

COVERAGE

Title: UNTITLED

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Format: Screenplay

Pages: 105

Draft/Date: 5th / 01-04-02004

Analyst: Gardner Barnes

Circa: Late 80's / Present

Locale: College town

Genre: Supernatural/Suspense

Premise: When a group of college students investigate a religious cult's mass ritual suicide from the past, they find themselves haunted by the cult's demigod leader.

Comments: With thriller devices and story turns reminiscent of THE RING and THE GRUDGE, this entry creates some suspenseful scenes and gets some mileage from the frightening reality of forced ritual suicide. But ultimately, this entry seems too derivative -- in its concept and execution -- to inspire confidence, and it has trouble balancing its genre movie parameters with its "intellectual" plot.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Premise			x	
Characterization				x
Dialogue			x	
Story/Structure				x
Set/Prod Values			x	

Project: Recommend Consider Pass

Writer: Recommend Consider Pass

SYNOPSIS:

Open on a college classroom where PROF. DIANE ESTABROOK (late 30's) discusses how all religions rely on the marginalization of society to attract their members. After class, Estabrook speaks with four students – MINDY (20, bookish leader), ALEX (20, class clown boy and school mascot), BAILEY (20, handsome, hip) and CASSANDRA (20, dangerous and damaged) – about their group research project. She warns the group (the fifth member MORGAN is not in class today) to be careful when studying the massacre of Kwan Yin. Twenty years ago, in their town, an entire cult committed a mass ritual suicide dedicated to Kwan Yin.

Later, as Mindy reads from her research books about Kwan Yin, she sees something shocking and races to Morgan's apartment. Mindy and TARA, Morgan's roommate, find Morgan dead in a bathroom, having pierced out both eyes and gutted herself with a knife. Estabrook offers to let the group out of doing their project but Mindy persists – without consulting the rest of the group. Bailey walks Mindy home from the murder scene and they clearly have feelings for each other, yet Bailey is dating Cassandra who is abusive to him. Mindy reveals that she previously saw the image of Morgan's death in the book. She also admits that she sees visions of horrible things. She knows that it's connected to Kwan Yin, but she was afraid to study this until she knew the group would have her back. Bailey suggests that Estabrook would let them change topics, but Mindy lies and says Estabrook won't.

Mindy arrives home and feels an odd presence. Unbeknownst to Mindy, the image of an evil-looking Asian man appears in each of the framed photos of Mindy's mother, and he spies on Mindy. Fortunately, Cassandra comes over and they discuss Morgan's death. Cassandra confesses that she doesn't love Bailey but is just comfortable with him. Cassandra and Mindy resolve to check out the shrine nearby where the massacre took place.

The next day, Mindy receives a package that gives her visions of a woman's eye being pierced. Inside is a VHS tape with a note: "Watch Me." She goes to see her father LOGAN – who is a cook at the campus dining hall – and runs into Estabrook there. Logan is concerned for Mindy after Morgan's suicide. After Mindy leaves, Logan and Estabrook reveal that they have been secretly dating for seven months, but Logan has yet to tell Mindy.

The group meets with new information about the Kwan Yin founder – OWEN QUINLIN. The group watches the video which documents the night of the mass suicide. Quinlin and 20 cult members holding knives surround a woman lying on an altar. The lights go out and when they come back on, Quinlin and the entire cult have committed mass ritual suicide, yet the woman on the altar is missing. After seeing this, the group agrees to sneak into the nearby shrine the following day.

That evening, Mindy approaches Estabrook for advice. When Estabrook hears about the visions, she becomes concerned. She tells Mindy that the project is over – which Mindy doesn't relay to the other members. Estabrook also tells Mindy that Morgan was pregnant, which is why she was depressed and committed suicide.

The next morning the group members go to the shrine where they are greeted by a large, limping monk named GEE MING. Gee gives the group a tour, explaining that the souls of the acolytes are trapped at the shrine because Quinlin betrayed them. Alex steals an amulet off of Kwan Yin's statue. The spirit of Kwan Lin approaches Alex and warns him not to submit to Quinlin. Alex gets lost as the rooms of the shrine become a maze. Trying to find Alex, the rest of the group gets

lost in this shrine maze too. Mindy has another premonition of being stabbed in the eye. They finally escape the maze and return to campus. They are all spooked and Alex wants out. He implies the obvious attraction between Bailey and Mindy, and Bailey attacks him. Mindy finally admits that Estabrook took them off the project, but Mindy still wants to pursue the truth.

