



REVIEW

MARITAL PROPERTY

Gina Frangello, *Blow Down Your House, Counterpoint*,
2021

Reviewed by Kristina R Gaddy

[Review Guidelines]

Mark turns to Anna. Their naked bodies lie stiffly next to each other on the bed. Anna doesn't know where he's been, and didn't even know if she wanted him to spend the night.

"Were you unfaithful to me?" she asks.

"The truth is, not really. Were you?" Mark responds. Anna shakes her head as tears begin to roll down her cheeks. "No."

"There's always someone else when these things happen," Mark cuts her off, almost to himself.

"Not in this case," she says. [1]

The opening scenes to Andrzej Zulawski's *Possession* lay bare the thought we have when someone wants to end things: There must be someone else. Otherwise, why would you want to leave me? You couldn't rather be alone than with me. And Mark, played by a young Sam Neill, can't accept Anna's answer and spends the rest of the movie trying to find out who this man is.

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I've been Anna. I've asked that question, maybe dreading the response, maybe hoping the answer would free me. I've been asked that question and the truth was, not really.

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A few scenes later, Mark returns from work to their empty Berlin apartment, Anna and their son Bob gone. Anna, played by Isabelle Adjani, calls and tells him that she needs time for herself. Mark responds by looking through her things, finds a note from another man, and begins to interrogate Anna's friend about who this other man is. When Mark calls to interrogate Anna, she admits that yes, she has someone, and she's had him for a long time.

The film is about the end of Mark and Anna's relationship, but not in a slow-paced, European art drama way. Mark confronts who he believes to be the other man, and when Mark screams at Anna, asking where she was, he accuses her of not loving their son and being unfaithful. Nothing she says quells him. So, she yells back what he wants to hear: that she's been fucking everyone, that she's a monster. From there, the film spirals into horror. Critics have described it as "messy," "mucky,"

and a "carnival of nosebleeds." The camera follows Anna to a dilapidated building abutting the Berlin wall. In the dark and sparse apartment, Anna has been growing a creature, a bloody blob. This creature has possessed her. Zulawski believes there must always be someone else. It can't be that we are unhappy, unfulfilled, no longer in love, or just want something different.

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Thirty-one years after the film's 1981 release, journalist Margaret Barton-Fumo asked Zulawski about the successful revival of the movie. (The shortened version released in the US in the 80s was generally panned by critics.) "Please, how can I answer that? *Possession* was born of a totally private experience," he told her, and divulged that he is Mark. "When I returned to Poland [from completing a film], I saw exactly what the guy in *Possession* sees when he opens the door to his flat, which is an abandoned child in an empty flat and a woman who is doing something somewhere else." [2]

And so, what we see is what Zulawski sees; what we see is his experience of a wife who no longer wants to be with him. Anna is "crazed" and "crazy," according to male movie reviewers no matter if they reviewed it in 1981 or 2021; one female reviewer left it at "unhinged." But she's only that way if you take Zulawski's version of her. Zulawski's ex-wife, actor Małgorzata Braunek, later said everything with the director was "emotional, hysterical." [3] But she never got to make a film about their divorce.

What if Anna is tired of Mark disappearing, not knowing where he's gone on his business trip (which is apparently really a spy mission)? What if she's tired of taking care of their son all by herself? What if she's tired of not having friends because of Mark's possessiveness? I don't have a child, but I have grown tired of sitting around, waiting for my boyfriend to return home while he didn't want me to go out with my friends. She's had enough and must find a way out.

What if Anna got to tell her version of the end of their marriage?

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If someone asked Gina Frangello whether she was unfaithful to her husband, she wouldn't respond "not really." The first line of her memoir-in-essays *Blow Your House Down* is "A is for Adulteress" and soon thereafter writes, "Allow me to reveal the A on my breast." The adultery begins as an "emotional affair" with a writer friend, which might fall into the not-really category of cheating, until it turns intimate and sexual.

But before that, before the sex with her friend-turned-lover, Frangello writes that part of the reason she and her husband have grown apart is because he "swings between chilliness and volatility lately, and I find myself acting overly polite towards him, like he is a customs official or a cop, knowing things will go more smoothly if I am 'nice'" (21). Over the course of their relationship, Frangello has dropped out of her PhD and does "almost all the child-rearing, cooking, coordination with teachers, doctors, parents of other children" and yet her husband screams, "Why can't you ever support me?" (65). Like Anna, she is expected to take her husband's rages and return them by meeting his needs with demureness. Until she can't do it anymore. Until there is a breaking point. Frangello's best friend dies and the friend with whom she's having an emotional affair kisses her and becomes her lover. So there is another man, but it is so much more than that.

