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Venus

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Venus

Abstract

This is a film review of *Venus* (2022), directed by Jaume Balagueró.

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Venus (2022), dir. Jaume Balagueró

The next time you're having a stressful day, just remember poor Lucia. At least you're not stuck between a posse of angry drug dealers and a cabal of quasi-Satanists and demonic hench-creatures, with everyone closing in on you in a cockroach-infested ninth-floor apartment.

Venus is a Spanish-language horror film, and like many horror films it is brimming over with religious symbols, delivered up for kitschy thrills. TIFF describes the film as “cosmic horror” and bills director Jaume Balagueró as a “Midnight Madness alumnus,” both a statement of fact (he also participated in the festival’s Midnight Madness section in 2009 with his film, *REC 2*) and a statement of vibe. *Venus* might not be great cinema. But it certainly hits its genre marks with competence and, occasionally, real flair.

To get to the religion bits, I have to spoil the plot—so look away, if you want your plot thrills unsullied. We open with on-screen titles, intimating some form of cosmic apocalypse brought about by the appearance of a strange planet that will usher in the reign of

the goddess Lamaasthu. (Who, you might ask, is Lamaasthu? I didn't know either. Wikipedia tells me she is a Mesopotamian demon-monster known for kidnapping children to suck their blood and gnaw on their bones. So a fun party guest. In this film, she's been elevated to somewhat higher status, a grand goddess of suffering and sorrow, the queen of *dolor*). The film's planetary title recalls this gendered planetary conjuncture. It's also the name of the sad-sack apartment building, somewhere in Madrid, where most of the action unfolds.

We open in a strobe-lit nightclub, where a go-go dancer (Lucia, played by Ester Expósito) furtively departs her platform. She sneaks into a backroom and proceeds to steal a duffel bag of drugs from her boss—and, thence we later learn, the Spanish and Chinese mafias. Her plan immediately goes awry. Stabbed in the leg, she bloodily lopes her way to the Edificio Venus, to crash on the cot in her estranged sister's laundry room. Cockroaches aren't the building's only problem. It's also haunted and mostly empty. Long ago, the other residents abandoned their flats after decades of disrupted sleep, suicide, witchcraft, and cannibalism. (Again, Lucia's problems are worse than your problems.) You guessed it. The evil genius behind these horrors is Lamaasthu. She lives in the attic, prying open residents' dreams.

And here's where we come to the real spoilers, the bit where the movie goes all *Rosemary's Baby*. The big reveal in the last thirty minutes of the film is that the eccentric spinsters on the fifth floor are would-be priestesses of the dark goddess. They maintain a kind of demonic S&M dungeon in the attic, where they occasionally murder children or drain gangsters of their blood. Their aim is to usher in the apocalypse, and they look great doing it—just the right mix of mischievous old lady and unhinged Satanist.



One of them even sports pentagram tattoos on her back. As the weird new planet glides between the earth and the sun, creating a supernatural eclipse, our priestesses ready a ritual to help Lamaasthu assume human form. They've done everything right: kidnapped Lucia's endearing niece (a wee child who dreams of one day becoming a dancer), killed her mother, summoned a quartet of cosmic demon-bishops who shoot serpentine tendrils out from their skirts. What could go wrong?

The set pieces at the end of the film are a rollicking good time, if you're into that sort of thing. Truly, who doesn't like an S&M-style executioner-demon who can pop a human head between his hands like a water balloon? *Venus* is, even better, a double-genre mashup. It's a horror film crossed with a drug-smuggling gangster film. So you don't just get demons. You also get a malevolent mob boss who villainously interrogates go-go girls while forcing them to dance on a back-office desk as he taps his ring on the chair for time. Occasionally, these genre worlds intertwine more directly, as with the genderqueer séance medium who can locate people for the mob by psychically spewing blood on a map. So basically there's

something for everybody. Both sides of this genre coin feel a little wan by themselves. Together, though, they do a good job of ramping up tension toward the climax, with a key twist awaiting the viewer at the very end.

