen? This implies of course that there continuously exists an invertible relation between "teacher" and "pupil", "pupil" and "teacher", and an implicit *power-struggle* maintained in the persuasive determinations as to just *who* shall wear which hat. At any given time, the one who would be "educator" (whether artist or critic) stands before one from whom he ought properly to be learning. Whether this is recognized, of course, makes the difference between creative dialogue and entrenched hostilities. Quite often it happens that one in the real position of pupil fails to recognize that fact, as when the

basically-mediocre stands before genius and presumes to “educate” it. The artist who would educate the eye of the observer must in turn be responsive as to whether the act of observation has anything to teach the creative “instructor”. It should be kept in mind that a Mencken or a McDonald (Dwight) are a constant education to the merely “talented”, or those who presume “talent”; and that a Picasso has to long acclimate the critical eye to his brand of education before that eye opens to the fact that it’s been a *pupil* all along and not the teacher, gently *guided* by the continuous persuasion of genius to its revised pedagogic standards.

So we come to *The Abyss*.

In all the reams of words one has read on the subject of this summer film, it must be asked whether there is *anyone at all* in the darkened mezzanine of our shared pleasure palace, anyone in the conventional theatre of existence equal to addressing the matter of this movie that ought to have been so self-evident. The critical consensus in relation to this film seems rather to have definitively indexed the mediocre station at which the conscious level has settled; the spokespersons for the general frame of reference seem clearly to have defined the distance that stands as an abyssal gap between that which our most visionary art has to tell us and that which we’re capable collectively of accepting.

The critical consensus on *The Abyss* seems indeed more uniform than most; virtually all “major” critics seem to agree that the film “divides in half”, and makes a much better adventure film of the standard caliber than it does “science fiction”— that these “two” aspects of it mix rather like oil and water.

In fact, “oil” and “water” fairly characterize the terms of *tension* in the film, if not its final quality. The plot, with which we’re familiar by now, finds the crew of the underwater oil-drilling station *Deepcore* shotgun-married to a U.S. Navy SEAL team in an ad hoc, investigative operation commissioned to assess the fate of a nuclear sub lost or crippled in the Caribbean. The pivot of plot, *character* and *physical* tension is related to *pressure*, i.e. the various discrepancies and apparent incompatibilities that arise between civilian and military mentality, the potential for HPNS (high pressure nervous syndrome) as they dive more deeply, the claustrophobia of the enforced environment, the tension surrounding the presence of explodable nuclear warheads...and the principal, Unknown factor, the persistence of that incalculable “ingredient” teasingly heralded by strange lights and vaguely answerable, somehow, for the disastrous fate of the hunted sub...

This Unknown factor is indeed the Point of the movie. It’s that very, subterranean passage into the unknown, under extraordinary pressure and —gropingly— in the dark, which psychologically defines the relation to the film’s real key. Without this, the movie has no meaning. It cannot *be* an “adventure” film without this haunting lure, this magnetic Presence. The unexpected Beings that ultimately populate the vertiginous trench on the edge of which they’re trapped, comprise much more than the Hitchcock “McGuffin” i.e. a device to move the plot along. It is obvious that the mutually resistive sense of “oil” and “water” in this film has to do with the very meaning on which its elements are structured; there is a passage between essential *dimensions* of Being taking place here, and this is made virtually self-evident *everywhere* in the movie. It is after all about the unexpected (but *enforced*, mandated) transition between distinct values of existence underscored by the peculiar requirements for acclimatization to the “breathing liquid”, the acute care toward graduated pressurization and decompression etc.

Indeed, just as Monty had insisted that *Batman* was really “about” *poison*, so it should be recognized that *The Abyss* is really “about” *air*. Whole *atmospheres* of existence have to be taken into consideration for each step accomplished. The ante on *attention* concomitantly goes up; everything taken for granted on the “surface” of things, has to be reviewed by the scan of critical alertness in the deeps. Breath *isn’t* taken for granted. Indeed, a whole *different internal environment* in the chemical composition of the bloodstream has to be established in order for them to move into the domains they’re required to investigate. A whole different proportion of oxygen to other elements has to be induced for the transitions to be accomplished without sudden disaster and death. Elements such as nitrogen which would be poisonous under ordinary circumstances, are crucial to the breathing mix in order to neutralize possible HPNS.