And long before the other man, Frangello recounts the times that her husband verbally and physically abused her over the course of their marriage, and wonders if she could have said, "*I tried, I'm sorry, this just isn't OK and I can't live like this?*" (85). She admits that three years before her affair began, she realized something was broken in her marriage they couldn't fix, even with counseling. Frangello believes that her husband knows they aren't in love anymore either, and that she is just waiting for their children to leave the house to get a divorce.

Years into the affair, after a dinner out with too many drinks, Frangello has been talking about her lover and her husband finally asks whether she is in love with him and whether they've had sex. "Yes," she tells him (142-143).

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After Anna tells Mark she needs space, they meet at a large, airy cafe in central Berlin. They can't even sit at the same table, can't face each other, but Marks starts by asking Anna how much she wants in child support for Bob and telling her that he doesn't want to see his son after the divorce. Anna doesn't want to be with Mark, but still wants him to be a father to Bob. We see that Mark is just using this line to hurt her. He quickly focuses back in on the sex that Anna's having with her lover.

"You say it's better with him than with me," Mark says.

"I get more out of it."

Mark pushes all the empty dishes off his table, screaming "Look what you've done to me!"

Anna gets up and starts putting on her jacket. "No one is good or bad, but if you want *I'm* the bad one, and if I knew he existed, I would have never had Bob with you!" she screams back. Mark begins chasing Anna out of the restaurant, screaming, "Get out!", knocking over tables and chairs as he goes.

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Frangello doesn't know how her husband will react to the confession of infidelity and secretly hopes that he is OK with it. He doesn't shout, doesn't chase her out; he simply runs. "How many times had I chased my husband out of restaurants, begging him to calm down, to talk, to stay?" Frangello asks (144). When she finds him, they "sobbed and fought and bargained and despaired" (144). As the marriage continues to unravel, Frangello and her husband share past thoughts and actions that harm more than help, they go out to dinner again, and this time, it ends with him "slamming away from the table and calling me a bitch and running out of the restaurant" (149).

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If I have been unfaithful, it's never been in this way. It was young, foolish, and fleeting. But what I do recognize is the fury, the anger. *You want to possess me, but you do not want me.*

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Anna slices and grinds meat in the kitchen and Mark can't help but want more answers. She doesn't want to talk.

"Are you afraid I'll get mad again and beat you?"

Anna shakes her head.

"Are you afraid I won't like you?"

She nods.

Mark pleads for her to help him.

Instead, she takes the electric meat slicer to her neck, and bright red stage blood flies across the screen.

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Frangello and her soon ex-husband have "six-hour conversations nightly, going over every minutia," that brought them to this point, a thing that cannot be hidden from their children and their son begs "his father to 'stop crying, stop yelling, stop closing the door to have talks'" (148). And she "sobs hysterically...a banshee with no control of the noises coming out" of her throat (151-152).

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The camera follows Anna out of the apartment and across Berlin, her dark hair pulled into a low bun, a white bandage on her neck and dark blue cloak making her look like a nun missing her habit. A man Mark has hired follows her too. She runs into the dark, derelict building as classic 70s horror organ chimes in the background.

After a quick currywurst snack, the investigator rings, then pounds on the door before a sacred Anna lets him in. He claims to be from the building management, looking for a broken window. He looks everywhere, searching for the man that Anna must be with. In the bathroom—a room without a window—he finds a dark and viscous wad of something that's writhing. Anna comes in behind him, hitting him with a wine bottle and then uses the bottle to slit his throat as blood spurts all over her.

Mark comes to learn that Anna has killed more than one man and is growing her monster. We never learn whether the monster is growing because of Anna's devotion to it or because of the bodies in the apartment. Or maybe those two are inseparable since Anna kills to protect her monster. This is the other man: a monster who is feeding on Anna.

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When Frangello and her husband separate, they get a separate "Pad" where they each stay when the other is with the children in their home. Here, she numbs her mind with wine and weed. Her lover doesn't want to leave his wife. Her ex-husband calls her to tell her the wrongs she committed, and she responds with texts about how she's glad she has "broken out of the box of his expectations" and is happy to have her own space (211). She can listen to loud music, doesn't have to cook for anyone, and doesn't have to be conscious of her husband's moods and the threat of his emotional explosions. "I felt so gloriously free that every morning seemed to shimmer," she writes (212).