That night, Alex wears the amulet he stole and Kwan Yin visits him in his dreams. She warns him not to give Quinlin the amulet. He wakes up to find himself holding knives in both hands. He kills himself by stabbing out his eyes and gutting himself under Quinlin's control.

When Mindy gets back to her room, Tara is waiting for her. Tara tells her that Morgan's father disowned her because of the pregnancy. Mindy sees this as why Morgan turned to Kwan Yin and awoke Quinlin. Finally, Tara gives Mindy an amulet that she found that she believes has to do with Kwan Yin. Tara tried to discard it, but it magically comes back to her every time. Bailey goes to Mindy's room later that night to tell her that he is off the project and gives her back the research books. Inside, Mindy sees the etching of Kwan Yin has changed again, and now it appears as Tara.

Morgan's mother calls Tara about Morgan's missing necklace. Tara knows it must have been left in the bathroom so she goes to retrieve it. She finds the necklace, but when she picks it up, it transforms back into the amulet that she had given to Mindy. Quinlin tells Tara to submit at his altar, but she runs. An unseen force throws her around and puts a dagger in her hand. The force tries to kill her, but she is able to resist. Fighting to open the bathroom door and escape, her arm is broken. When the dagger appears again in her one good hand, she is unable to stop her other arm from gouging out her eyes and gutting herself. Mindy races to Tara's room but can't find her. She checks the bathroom, but her body has vanished.

Mindy goes to see her dad Logan when Cassandra calls to vow support to keep researching. Mindy finds Estabrook and her dad together, but she is angrier about the lies her dad had told her over the years about her mother. Mindy says that she has discovered that her mother was in the cult. Logan confesses that he was too embarrassed to tell Mindy because she did kill herself, but she slit her own throat unlike the other cult members. Mindy is relieved, but Logan and Estabrook are concerned about Mindy taking on Quinlin.

Bailey and Mindy discuss their emotions at the library, and then Mindy explains that her mother was the woman who disappeared from the mass suicide. She still killed herself, but Quinlin needed her to do it on his altar to give him a god's power. As a result, Quinlin needs a final victim to submit on the altar and he'll become a god. Meanwhile, Cassandra is closing up at work when she finds the amulet. Suddenly, Quinlin appears and she is transported back to the shrine maze. Quinlin yells at Cassandra to submit to him, but she resists. Estabrook has a copy of the holy book and she reads the rules to channeling Kwan Yin and becoming a god – whoever does it must chant from the holy books and have the amulet. Suddenly, Quinlin appears and stabs Estabrook in the chest.

Mindy and Bailey head to the shrine where they hear Cassandra's screams. Mindy has a premonition and sees that Quinlin has killed Tara, Alex and Estabrook. At Estabrook's home, Logan finds Estabrook near death. She tells him that he must take the holy books to Mindy because that is the only way to beat Quinlin. Mindy and Bailey get separated and Mindy finds the dead body of Gee. Finally, Mindy finds Cassandra alive and well. Quinlin has possessed Gee's body and leads Bailey to the holy book, from which Quinlin has burnt all the pages. Bailey realizes that Quinlin has possessed Gee's body and they fight.

Mindy explains her master plan to beating Quinlin to Cassandra. Cassandra is going to chant the holy words and commit ritual suicide. She will be safe from harm, return from the dead and have godly powers. Cassandra is seeking the ultimate thrill and this is it. Bailey finds them and tells them the bad news about the burnt pages. Fortunately, Logan arrives with Estabrook's copy. They begin the ceremony, but Quinlin attacks, possessing various dead bodies. Before Cassandra can do her part, Quinlin intercedes and takes the amulet. Cassandra makes the ultimate sacrifice and cuts her own throat. Quinlin next plans to kill Mindy as a sacrifice, but she successfully holds the amulet and says the chant during his attack. It works and Quinlin dies. Mindy introduces Bailey to her dad as they leave the shrine to start a new day.