The sense of claustrophobia (which was so repellent to some critics as to cause them to abandon their critical seat and run in sheer emotionalism of psychological reaction for the exits) automatically puts *air* at a premium. Indeed the principals, Bud and Lindsey Brigman (perfectly played by the great Ed Harris and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) wind up gasping for air, and then...no breath. The suspension of breathing to the point of—*dying*! The revelation of the movie, the point which no one seemed able to bear without turning from its central significance, is ultimately that the only way *out* from their seemingly patent

entrapment is for at least one of them *to die!* Literally die. The factor which for every audience made *The Abyss* such a powerful film, was the extraordinary “solution” to their ultimate release which writer/director Cameron had devised.

Of just as great a significance, it is the *woman* who heroically volunteers for, and goes *through with*, the program of dying. Why Lindsey? Is it an implicit if buried misogyny of the filmmaker, a corollary of her depiction by the other characters as a royal shrew? Or is it more archetypally deep than all that? Does it have to do perhaps with the critical role of woman in the *birthing process*? Is it perhaps that she is indispensably critical to the *rebirthing process* as well, and that the same psycho-physiological pattern that distinguishes her as “feminine” and therefore childbearing “doubles” on a higher plane for a more holistic birthing/regeneration process? What clue do we have in the film that this could be the case (rather than being just a symptom of Monty’s own thematic obsessions arbitrarily grafted to the filmstock)?

First of all, *Lindsey* is the inventor/designer of the whole drilling station through the vehicle of which the adventure is carried out. The Navy appropriates her rig in fact because it’s uniquely suited to the task, and closer to the scene as far as the critical time-factor is concerned. The whole thing takes place *through her vehicle*. In fact it’s *because* she’s designer/commandant of the underwater station that she’s criticized for her allegedly “masculine” or martinet traits. Indeed one critic (Dixie Whatley) lamented that Mastrantonio’s performance was *defective* on that score since she seemed not to measure up behaviorally to the sotto voce comments about her murmured by the crew, and was “so much more convincing” in the latter part of the film during her transformatively empathetic phase.

This, however, is just *the point*. Mastrantonio’s performance is precisely perfect because she’s refused to interpret her character according to the judgment of *other characters in the script!* Since when, we must ask our contemporary critics, are the musings of characters *within a play* supposed automatically to be downstage instructions directed, on a one-to-one basis, for our apprehension of any other character in the play? Mastrantonio’s performance has to be taken, on the contrary, at precisely its *own* value and not judgmentally against her character’s description by other characters. Her performance *as given* is trying to tell us something critical about her character and its integral role in the drama. If her performance suggests she’s something other than a shrew and all-out martinet, perhaps that’s because we’re supposed to understand the way in which the crew-members, including her husband, are *misperceiving her!* Let’s let her performance, in other words, tell us something at least as viable about her as what’s said in the script by others, and something as well perhaps about the *observations* of those others. To accept the *reality* of her “shrewishness” at face value just because it’s the affirmed scuttlebutt of the predominantly male crew, is to accept the conventional rap on PMS!

She’s resented because it’s *her rig* and she has proprietary concern over it, a concern that wouldn’t cause a blink toward any given male counterpart. Her behavior is, perhaps, routinely officious as might be befitting any entrepreneur of similar responsibilities; she might be a little *pushy* in places but that hardly equals the role of martinet that’s hung on her, behind her back. She’s probably just an Aries.

