

Cronos (18)

17th March 2008

Director: **Guillermo del Toro**
Mexico 1992

Running time : 92 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Federico Luppi** (Jesús Gris), **Ron Perlman** (Angel de la Guardia), **Claudio Brook** (Dieter de la Guardia), **Margarita Isabel** (Mercedes Gris), **Tamara Shanath** (Aurora Gris).

SCRIPT: **Guillermo del Toro**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Guillermo Navarro**. EDITING: **Raul Davalos**. MUSIC: **Javier Alvarez**.

In Greek mythology Cronos was the son of the titan Ouranos and father of Zeus; he castrated his father with a sickle of flint and devoured five out of six of his children by his sister Rhea at birth. It is perhaps this cannibalistic act to secure immortality that del Toro had in mind when he gave his vampire film its title. Vampirism is, after all, a form of cannibalism for those keen not to get their fingers dirty.

Well, since *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* the cinema has seen all sorts of vampirism, so much so that not content to remake those stories in the mould of successive generations of filmgoer, it has seen producers and directors offer their own peculiar takes on the bloodsucking phenomenon, from Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction*, through the *Blade* films, to *Van Helsing*, not forgetting Le Stadt in *Interview with the Vampire*.

Guillermo del Toro, as can be seen from his recent film, *Pan's Labyrinth*, is interested in mythology and likes to create his own monsters; he sets his horror stories against very real backdrops, the Spanish Civil War in that film and *The Devil's Backbone*, an antique shop in Mexico City in the case of the present film. He has also been able to balance his more personal projects with studio engagements (he directed the second *Blade* film).

Cronos focuses on the 'addiction' trope of latter day vampire films, with immortality, nay rejuvenation, as the lure. It posits an antique dealer (Luppi) who discovers the Cronos device, a sort of mechanical scarab beetle, inside one of a set of statuettes which, twelve chair-like, a rich industrialist is attempting to acquire in the hope of landing the right one. The discoverer/victim is also grandfather to Aurora, typical child heroine of a del Toro film, and it is this loss of 'grandfatherliness' as he is gripped by bloodlust and suddenly appears younger, symbolically shaving off his moustache, that is

the emotional – and at times humorous – hub of the film.

At any rate, once 'bitten' by the device, the antiquarian must satisfy his craving and defend his discovery from the predations of the industrialist's nephew (Perlman). Ultimately, as the inexorable logic of these things goes, he must decide between his granddaughter and himself, between damnation and self-sacrifice.

It's worth examining the names of the characters of this boldly realized modern horror film. On the one hand, being Hispanic, they are bound to have religious connotations (Mercedes, for example, is an allusion to the gifts of the three wise men and may not be otherwise significant); but it can be no accident that the lead character is called 'Grey Jesus', although Jesús is by no means an uncommon forename, when one stops to think about this *old* man and what he finally does. Nor are the names of the Perlman character (angel of whose guard?) or the granddaughter (a new dawn?) surely without symbolic weight! I will leave to you to ponder the significance of the Germanic Dieter...

A horror film for the cognoscenti, then, no doubt, and a highly original piece of work for all its generic borrowings. It is perhaps, as a first film, pumped rather too full of ideas, but in true art-house style takes full account of its provenance in time and place. It looks back to a pre-colonial past (Aztec gold and blood sacrifice) and forward to the cyborg horror of films normally set in the future, like *The Terminator*.

David Clare