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Thelma (15)

dir: **Joachim Trier**

starring: **Eili Harboe, Kaya Wilkins**

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Synopsis: Thelma leaves her sheltered home life and devout, abstemious parents for Oslo and university. Adjusting to the change is difficult and causes feelings of anxiety, which she suppresses. She meets fellow student Anja and is attracted to her. When her feelings are returned she panics, worried she may be gay. This triggers a telekinetic episode. She sees a doctor who attempts to explore her anxieties. This results in a further telekinetic event. Anja disappears. Thelma learns a family secret and returns home, believing she's responsible for Anja's disappearance. Her parents are convinced she is menace and plot to dispose of her. Thelma intuits their plan and kills her father. Anja reappears and they resume their relationship.

Thelma begins with the image of a father, ostensibly on a deer-hunting trip with his young daughter, turning his gun away from a sure-shot kill to aim it at the back of the girl's head instead, holding it there for a tense moment, then lowering it again. By the time the film is over, we have seen that same man clawing at the surface of a frozen lake while trying to get to the corpse of his infant son underneath, borne witness to a case of patricide-by-pyrokinesis and enjoying a threesome with a satanic snake. Pretty strong meat there from writer-director Joachim Trier - but strange as it is to say, for all this atrocity exhibition, his *Thelma* lacks a real sense of danger, of the awful.

The film, a lesbian coming-out story that incorporates elements of Supernatural horror, is a Norwegian homecoming for Trier, whose English language *Louder Than Bombs* (2015) was a misstep in a career that until then had seemed fortune-favoured. He is on surer ground here in some respects, working with young actors with whom he has a clear rapport. Eili Harboe has the title role, that of a small town girl who is conservative Christian values are challenged when she falls for a classmate, Anja, played by musician Kaya Wilkins, and in the resulting confusion discovered that she has buried supernatural abilities. Harboe and Wilkins's performances - simple, open and absent of affect - are the movie's primary virtue, the characters presented with great sympathy. But this is perhaps where that above-mentioned lack comes in: at no point can you imagine the filmmaker letting anything irreversibly terrible happened to his characters, and indeed nothing does.

In its focus on a repressed young woman's dangerous coming of age, its campus setting and its slow reveal of dangerous family secrets, *Thelma* closely parallels Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016), and both might be considered works after the model of Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976), made by epigones. *Thelma* even borrows the stifling air of religious repression from Stephen King and De Palma's source materials, though here it's of the frigid Scandinavian variety. Our heroine's overbearing parents (Henrik Rafaelson and Ellen Dorrit Petersen) have drilled abstemious faith into their daughter,



though it isn't entirely clear whether this is a matter of true belief, merely a means to keep her latent psychic abilities under control, or some combination of the two. As in this case, the film has a tendency to skate past the more interesting issues that it raises on the way to its sweet and very tidy resolution, which finds Thelma and Anja together as a couple, Thelma having thrown off the shackles of patriarchal oppression - though this happy send off glosses over the difficulties that might be faced in a secular relationship in which one of the partners is gifted with God-like powers of mental control. A sense of benevolence isn't a shortcoming in an artist, but in a film like *Thelma* it acts as a kind of hobbling restraint, a guarantor that all will be well when what's needed is the fear that all could be lost.

Credits

Thelma	Eili Harboe
Anya	Kaya Wilkins
Trond	Henrik Rafaelson
Unni	Ellen Dorrit Petersen
Director	Joachim Trier
Screenplay	Eskil Vogt, joachim Trier
Director of Photography	Jakob Ihre
Editor	Oliver Bugge Coutté
Production Design	Roger Rosenberg
Music	Ola Fløttum
Sound	Gisle Tveito
Costume	Ellen Dæhli Ystehede
Visual effects	Ghost VFX, The Gentlemen, Broncos VFX, Hydralab, Nordisk Film Shortcut, Storyline, Slowmotion FX, Goodbye Kansas
	Norway, Sweden, Denmark, France 2017. 116 mins

Another View

After an uneasy foray into Hollywood film-making with their disappointing English-language ensemble picture *Louder Than Bombs*, Joachim Trier and his longtime screenwriter Eskil Vogt are back in a Norwegian setting for this tremendously acted, if flawed, supernatural drama-thriller about a disturbed young woman. There is a scariness and sexiness to go with its cool understatements and opaque mysteries. It's a film that appears to allude at various stages to the classic tropes of Hitchcock and De Palma, and there is a fascinatingly gruesome scene in which a young woman must undergo an induced seizure under clinical surveillance while wired

up to an electroencephalogram, calling to mind the lumbar puncture scene in *The Exorcist*.

