

Maybe the Friend Zone Isn't So Bad

An *Obsession* Review

By: Adam Dombrow

Growing up as an unconfident fat kid, I spent a lot of time in the “friend zone”. Escaping this much maligned, imaginary designation felt like an endless battle to me, and getting the vibe that I was approaching said love-interest Purgatory always felt like a nightmare. Curry Barker’s *Obsession* takes the concept of becoming more than just friends and completely turns it on its head, making the escape the nightmare instead

And oh, what a well done nightmare it is to experience once (more on that later).

Obsession is **not** a fun horror film—quite the opposite actually, especially for anyone who has experienced a relationship with someone with mental/emotional pitfalls. It has all of the hallmarks of a relationship with an addict: the moodswings, the yelling, the bargaining, and most of all, the quiet, creeping dread that sinks in when you have to deny them the thing they claim they want most of all. Barker perfectly captures all of those fears and emotions while keeping the audience on the edge of their seat for almost all of the film’s hour and forty-nine minute runtime.

As little fun as there is to be had watching *Obsession*, there is also this sense of wonderment. *Obsession* is **very well done** in terms of pacing, style, and scoring, but the thing that I found myself the most impressed with about the film was Barker’s ability to take a premise that, for all intents and purposes, should *not really* be *that* scary, and somehow craft a tale that is downright unsettling to the core. *Obsession* feels like you’re watching something you shouldn’t

be watching—like slowing down and staring at a car crash—while also feeling like a completely fresh idea that you haven't seen before.

Contrary to *feeling* like you're watching a car crash though, *Obsession's* pacing is actually super dialed in. Barker gives you *just enough* scene by scene that it makes it impossible to look away, and right when you think “oh my God, this is becoming too much”, Barker eases up for *just long enough*. It's an extremely tense watch filled with proper highs and lows that keep your heart rate right where Barker wants it all the way up to the film's super-violent climax.

In terms of the film's look and sound, Barker's crew *all* deserve kudos for *Obsession*. Cinematographer Taylor Clemons, musician Rock Burwell, and sound designers Ben Zarai, Cailey Milito, and David Kitchens each brought their A game to the production, and all played a hand in the film's creepy, unnerving vibe.

Clemons' use of silhouettes and shadows is truly remarkable and unsettling: you know that what you are looking at is just a person, but my God is it jarring to just *listen* to someone cloaked in darkness delivering such sick sentiments, and Clemons makes sure to stay fixated on the Nikki's silhouetted figure long enough to make her truly eerie. For as many times as I rag on movies for having poor lighting, *Obsession* is a complete masterwork in that category.

Burwell's score is truly a tale of two halves. The synth work before the wish creates this sort of dream-like, fun atmosphere, whereas the later synth work is menacing, complete with perfectly placed strikes that aren't used simply to scare you like most horror movies, but instead they are used to prime you, letting you know that stuff is about to pop off! The two comparisons I kept making to myself about the scoring were Charles Bernstein's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (high praise), and the music of (one of my favorite bands) The Birthday Massacre.

Obsession's sound design mirrors the tension and feel of its scoring. The sound design itself is very bi-polar—there are quiet lulls followed by intense shouting, then back to lulls, making the film's dialogue stand out that much more. Each and every *bang* or “I love you forever... And ever... And ever... And ever...” all enhance the eerie vibe of the film's look and score.

None of *Obsession*'s aforementioned pieces work though if they aren't accompanied by a truly unhinged performance from actress Inde Navarrette. Navarrette's Nikki is the lifeblood of the entire production, and it is essential that you buy in to not only her fully on display mental breakdowns, but also the moments when she is calm and in control. Navarrette almost has to play three different characters *all* while being one person, and she completely pulls it off. Nikki the character gave me the same vibes as Katie from *Paranormal Activity*, or Annie from *Misery*.

This all isn't to say that I felt *Obsession* was a perfect movie though. One question I kept circling back to was “how old are we supposed to think these people are?” The ages of the circle of friends really seems to be all over the place, with three of them seemingly living on their own (I don't think the film works otherwise), and one applying for college while living and working with her father, yet still going out partying and drinking... It was very confusing to me. Before you say anything, yes, I know people can apply to college whenever, it just never gets addressed during the movie!

Even more confusing to me is how $\frac{3}{4}$ of the main characters are written up. Both male main characters are more or less *not great* guys. Male main character Baron “Bear” Bailey starts out likeable enough—a lovesick guy who desperately wants to get out of the friend zone—but by

the end I felt that he was pretty irredeemable, and the only rationale I can give it is that dating an addict makes you yourself change and do questionable things that you wouldn't normally do. Bear's best friend Ian kind of comes off like a douchebag throughout the entire movie—albeit a kind of amusing one. Even Nikki herself prior to Bear's wishing for her to love him comes off with this kind of weird, manipulative undertone (which is maybe the point—the film doesn't spend enough time with the female characters before the wish is made for the audience to get a good enough read). Maybe I'm just old now, but I really don't remember thinking in high school (or right after) that some people were just downright sketchy or rotten!

As I said in the beginning of this review, *Obsession* (for me) is not a fun watch. If I'm being honest, it left me feeling *exactly* how I felt at the end of the movie *Irreversible*—both are shocking, unflinching, and wholly unfun one time viewing experiences; however, that does entail you having the experience, because *Obsession* is indeed a very well crafted movie, and I look forward to seeing what Barker does next!