

Richly Complex ‘Oculus’ is Also Scary as Hell

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 11, 2014 - 3:38pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The effect of horror works in five basic ways. There’s the sense of Dislocation where the lead character suddenly loses bearing, becomes unsure of what where or even who they are. Next is Dread, which is the sense that something awful is coming. Terror is simply the reaction to there being no escape from that something awful when the character is confronted with it head on. Disgust, perhaps the most widely criticized aspect of the genre, brings us back to our own sense of uncleanness, or discomfort at the possibility of being rendered abject. Finally, Irony, points back to things like human limitations, ideas of order, justice, chance, destiny, and cosmology. Few horror films present all these modes. “Oculus” burns through about four of the above in relatively short order. In short, it is scary as hell and richly complex.

The film tells the tale of a young man (Brenton Thwaites) being released from a mental hospital who goes to stay with his sister (Karen Gillan). Little does he realize she is determined to prove him innocent of the crime for which he was incarcerated. To do this, she must also prove that an ornate antique mirror, which had hung in their father’s study, and harbors a supernatural force which is responsible for dozens of deaths during it’s four-hundred-year existence. As he unwillingly embarks on helping her, their past and present become blurred, calling into question the nature of memory, and the way in which family ties bind.



Kaylie (Karen Gillan) in ‘Oculus’

Photo credit: Relativity Media

As effective as it will be for many, director Mike Flanagan’s narrative shifts so often between the past and the present that it’s bound to lose some viewers. But Flanagan is up to some deep stuff. It’s impossible to see these juxtaposed images of children and the adults they became without beginning to wonder if the film is a neatly disguised ultra-unsettling psychological drama. But the intra-family violence seems too real,

too much like the horror stories we all read in the newspaper to just dismiss it as another tragedy in suburbia, and the willingness Flanagan has to get visceral with his shocks carries them beyond the jump scare. "Oculus" is horrific in a way too few horror films dare to be.

It's also got a solid cast. While the roles of sister Kaylie Russell and brother Tim Russell are ably served by Gillan and Thwaites, the real stars of the show are the child incarnations of them played by Annalise Basso and Garrett Ryan, together with Rory Cochrane as dad Alan and Katee Sackhoff as mom Marie. Sackhoff is especially good in this film and it's a joy to see her shine in a lead role.

This is a family in at least minor crisis long before the cursed mirror is up on the wall. Trust has been breached. Emotions are at a slight remove. But if the ties that bind seem loose in ways they also seem to choke drawing the family members together in inexorable ways. No escape plan. Flanagan also builds suspense by finding so many moments in which to have his audience see from the child's point of view. Forced to grow up beyond their years the pair engage in a sort of minor detective work that gives their arc the air of a hellish "Hardy Boys" adventure. The experiment the adult sister sets up for investigation into the paranormal is well-thought and realistically detailed, as are the ways in which her safeguards are ultimately turned against her by the malevolent force.



A Reflective Moment for Kaylee in 'Oculus'

Photo credit: Relativity Media

I had an interesting e-exchange with Flanagan shortly after hosting a screening of his film "Absentia" (2011). It had to do with the nature of fear and what, if anything, that has to do with spirituality. My point was that you can't evoke fear without opening up a huge can of worms. What slithers out of that can has the power to impact in non-rational ways, opening up the ability of man to understand the world beyond his senses. But whether you take "Oculus" as a portal into the rational or the non-rational, it is a potent mix of genre convention, family drama and complex structure.

"Oculus" opens everywhere on April 11th.. Featuring Karen Gillan, Brenton Thwaites, Katee Sackhoff, Rory Cochrane and Miguel Sandoval. Screenplay Mike Flanagan and Jeff Howard. Directed by Mike Flanagan. Rated "R"



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