Venus is a quasi-feminist Antichrist tale. Working in the genre tradition of *Rosemary's Baby*, it paints the feminized spaces of domestic life in anxious, claustrophobic tones, asking the viewer both to identify with female suffering and to take narrative pleasure in the spectacle of that suffering. The child becomes a figure for both innocence and futurity, with its Satanic corruption central to the plot's pending sense of total doom. Unlike some other films in this tradition (say, *Hereditary*), *Venus* is not interested in prolonging the ambiguity of its supernatural plot points for psychological effect: Is Lucia going crazy, or are there actually monsters? Monsters. No question. From the get-go, we know that there's a planet guiding Lucia's madness. It's creeping up behind the action, even during the drug-smuggling scenes, where backgrounded television sets show newscasters reporting strange development in the skies.

It's that weird planet, of course, that makes this a work of "cosmic horror." This phrase is typically associated with early 20th century fantasy writer H.P. Lovecraft, and, indeed, TIFF describes *Venus* as "taking a few cues" from Lovecraft, especially the story "The Dreams in the Witch House." The film would thus seem to be part of a much larger Lovecraft revival: an effort to reimagine the gnarly ancients spewed out by the notorious racist, especially in his Cthulhu mythos, for our 21st century present. Sometimes, as in the HBO series *Lovecraft Country* or the sci-fi novels of N. K. Jemison, this is done by Black creators to revisit the legacies of white racism and its continued hold on fantasy and related genres (I've written about "Religion in *Lovecraft Country*" elsewhere¹). Sometimes these new Lovecrafts are

meant to help us better imagine the grotesquely inhuman timescales of environmental disaster, as in the writings of Donna Haraway.² *Venus* is in the latter category. It mostly doesn't think about race, and when it does, it's cringeworthy. (We get repeat views of an oil painting that depicts Lamaasthu as some kind of cosmic-primitive dominatrix. Clearly racialized, she participates in odiously Lovecraftian tropes of the dark-skinned other as cosmic savage).

Lovecraft is about deep time, and the unsettling eruption of inhuman pasts into the human present. (It's that category, the inhuman, where Lovecraft's racism oozes out). Thus, in season four of the Netflix series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, our eponymous teenage witch and her scrappy band of buddies face off against a series of "Eldritch Terrors" (Lovecraftian language), existential forces like The Dark that cannot be killed, only thrust back into the recesses of the cosmos. In *Sabrina*, Lovecraft is what happens when you've already exhausted all the normal religion stuff. You've gone back beyond Genesis to the fall of Lucifer in early seasons (Sabrina beats the Satanic big bad). Then you've resuscitated the nature-loving pagan "old gods," who bring a carnival into town (Sabrina wins again, in a festive *Wicker Man* sequence). What's older than the old gods? The Eldritch Terrors.

Venus works similarly. It's dredging up a Mesopotamian goddess, after all, and while the pomp and costumery of its rituals may be Christian (pentagrams, bishops), the film is clearly aiming for something older and more elemental. There's a planet involved. Arguably, *Venus*—like films from Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* to Michael Bay's *Armageddon*—works to express our collective panic about impending climate apocalypse. Our problems are planetary too. They are not, however, mysteriously cosmic. We don't need a supernatural celestial body to destroy us. We're doing that just fine on our own, thanks.

And yet, we live in the moment of what Amitav Ghosh calls *The Great Derangement*,³ gadding about in collective denial as though there's no problem at all (*Don't Look Up*, jibes another recent film about celestially induced apocalypse). Part of the problem is the inhuman scale of climate change, the degree to which it is in some literal sense “unthinkable,” as Ghosh says. We need new forms of fiction that help us to think this unthinkable, he advises, putting cosmic or planetary horror into narrative form we can digest.

Does *Venus* help with this project? Maybe. Its very name is a planet. It may not deliver the rich joy, despair, and all-too-human boredom of a film like *The Werkmeister Harmonies* (see my review in this issue). But even kitsch has its uses. This is a munchable snack of a film, a pleasant way to while away the time that remains to us. You'll walk out with your blood thumping—and your survival instinct thumping too.

¹ J. Barton Scott, “Religion in Lovecraft Country,” Feb. 4, 2021, therevealer.org.

² Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).