COMMENTS:

The setup gets off to an intriguing start, mixing the safe and ordinary -- college students discussing ethereal concepts in the classroom -- with the macabre and supernatural -- mass ritual suicide. While the concept is promising -- a la THE RING, this formulaic supernatural thriller ultimately misses the mark due to flat characterization, an illogical plot structure and an absent mythology.

The characters have very little development and come off as stock caricatures. There is an interesting love triangle, but its resolution is handled clumsily, followed by Cassandra committing suicide to stop Quinlin. This is hardly the circumstances for Bailey to jump into a new relationship. Mindy's arc is entirely too shallow. Her "secret" motivation for researching the Kwan Lin massacre is telegraphed from page one, and in the end she doesn't grow as a character or learn anything to stop Quinlin. As one of the romantic leads, Bailey needs to be less passive and offer more than good looks and exposition to drive the story forward. Alex's oafishness is simple comic relief, but his character should show more heart so that it resonates when he dies. Cassandra shows the most amount of growth in her treatment of the love triangle and her sacrifice, yet it almost comes too easily compared to her abrasive attitude from the beginning.

The characters' relationships need work as well. The budding attraction between Mindy and Bailey is overtly forced as scenes are included almost independent of the A-story. When Mindy is searching for Tara after seeing her image in the book, in the very next scene with Bailey, Mindy and Bailey are having a heart to heart at the library. Instead, they should be letting this affection be shown in actions while fighting evil and pushing the story along, not momentum-killing flirt-fests.

Moreover, none of the characters shows any lasting remorse after their peers die. An example is soon after Morgan gruesomely commits suicide when Alex calls her a "loser." Also, after they defeat Quinlin -- Logan, Mindy and Bailey walk away from a shrine filled with the bodies of their friends. These are two examples where the characters do not have a realistic sense of peril. As a result, any connection with the characters and sense of doom are lost.

This story is full of trailer moments, but what's missing is more credible, original pay-offs for all the red-herrings. In short, the cause-effect needs to be more linear. What is the inciting incident that sets off this chain of events? It's too coincidental that a member of Morgan's own group apparently started this off after she too was disowned after an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Furthermore, Mindy's motivation for researching this topic is that "she was scared before, but now has this group to watch her back." Bailey is the only astute one. Why use such unreliable people? A clearer objective needs to be defined -- even if Mindy is covering up the truth.

What is Estabrook's role in all of this? There are indications that all is not what it seems with her, yet there is no pay off, nor explanation of why she has a copy of the holy book. Who sent Mindy the tape of the mass suicide at Kwan Lin? The group makes the point that as scholars they study the footnotes of history to turn footnotes into chapters, yet it appears that they already have plenty of books and chapters available on the subject. The source of their information should be more creative and unique.

The story lacks a constant set of rules and mythology. It is never quite explained how Quinlin attained his powers after he died along with the cult members. Furthermore, his powers are vague and inconsistent. He throws Morgan across a room but then struggles to have people stab themselves. Quinlin appears to be omnipresent as he attacks Cassandra at the same time he kills Estabrook. What god powers will Quinlin attain if he succeeds? What are we supposed to be afraid of? He is treated more as a monster – like JAWS, showing very little of him until the end – as opposed to a classical antagonist with a developed personality to fear and hate. For this kind of thriller, he should be more of an active threat – someone you love to hate. Did he wait until Mindy was of age to try this ritual? Since there is no establishment of normalcy, when the line between the real world and the supernatural world becomes blurred, there is nothing to compare it to. Finally, the story of Kwan Yin -- which is the basis for the cult in the first place -- is glossed over in sound bits. The characters give out nuggets of information but not enough of a story to track. When did she live and die? She was too pure for hell, yet why didn't she just get married to her lover in the first place?

With thriller devices and story turns reminiscent of THE RING and THE GRUDGE, this entry creates some suspenseful scenes and gets some mileage from the frightening reality of forced ritual suicide. But ultimately, this entry seems too derivative -- in its concept and execution -- to inspire confidence, and it has trouble balancing its genre movie parameters with its "intellectual" plot. The dialogue is serviceable, not special, but it gets in the way of the action. All said, there are some imaginative set-pieces here, but the characters are too simple, the plot too aimless, and the element of jeopardy too superficial to generate a memorable story. In the end, it's not clear whether this is supposed to be merely a wild, B-movie ride, or a serious supernatural thriller.