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**Friday November 15th, 2019**

**Border (15)**

*Dir. Ali Abbasi*

*Starring: Eva Melander, Eero Milonoff*

*Sponsor: Helen Hancocks*

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**Synopsis:** Sweden, the present. Tina is a malformed woman resembling a Neanderthal. She suffers the stress of other people, but lives a normal life, sharing a woodland cabin with her boyfriend and working as a border guard at a ferry terminal. There, her supernatural sense of smell allows her to detect the guilt and shame of people carrying contraband. One day, she stops a man who turns out to be carrying a memory card full of child pornography: the police bring her onboard their investigation into a paedophile ring. Meanwhile, Tina meets the physically similar Vore and the two share a connection. Vore is more confident than Tina; beguiled by him, she invites him to stay at her house. They begin a sexual relationship, and Tina unexpectedly develops male genitalia (Vore appears male but has female genitalia). Vore reveals that they are both trolls. Tina discovers a baby in Vore's room, and Vore explains that he regularly gives birth to these under-fertilized embryos which die after days. Back at work, Tina exposes the paedophile ring but the investigators are unable to identify who is smuggling infants for the pornography. Vore kills their prime suspect, and Tina realises that he is replacing human babies with his offspring and then selling the kidnapped babies. Tina turns Vore over to the police but he escapes. Sometime later, a troll baby is left on her doorstep with a postcard from a troll community in Finland that Vore had previously mentioned.

The source material for Ali Abbasi's *Border* - a strange hybrid of twisted fairy tale and police procedural - is a short story by John Ajvide Lindqvist, author of *Let the Right One In*. *Border* shares some DNA with that novel and its lauded 2008 film adaptation by Tomas Alfredson, most notably the way that it fuses mythical elements with an exploration of social isolation, and the queasy venality of certain interactions between the magical and human realms. In *Let the Right One In*, Eli is a centuries-old vampire attempting to pass as a normal child in modern Sweden. In *Border*, Tina (acclaimed Swedish actress Eva Melander) stands out physically but tries to live an ordinary life.

Melander plays Tina under several hours' worth of prosthetics. She has a protruding brow, broad nose, mottled skin, crooked teeth and lank hair. She effectively looks subhuman - perhaps an apt term in a film that seeks to interrogate notions of beauty, conformity and otherness. From people openly staring at her unusual features in the supermarket to verbal abuse ("I can't stand that kind"), Tina is treated as 'other'. She looks and behaves differently, and is most serene and most at home walking barefoot in the woods near her house, where the wild animals are much more comfortable in her presence than the dogs kept by her room-mate and sometime boyfriend Roland (Jörgen Thorsson). In the current climate, the most readily apparent reading of Tina is as an immigrant, an interloper who does not belong - a theme Abbasi tackled in his first feature, *Shelley*, in 2016.

This angle suits a magic-realist treatment of the outsider, and a Abbasi relishes deliberately complicating traditional fantasy tropes with Tina's job as a guard on the Swedish border. She is marginalized for her appearance but is, in fact, the quiet conformist whose preternatural sense of smell allows her to sniff out ne'er-do-wells passing through customs. She can literally smell their guilt. Nadim Carlsen's cinematography accentuates her senses with sharp focus on her nose, otherwise capturing the indoor action in unflattering lighting designed to aid her attempt to blend into the background or shading outdoor scenes in earthly hues.

Tina's social conformity means that her meeting with the physically similar Vore (Eero Milonoff) takes on a certain piquancy. Tina is convinced that Vore is hiding something as he passes through her station, but is soon beguiled by his confident charisma. They seem further destined for one another when they learn that they have the same scar on their lower backs and were both struck by lightning as children. The two actors conjure up incredible chemistry beneath their heavy makeup (which got an Oscar nomination for Gören Lundström and Pamela Goldammer). They've got little facial movement to work with and so rely on twitching noses and bodily physicality to convey their characters' emotions, concealed or conflicted as they may be. The burgeoning romance between them allows Tina to begin to accept herself on her own terms. When Vore proves to be vitriolic (and perhaps radically inclined) about the way that other normal humans have treated them both, Tina begins to question whether her allegiances belong with the society that has taken her in but never accepted her, or with the man who believes she is perfect as she is.

Quite what she is remains ambiguous, but there are overt suggestions of beings from Nordic folklore. There's a gender-bending quality to the narrative that sees the ostensibly male Vore giving birth (he is revealed early on to possess female genitalia) and the apparently female Tina grow a penis during a memorable intercourse scene.

While *Border* takes place in a clearly fantastical riff on reality, things don't sit entirely comfortably, and questions are raised regarding trans representation. However, in the world of the film, the notion that Vore has had a sex change operation is shown to be a parochial human assumption in a far more gender-potrous situation. It is perhaps the subsequent implications for Vore's sex fluidity that muddies the water further. Tina's personal narrative begins to dovetail with her professional one, and Vore (and his uterus) becomes entwined in an investigation into a local paedophile ring. Fortunately, the grim subject of sexual violence and

racial intolerance are just a backdrop to the tale of a woman learning about her heritage and choosing her own path forward, now that she better understands where she comes from.

