

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Brotherhood of the Wolf*

France, 2001. Rated R. 142 min

**Cast:** Samuel Le Bihan, Mark Dacascos, Vincent Cassel, Emilie Dequenne, Monica Belluci; **Writers:** Stéphane Cabel, Christophe Gans; **Music:** Joseph LoDuca; **Cinematographer:** Dan Laustsen; **Producers:** Richard Grandpierre, Samuel Hadida; **Director:** Christophe Gans

**B**ROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF has at its center a legend from rural France. According to this legend, the beast of Gévaudan killed hundreds of women and children during the reign of Louis in the mid-18th century. The film's opening sequence, in which a young woman is brutally slaughtered by an unseen beast, has a hyper-kinetic quality, with intense, condensed sound and dizzying camera movement. Handsome, capable Fronsac (Samuel Le Bihan) comes on the scene, sought out by worried locals (they suspect a werewolf, or worse) for his vast knowledge of animals and the occult. Accompanied by his silent Iroquois "blood brother" Mani (Hawaiian actor Mark Dacascos), the two utilize the best of *Matrix*-style choreography and *Crouching Tiger*-style martial arts to fend off cutpurses and other assorted villains. Fronsac gradually unravels the vast and intricate efforts behind the mystery of this beast: the church, scientists, and various politically-motivated patriarchs and members of secret societies all seem to be involved. Jim Henson's Creature Shop helps, too, and the film's special effects are suitably big and bold.

**I**talian actress Monica Belluci (*Malena*) plays a seductive aristocrat who seems to be involved as well, along with real-life husband Vincent Cassel (*The Crimson Rivers*). The ingénue is played by Emilie Dequenne, who

starred in the Dardenne brothers' award-winning drama *Rosetta*. The acting is first rate, and no wonder, as the performers are all high-pedigree actors. Since the film melds so many genres and styles in its look, narrative and tone, the actors might well have become lost as they were put through their paces: now it's an 18th-century French costume intrigue, now it's a gothic werewolf thriller, now it's a Rosicrucian conspiracy story, now it's a martial arts adventure flick. But the performers gamely go along with what's asked of them, and their characters become larger than life in this way: more heroic, more lustful, more evil,



more pure, since they are condensing so many archetypes into one identity. How would an 18th-century knight and naturalist who's an expert in swordsmanship, animal husbandry, and papal policy speak and behave?

**I**n an interview on the "Ain't It Cool News" website (which contains many insightful film essays), Gans had much to say about the film's mythological themes and French-Asian cultural ties: "The bridge between Asian cinema and ours is anyway easier to build than between ours and an American one. Because we're sharing common mythologies. To start with, those about dragons and Knights, which are the basic subjects of *Brotherhood*. For me, anything that deals with knighthood and the apoca-

lyptic end of an age, with melancholy tied with the loss of fears and of the heroes who protect us from those, are important to illustrate. Because we could find in them a kind of common patrimony between Asia and Europe. I guess it's born from the historical heritage of both cultures, although there's no proof of a link between them: we still don't know why the dragon exists in our culture and in the Asian one. Add to it, we've got the same representation of it with different meanings. To them it's a positive thing, to us a negative one."

**A**lthough Gans' unclassifiable film did not win any major awards (although many critics applauded its bold defiance of genre norms and impressive production values), it received a number of minor ones, and was seen on the nominations lists of a number of web-based film awards competitions. The 2001 Saturn Awards nominated it for best thriller/horror film, best costumes, best supporting actor, best supporting actress, best music, best writing, and best special effects. It also received a Golden Trailer Award for Best Horror/Thriller film, and its evocative soundtrack (by "Hercules" and "Xena: Warrior Princess" composer Joseph LoDuca) was recognized by many critics as one of the year's best and most original, utilizing electronics, violent rhythms, and ethnic sounds from Spain, France, India, and China. The film, like its soundtrack, borrows from diverse sources (anything from director Luc Besson's *The Messenger* to recent martial arts fare to *The Musketeer* or *Sleepy Hollow*), forming an inspired mélange of styles that, for all its giddy eclecticism, doesn't fail to excite and entertain.

– Peg Aloï



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