Perhaps Trier and Vogt's movie doesn't in the end go satisfyingly for the jugular in the way a more obviously generic horror might, and its ending arrives with some of its ideas undeveloped. Yet *Thelma* creates an uncanny accumulation of mood, an ecstasy of disquiet, like the film's hostile and telekinetically induced starling-murmurations. It also interestingly suggests that horror doesn't need to have a nihilistic or unhappy ending.

Eili Harboe's performance as Thelma is outstandingly good. Thelma is a shy young woman who has just arrived at university in Oslo, leaving behind her two over-protective and very religious parents: Trond (Henrik Rafaelsen) and Unni (Ellen Dorrit Petersen), who have an exasperating habit of checking up on her online, monitoring her lecture timetables and Facebook friend-acceptances. Thelma is lonely, and like many students away from home for the first time, is always suppressing feelings of anxiety and panic. Adult independence scares her, and there is evidence that she has also suppressed memories from her childhood. Trier and Vogt begin with a scene in which Thelma, as a little girl, is taken by her father on a hunting trip in the snowy forest – and a PhD thesis could be written about the child's first hunting trip in the movies: usually a father/son experience, in which the boy undergoes an ambiguous or abusive rite of passage as he is compelled to witness and participate in an animal's death.

One of the things Thelma is anxious about at college is the suspicion that she is gay. She has met a beautiful fellow student called Anja (Kaya Wilkins) at the swimming pool; she follows Anja's Instagram feed and soon they are hanging out. But some of Anja's other friends like teasing and mocking Thelma's naivety and religious convictions, and all her new feelings cause intense physiological and cosmic disturbances. Thelma succumbs to what look like epileptic episodes. Then stranger things happen. She realises that she has the power to summon or coerce people or objects by going into erotic trance-like states that look like psychic self-harm.

The keynote scene arrives when Anja's mother Vilde (Vanessa Borgli) takes the girls out to the ballet, an occasion for which Thelma feels it necessary to get glammed up. There is a real grandeur to the occasion and Trier cleverly conveys how exciting and overwhelming Thelma finds it – especially as the dance piece is challengingly physical and sensual, and as Anja is holding her hand and beginning to caress her intimately in the darkness. It is the trigger for everything that is to happen. The doctor who examines Thelma reveals to her things in her medical records that her parents have concealed from her, or which they have somehow caused her to forget, and flashbacks to her childhood tell their own story.

In some ways, *Thelma* is like Olivier Assayas's *Personal Shopper*. There is the same conflation of female sexuality with supernatural phenomenon, and the same way of almost normalising supernatural events within a realist narrative. (Actually, the "disappearance" scenes in *Thelma* also reminded me of something much brasher, a little known film called *The Forgotten* from 2004, with Julianne Moore, directed by Joseph Ruben who made *Sleeping With the Enemy* in the 90s.) And where is the story finally taking us? Well, that is perhaps where *Thelma* tries to become a much more conventional scary movie, while keeping intact its more studied calm and detachment. It all hangs together — and what a very formidable performance from Harboe.

Peter Bradshaw: The Guardian

C'est la Vie (France 2017. Cert 15)

Our first new release film of the season (only appearing in cinemas at the end of August) comes from the team behind 2011's comedy hit *Intouchables*, reuniting for this classically constructed ensemble comedy in which a wedding threatens to erupt into an utter nightmare for the party's cantankerous planner. Max is a battle-weary veteran of the racket but his last gig proves to be a hell of a fête, involving ridiculous period costumes; a hyper-sensitive singer who thinks he's a Gallic James Brown; a micromanaging groom; and a girlfriend who's openly flirting with a much younger server. It's going to be a very long night...

"expertly assembled, tartly played and hugely enjoyable" (*The Hollywood Reporter*),

Our next screening - November 9th, 7.30pm