



THE HUNGER

by Whitley Strieber

The Hunger is the first new wave film of dread. In the fiction of this genre the new wave is saying that we can go beyond the exploitation of fear and start dealing with something real, the evocation of the most furious and powerful of interior human states.

I think that the film raises the genre to a level from which it has been falling since the film of dread (from **Nosferatu** to **Psycho**) was completely replaced by the film of horror. In the film of dread the images are primarily representations of inner states. The horror film makes evil a physical presence: the thing.

In terms of visual power you have to go back to the films of dread of the silent era to surpass **The Hunger**--to **The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari** and the original **Nosferatu** (where the "vampire" is in reality an incubus, not a monster. **Nosferatu** is a dark meditation on himself.)

A true film of dread has the arbitrary and profoundly mysterious structure of real life, and runs like a sinister dream, frail and yet uncontrollable, and so very dangerous. During the sixties the film of dread gradually abandoned its own psychological underpinnings and became the modern horror movie, at its worst an exploitation of ugliness for its own sake, at its best a dark celebration of terror. But never important, in the sense that it plumbs human depths.

Now, suddenly, a filmmaker dares to say that horror can be something important, and challenges viewers to see a movie as they see their own nightmares, and says I am going to dare everything in the service of this art--and makes the stylish, terrifying and emotionally satisfying work that is **The Hunger**.

On the level of narrative, the film is very innovative. Words are used like music and visuals to support the emotional sense of the

Does Whitley Strieber like the film that Tony Scott made from his book?

----Does he ever!

experience. When narrative appears, it is there in the service of the heart, not to impose an artificial structure on the viewer's experience.

My novel was about the hunger to survive and the tragedy of mortality. Given what usually happens when "horror" novels are filmed, I thought it would be unusual if even these themes were preserved. But when I saw the film, I realized that there had been an enrichment of the thematic content. The film goes beyond my themes; in a sense it has revolutionized my consciousness of my own work. To be specific, the theme of this movie is the ghostly presence of time in our lives, and the profound loneliness of being human.

In her portrayal of the symbiote Miriam, Catherine Deneuve brings to the surface the eerie interior of human experience and our **alienness** from all other living things. We are never at home with ourselves: because we understand that we must die, we are a species alone. Mankind, the knowing shadow, haunts this innocent planet.

David Bowie, supported by the masterful makeup effects of Dick Smith, creates in John Blaylock something that is almost never done successfully. His performance is in a sense not a performance at all, but a real, human experience. David Bowie faces death and his own mortality, really faces it, before our eyes. The acting seems so real that watching it is almost like having the experience. I suspect that this is because the subconscious on some level must perceive life this way, as a brief, shattering decay, ended almost before it begins. Bowie enters the time of our secret human depths, the terrible, compressed moment that is all we really own of days. He contends with the deepest material of spiritual and youthful rebellion in the film--the fact that this rebellion is not against parents or culture, but rather against growing old, against death itself. Bowie says with quiet fury, damn you, time. And then he dies.

Susan Sarandon is the victim of the piece, everyman dragged by the very fact of his effort to survive, into his own destruction. Her acting is appropriately less spare and contained than that of the other two principals, for she forms the frantic connection in the triad; she is the magic presence between the two dancers, both of whom depend on her, but are essentially indifferent to her. To them she is a prop, an incident, but to herself she is a human being facing destruction. On a mythic level, she is Persephone in the underworld. The dark truth of life captures her in a shattering scene on the floor of a bedroom.

She crouches there, in agony, facing the **otherness** that has entered her blood, unable to either endure or escape. Of course, Miriam's otherness is nothing more than our own knowledge of time, and of life's truth.

When Sarah assumes Miriam's role at the end of the film there enters an astonishing and totally unexpected sense of mystery. I was surprised to see a modern director with commercial intent ending his film not with the usual final thud, or even ambiguity. The viewer is made richer by this ending, rather than being exploited or confused, as is usually the case. Did Sarah become another Miriam, essentially ageless, or another John Blaylock, condemned to eventually be overtaken by time? Susan Sarandon communicates the terror of her question, which is also our own fear of the unexpected and the unknown, in a few highly charged seconds. It is simply done and yet rich with meaning. It captures a sense of enigma not seen since **The Magician**. If you had asked me beforehand I would have said no, the interior mysteries of human experience just aren't accessible in a mechanical medium like film, not unless it is in the hands of an artist like Bergman or Hitchcock. If he keeps working at this level, Tony Scott is going a very long way.

People who are expecting conventional film grammar have a good chance of misunderstanding **The Hunger**. But many others, I hope, will make the kind of emotional contact that the film is seeking.

When you talk about the various things that are loosely connected under the sobriquet "new wave" in terms of motive or structure and not mystery, the meaning becomes elusive. New wave is anger, defiance, black laughter, the resigned human being with a blade in his hand.

Bowie's music and his mystery are deeply, viscerally connected with both sex and death, and in this sense the film is so profoundly of him and his work that it amounts to a kind of apotheosis--an irony his fans will appreciate: his own death as entertainment.

I think that this movie touches the inner terror of the human situation. At least it did for me. As the author of **The Hunger**, and having little certain knowledge of what the film would be like, I was terribly uneasy when the house lights went down. I ended up filled with respect for the film. Not only did I have a great deal of fun with it, I felt that something valuable was conveyed, some subtle information about the dangerous art of being alive. The film not only scared me and gave me pleasure, it very unexpectedly enriched me as well.