Indeed if we look at both her role and that of Bud, her estranged husband, *as played* and not as characterized by others in the script, there is much to like about both of them from the very outset. It becomes progressively evident that their estrangement is the product of mutual misunderstanding and impatience, rather than anything intrinsically awful about either of them. And that superficial basis of misunderstanding is *precisely* what’s overcome by the depth of Being they both must face when “coincidentally” placed side by side in the ultimate “no win” situation. They must in fact face death, one another’s death; their own death. The Transformation that takes place when finally emerging on the Other Side of that ultimate Veil of Death, then, is a decisive transformation toward the Real, i.e. the truly compatible and mutually loving condition of their beings beyond the superficial (or “surface”) appearances of antipathetic polarity.

The Abyss, then, is a love story—but an unflinching love story, one of the greatest ever if it’s recognized in the real magnitude of what it presents its audience. “Love You Wife” is not a sentimental expedient by which to bond the human characters to the technological wizardry of the undersea “UFOs”; it’s the formula of the movie. As with the climax of *Star Trek The Movie* (another misunderstood herald, so ol’ Monty would argue) it signifies a real *hierogamos*. It sums the spiritual marriage that takes place between male and female polarities of the whole Being when the lower-stage artifices of insular psychological self-protection are overcome. (Let’s not miss the fact that *each*, in turn, volunteers an almost certain sacrificial

death on behalf of the other —and inferentially, on behalf of much *more* than just themselves alone.) Thus it represents, symbolizes and foreshadows the real millennial transition between 3rd-stage (3rd density) consciousness and the oncoming density of the *4th great stage* in dimensional development.

This 4th density existence is indeed perfectly symbolized by the oceanic milieu of *The Abyss*. Water is the element closest by analogy to the Astral; and it is *astral* or Psychic existence itself which closes the gap, bridges the abyss and “joins” to physical consciousness in the transit to 4th density existence. This astro-material medium is precisely the “environment” of the spacebeings and other 4th density denizens as discussed in essays such as *Channeling UFOs, etc. (T-Bird Oct.- Nov. '89)*; so it's no wonder Cameron has “the Brigmans” meet such beings beneath the Sea, at the brink of *The Abyss*.

But, it seems, no one saw it, first time out. So check out the video and look at it again. Are the “two” components of the movie, the gritty undersea realism of their claustrophobic adventure and the special effects/sci-fi theme winding like a luminous electric eel around it, so utterly incompatible as all that? Or has Cameron forged a *new genre* in the balance, one to which he is educating our eyes in open recognition? a genre that wipes away the prejudicial veil that distinguishes between “dream” and “reality”, imagination (even of the Fantastic type) and corporeal conditionality in the same general way that *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* confounds our categorizing and compartmental consciousness by a seemingly “technological” advance.

Cameron himself is being rapidly categorized as a “techno-director”, i.e. one implicitly facile in the wizardry of blended special effects and action-adventure but typically “lacking a soul” (i.e. he fails to indulge the sentimentalism and empty assurance of a *Parenthood*); but *is he really?* Is the powerful performance of a Michael Biehn in *all three* of Cameron's major-budget movies, or of a Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens* or a Linda Hamilton in *The Terminator* the expected product of the techno-director's mechanical artifice? Or is there power and thematic magnitude in the script and in the production, in the direction and the remarkable acting it elicits that so far distinguishes all of Cameron's films in a way that fails to be properly noticed *only* if we still insist upon wearing the arrogant blinders of conventional categorization, that forcibly screen us from valuing “science-fiction” any higher than a certain preliminary notch on the gauge of “acceptable seriousness”?

No, Cameron is proving himself a film genius the likes of which hasn't been seen since the underrated Boorman made his best movies; and that means he is forging an Art-form that would educate—and wholly redefine —the critical Eye for which, after all, it's created.

Oh yes, don't forget who it is that *does* contract the HPNS disorder and so jeopardizes the whole effort, not to mention the world, before proving his constitutional inability to “cross” the crucial Abyss intact by exploding to bits at its edge—for it's precisely that mentality which in its rigidity does menace the fate of the world presently, and is doomed to miss the transition ultimately (“Coffey” is a perfect name for him, no? The preferred nourishment of that high-strung nervous-system so similar to the symptoms of HPNS even in its “normalcy”).

The Abyss..... * * * * *