Like a mirage in the desert, the shimmering isn't real. Her lover hasn't left his wife yet.

She's not happy. "I wanted precisely a love with the power to annihilate me in its intensity, but that would expand and nourish me instead because we would choose creative over destructive power" (22).

*

Anna gets off the U-bahn and begins, slowly at first, to laugh. Like she's cracked, almost fake, her voice springing off the tiled subway tunnel devoid of other people. She bumps into the wall, then slams into it. Her laughs turn into convulsions and screams. She slams her shopping bag against the tiles and yogurt splatters everywhere. She shakes and jerks. She falls and sprawls on the wet concrete until her eyes turn red. The

movement and sound make it almost sexual. Milk pours from her mouth and blood spills from her chest. The scene goes on longer than it feels like it should. And for all the theatrics, it feels genuine, like Adjani might be too familiar with the feeling of being possessed. Of having a partner who wants control of your movements and whereabouts. Of being so filled with anger and sadness and frustration that you can't possibly keep it inside any longer. Of being a woman in a relationship where you are not understood or respected.

When she returns to her apartment (Mark's apartment), she says that she miscarried.

"For the first time, you look vulgar to me," he says.

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When in the Pad, eating shitty food, drinking too much, and not seeing her children, Frangello suspects she has a tumor growing inside her. She is right. Her breasts have cancerous lumps. She considers getting back with her ex-husband, but he doesn't want to repair their marriage, and on second thought, she doesn't want to either. "He had loved the *idea* of me...[but] I was *not that woman* anymore and I had nothing to offer him now but the memory of my mistakes and flaws" (253).

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A few scenes later, Mark follows Anna once again, this time to a house. He climbs the dark stairs and hears howls of pleasure. He gets closer and closer until he finally sees Anna, entwining herself with a half-man, half-tentacled creature covered in blood.

"Almost," she repeats over and over.

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As Frangello goes through chemotherapy and a divorce, her ex-husband is increasingly hostile and threatening towards her: fighting, pointing out to the divorce lawyers that she smoked marijuana, accusing her of having borderline personality disorder, and canceling the utilities on her house. Her lover tries to support her, but with crippling depression and a sick wife, he doesn't feel like he can leave his marriage. As she vows to end their relationship, he begins to seek treatment and leave his wife.

*

At the end of the film, Anna's creation is complete. As Mark tries to escape from the police after a crazed chase looking for Anna once again, he crawls up the stairs to the building leaving a trail of blood behind.

"I wanted to show it to you," Anna tells him, bright-eyed.

It's a creature that looks exactly like Mark.

The cops shoot up the stairway, hitting Anna. When a male director tells the end of this marriage, Anna dies. She collapses on top of Mark, giving him a final kiss before shooting herself in the back. She cannot live without him.

*

"Between 2015 and 2019 I lost: a marriage, many useless luxuries and privileges, my two breasts, my hair, my menstrual cycle, a hip, both parents, my sense of myself as inherently 'deserving' of any of these things," Frangello writes at the end of her book (309). But she's gained a life. She's more than a mother and daughter, more "than any man's."

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Only one review I've found of *Possession* over the last forty years understands Anna's perspective, and it comes from an undergraduate journalism student: "In Neill's portrayal of Mark, he perfectly embodies an incessant, male jealous rage and uses this fracturing of the paternal ego to drive home the most terrifying aspect of the movie: the domestic violence and sexual discontent that is all too real." [4]

Unlike Anna and Małgorzata Braunek, Frangello has been able to tell the story of her divorce. Of her ex-husband's possessiveness, control, emotional manipulation, and physical abuse—although she's hesitant to call it that. At the end of the book, she reveals that her ex-husband wanted her to keep the end of their marriage to herself—to not write about it, to not tell anyone about it. Because she would tell her version where no one is good or bad, and even if she cheated, if she yelled, if she was the one with someone else, he could also be a monster.

[1]

[<https://archive.org/details/possession.1981.1080p.brrip.x264.aacetrq>]

[2] [<https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/film-comment-interview-andrzej-zulawski/>]

[3] [<https://swiatseriali.interia.pl/newsy/seriele/pensjonat-nad-rozlewiskiem-376/news-malgorzata-braunek-i-andrzej-zulawski-od-milosci-do-nienawis,nId,5269542>]

[4] [<https://www.statepress.com/article/2020/10/specho-andrzej-zulawski-possession>]