



THE DESCENT 2005 (U.K.)

Director Neil Marshall **Producers** Christian Colson, Paul Ritchie, Paul Smith

Screenplay Neil Marshall **Photography** Sam McCurdy **Music** David Julyan

Cast Shauna Macdonald, Natalie Mendoza, Alex Reid, Saskia Mulder, MyAnna Buring, Nora-Jane Noone, Oliver Milburn, Molly Kayll, Craig Conway, Leslie Simpson

One would be hard-pressed to think of a horror film in recent years that has wowed both critics and audiences alike quite as much as Neil Marshall's sophomore effort, *The Descent*. While his first film, *Dog Soldiers* (2002) was a fun riff on the werewolf movie, *The Descent* is almost humor-free and more than manages to deliver the goods.

Recovering after a car accident in which she lost both her husband and young daughter, Sarah (Macdonald) gets back with her cohort of extreme sport-loving girlfriends for a spelunking expedition in the Appalachians. Juno (Mendoza), the reckless one of the pack, chooses an uncharted cave to explore, and the six friends go deep within the mountains. A cave-in cuts the women off from going back the way they came, and as they venture forward they run into a race of "crawlers"—humanoid-like creatures with a taste for human flesh.

Whereas *Dog Soldiers* was a jokey romp about masculinity, *The Descent*'s focus is on the women; not as traditional horror movie women, weak and frightened by everything around them, but as strong, capable and tough-as-nails chicks. Full credit must go to Marshall for avoiding most of the strong

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The idea for the poster art came from a photograph by Philippe Halsman of Salvador Dalí, which was itself inspired by Dalí's gouache painting *Female Bodies as a Skull*.

woman stereotypes, as he never lets the characters stray from believability even in the most fantastical of situations.

Echoes of John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) rebound even at the very beginning as the women are seen white-water rafting in Scotland; furthermore, Juno's wetsuit during the caving expedition is modeled on Burt Reynolds wetsuit from the earlier film, complete with cut-off arms. And just

*“HORROR FILMS ARE . . . OUT OF THE
HARDCORE . . . REACHING A MUCH MORE
BROAD AUDIENCE.”* NEIL MARSHALL (DIRECTOR)

as *Deliverance* explored the limits of masculine culture, particularly in the wake of increased urbanization, *The Descent* explores the limits of feminine culture and explodes some of the myths about female friendships, specifically those surrounding fidelity and trust.

The gynocentric universe of *The Descent* is also present in the film's *mise en scène*; the caves and tunnels act as images of female biology—wet, slippery and, if you don't know what you're doing, very dangerous.

The movie's U.S. release cut the original ending, much to even the critic's dismay. While the new ending was hardly a happy one, the revised ending on that final *Carrie*-like shock cheapens the film to pure sensationalism. The original UK ending is on the unrated Director's Cut of the DVD and changes the overall effect one leaves with. **MK**

Steven Jay Schneider is a film critic, scholar, and producer with M.A. degrees in Philosophy and Cinema Studies from Harvard University and New York University respectively. He is editor of *1001 Movies You Must See Before You Die*, and author and editor of *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe* (FAB Press), *New Hollywood Violence* (Manchester UP), *100 European Horror Films* (British Film Institute), and *The Horror Film* (Taschen).

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