### Credits

<b>Tina</b>	Eva Melander
<b>Vore</b>	Eero Milonoff
<b>Roland</b>	Jörgen Thorsson
<b>Agneta</b>	Ann Petré
<b>Tina's father</b>	Sten Ljunggren
<b>Daniel</b>	Kjell Wilhelmsen
<b>Therese</b>	Rakel Wärmländer
<b>Robert</b>	Andreas Kundler
<b>Tomas</b>	Matti Boustedt
<b>Director</b>	Ali Abbasi
<b>Screenplay</b>	Ali Abbasi, Isabella Eklöf, John Ajvide Lindqvist
<b>Cinematography</b>	Nadim Carlsen
<b>Y</b>	Olivia Neergaard-Holm, Anders Skov
<b>Editing</b>	Christian Holm
<b>Sound</b>	Christoffer Berg, Martin Dirkov
<b>Music</b>	Elsa Fischer
<b>Costume</b>	

### Another view

It is clear from the outset that *Border* will be trafficking in the divisions of identity and alterity. This Swedish-Danish co-production from an Iranian director (Ali Abbasi, whose 2016 feature debut was the Danish horror *Shelley*) is adapted from a short story by Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist (who penned the 2004 novel *Let The Right One In* and then adapted it for Tomas Alfredson's 2008 film version).

It chooses to focus on the sort of character whom one might only ever notice in passing, if at all, but who embodies many of the conflicts and contradictions of our globalised, multicultural lives. "Ugly bitch!" says a teenaged boy. "I can't stand that kind." He is referring to Tina (Eva Melander), the border guard at a Swedish ferry port who has just had the boy's alcohol seized. Stockily built and frumpily dressed, with sunken eyes, bad teeth and a strange scar on her face, Tina somehow manages both to stand out from everyone else and shrink into the background.

At work, she has an uncanny ability to sniff out from the passing crowd those who are transgressing the limits of the law, be they juvenile liquor smugglers or importers of child pornography. She shares her home in the forest with a feckless dog trainer named Roland (Jörgen Thorsson), in a platonic relationship of convenience. But she is lonely, and feels closer to her natural surroundings than to her human colleagues and companions.

All this changes when Vore (Eero Milonoff) crosses her border post. He is a peculiar man whose crooked smile suggests secret knowledge, and whose scent throws Tina's usually unerring senses into heady confusion. What ensues is a love story, as Vore brings to Tina an understanding and acceptance that few others – perhaps only Tina's senescent father (Sten Ljunggren) – have ever shown.

Vore seems like a perfect match for Tina and is, despite her inexperience and some physical anomalies, sexually compatible with her too. But even as Tina starts taking a new-found pride in aspects of herself she had always suppressed, she must decide how much of her older, unhappier identity she is willing to abandon.

The fairy tale aspects of this burgeoning sylvan romance are offset by Tina's involvement in a local police investigation into the most appalling kind of real-life crime. Meanwhile, Abbasi keeps switching the boundaries of genre, even as he explores the fluid borders between nations, ethnicities, genders, physiologies and even species. As with any folkloric allegory, the film is fanciful, yet at the

same time it articulates recognisable issues facing anyone who has ever been marginalised, overlooked, alienated or oppressed.

In searching for her own true roots and individuality, Tina may just be chasing her own tail, but the dilemmas raised by this transgressive quest will likely resonate with the divided loyalties of anyone who is, for example, mixed race, adopted, gender dysphoric or one of the Stolen Generations, and who therefore slips through the fixed barriers of conventional identity. And if all that makes the film sound a little heavy, rest assured that Abbasi smuggles in lots and lots of freaky goodness.

### Anton Bitel: Little White Lies

#### Our next screening: November 22nd, 2019, 7.30pm Bait (UK 2019. Cert 15)

Our first new release slot of the season is taken by one of the most surprising and talked-about British films of this or any year. *Bait* is written, directed, filmed and edited by Cornish film-maker Mark Jenkin. Not content with that, he also composed the score, shot the whole thing on 16mm black and white film stock using a hand cranked camera and processed it using some very unusual materials.

The result has all the texture and feel of the early years of cinema, but with a bracingly contemporary story that delves into the consequences for the residents of a Cornish fishing village of second-home owners buying up local property. It's been described as thrillingly original - we certainly haven't seen anything quite like it before and we're proud to bring it to The Venue for an exclusive screening.

### Programming news

Members will be aware that this season's classic will be chosen in a members' ballot sometime early in the New Year. The Programming Committee will draw up a short list and are looking for nominations to the long list. If anyone wishes to submit a suggestion, please bear the following points in mind:

1. Classic films are not restricted to those from the period between 1930-1960; those made between 1970-1990 will be considered;
2. We are looking for films that have been restored and re-released. We will not list a film if it is not available on DCP;
3. The Programming committee reserves the right to limit to long list to 15 titles;
4. Members' suggestions will be accepted up to the final screening of this year (November 29th)

If you have a title in mind, please email it to the Programming committee at [filminlincoln@gmail.com](mailto:filminlincoln@gmail.com), putting Classic Film in the subject header. The long list will be closed when we have 15 nominations.