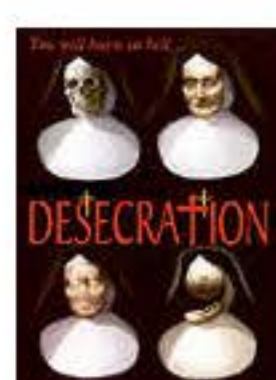


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Desecration

Reviewed on March 23, 2000 by Mike Long in DVD, Reviews // 0 Comments



Desecration (1999)
Image Entertainment
Cast: Danny Lopes, Irma St Paul
Extras: Original Short
Rating: ★★★★★

I've written before about the recent lack of horror films coming out of Europe. It has been a while since fans of EuroHorror have had a good flick to rally around. Well, I think I've discovered the problem. Instead of looking in Europe, we should have been looking in New Jersey. That's right, New Jersey. A new shocker called "Desecration" has recently hit DVD and it was filmed right here in the USA. "Desecration" was written and directed by Dante Tomaselli. With a name like that, viewers may expect a film that is reminiscent of Italian horror films and they won't be disappointed. With its disturbing images and wavering storyline, "Desecration" calls to mind the essence of EuroHorror, with a dose of American ingenuity. Giallo fans be warned, "Desecration" isn't a murder-mystery like so many European thrillers, but a supernatural horror film. "Desecration" tells the story of young Bobby Rullo. Bobby has had a very rough life. At the age of 5, Bobby witnessed his mother's death. He was subsequently raised by his father and grandmother, and then shipped off to a Catholic boarding school. As the main story opens, we see Bobby as a 16-year old, played by Danny Lopes.

A terrible accident occurs when Bobby's model airplane loses control and crashes into a nun, killing her. (I'm not making that up.) This incident sets off a bizarre string of events. Danny begins to see the dead nun everywhere. Tragic accidents begin to occur around the school. Danny's grandmother (Irma St. Paul) also begins to have bizarre visions of Danny being sucked down into a black pit. Danny turns to a priest for help, but no one believes him, or they just assume that it's guilt from the accident. Soon, Danny finds himself being pursued by the demonic nun into a horrific world where nothing is as it seems. The only person who recognizes this dangerous situation is Grandmother, and she takes it upon herself to help Danny.

Writer/director Dante Tomaselli has created a unique and compelling film that is both very strange and very hypnotic. Despite the relatively straightforward way that I presented the plot synopsis above, the film is very hard to describe. Tomaselli lets the narrative take a backseat to the film's disturbing and often grotesque images. The style of the film can be compared to that of Dario Argento's "Suspiria". (Incidentally, Tomaselli cites Argento as an artistic influence in the film's end credits, so the comparison probably isn't far off-base. He also cites Ric Ocasek, but I don't have any thoughts on that.)

The film presents us with a series of events rather than a cohesive story, and makes no apologies for this. With these events come visuals that give the viewer a great deal of information, which may or may not make sense, depending on how the viewer is interpreting the film. Tomaselli was quoted in Fangoria #191 as saying, "I just want to set up a mood and allow them (the audience) to interpret the images however they'd like. There are no easy answers."

But, for me, this is the film's downfall. I came away from the film feeling cheated. I was very impressed by the visuals, some of which I found to be very creepy. But, what did it all mean? As with "Suspiria", "Desecration" gives one the feeling of being dropped into someone else's nightmare. We are given very little background information on Bobby and his family, and many of the events in the film are never explained. And the ending is one of the most ambiguous that I've seen in years. As we can tell from the quote above, it was the director's intention to leave the film open-ended, but at times, "Desecration" has the feeling of being a series of shots that were put together in random order. And while a film like "Suspiria" almost (please note that I said "almost") crumbles under its attempts to construct a plot by the end of the film, "Desecration" wanders further and further from a plot as the film proceeds.

This criticism is not meant to imply that "Desecration" is a bad film. It isn't. It definitely succeeds as a study in visual horror. But, in my opinion, the lack of coherent plot does hurt the film. But, Tomaselli's obvious cinematic eye help to make the film watchable. "Desecration" was shot on a budget of \$150,000, but, for the most part, it is able to overcome its low budget. While Tomaselli's narrative structure (or lack thereof) brings Argento to mind, his camera work reminded me of John Carpenter. As with Carpenter, Tomaselli seems intent on packing as much visual information into each shot as possible. There are several shots which begin as seemingly benign, but you soon notice the "ghost nun" wandering in the background. There are several crane shots which are very impressive. Also, the special-effects make-up in the film is impressive as well, especially when the "ghost/demon nun" appears to have been severely burned. It should be noted that Tomaselli is the nephew of writer/director Alfred Sole, who made another Catholic-shocker "Alice, Sweet Alice" (1977), (AKA: "Holy Terro", AKA: "Communion"). What's up with that family? I think that the Pope needs to visit them.

The Image DVD of "Desecration" gives us a very nice transfer of the film. The film is $1.85:1$ and is not $16:9$. "Desecration" was shot on Super 16mm film and this transfer looks very good. While there is some graininess to the image from time to time, for the most part the picture is very clear, especially during the daylight scenes. The digital transfer has revealed some flaws in the source print, but these are minor. The image appears to be accurately framed, as there is no warping of the picture. The color balancing on the film is also quite nice, and I especially liked the sepia-toned opening. (Also, don't miss the subliminal religious symbols during the opening credits.)

The audio mix on "Desecration" is also very good. While the DVD box lists the audio as being simply $DD, Dolby Digital$ Stereo, I was definitely getting some good surround sound action throughout the film. The surround sound is used to enhance the film's eerie score and the bizarre voices that accompany the demonic happenings. Unfortunately, the dialogue mix is done rather poorly, with some of the actor's lines being virtually unintelligible.

The only extra on the DVD is a 3-minute excerpt from Tomaselli's original short film of "Desecration." The original short ran about 23-minutes and I can't help but wonder why Image didn't go ahead and include the whole thing. (DVD space concerns?) I would've liked to see how the short compares to the feature-length version, as the 3-minute excerpt tells us nothing, although it does offer some interesting visuals. Also, I can't help but question Image's choices for the DVD box art. They won't be selling that one at Wal-Mart!

It can be argued that American filmmakers have been trying for years to capture the flavor of European films. (Remember all of those awful remakes of French films?) Well, Dante Tomaselli has definitely created a EuroHorror vibe with his shocking "Desecration." The film can be downright confusing at times, but it's no-holds-barred visuals definitely have an impact on the film. If Tomaselli continues to grow as an artist, I could easily make watching his films a "habit."

Danny Lopes Horror Irma St Paul

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