

Border (15) S

Directed by Ali Abbasi



'18 Sweden | Denmark 1hr 50mins

Fri 8 March for at least one week

Based on a novel by Let The Right One In author John Ajvide Lindqvist, this genre-defying, Cannes award-winning Scandinavian fantasy takes a curious look at the boundaries of human/inhuman, right/wrong, duty/desire and male/female.

Tina (Eva Melander with excellent prosthetics) is a Swedish customs officer with a nose for trouble - quite literally, as her heightened sense of smell is able to sniff out contraband and moral corruption. When one day a similar-looking strange man sets her senses tingling, she discovers a relationship, a history, and a secret that will force her to choose between good and evil.

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This interview by Nicolas Rapoldh with director Ali Abbasi originally appeared on filmcomment.com in Sept 2018.

Film Comment: How did you feel about films with fantastical elements when you undertook this project? People often say, oh, this fantasy movie or superhero movie is actually about X, and it doesn't always do that for me. But in your film, without sweating it, you let us feel acutely what the main character is going through and it's very careful about point of view.

Ali Abbasi: First of all, I should say that I'm not a genre fan, neither in literature nor in film. I don't read comic books or fantasy books. My first film, *Shelley* [2016], was kind of in the horror sphere, and now it would be easy to see this huge interest I have in genres—but I really don't. I see the whole genre thing, and fantasy included, as a marketing device. The reason why *Border* and *Harry Potter* would both be called fantasy eludes me, but I don't mind it. If I did something and they put it beside mayonnaise in the supermarket, there must be a reason.

I started as a writer, writing short stories, before I did anything with movies, and I was very inspired by surrealism and magical realism—especially the South American writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar. And the reason was that, growing up in Iran, reality is a bit jelly-like. It's not solid. It can change, it's opaque, it's very tricky, and sometimes it's so strange and weird that you just can't believe. So the idea that there is a fantastical element within your everyday life and it's not a dragon flying by, that is very easy for me to grasp. And that's what we tried to do with *Border*.

What I liked about the John Ajvide Lindqvist short story is that it's not really written like, "Her sense of smell was..." or "She did this and she did that..." It's written in diary form. You're inside her head. She's a little bit sad and melancholy because nobody likes her, and she has this boyfriend that she's not really happy about, and then this guy comes and she's like, oh, I'm falling in love, what's going on with me? But there are very few mentions of, oh, I have this power, oh, I'm so different, or this and that. And that was the approach we took in making the movie. It's not about a woman who has an extraordinary nose, it's about a woman who's lonely and looking for love, and she happens to have an extraordinary nose.

Film Comment: The actress who plays Tina, Eva Melander, is incredible. She achieves such finely detailed nuances of expression, and through so much makeup. What made you know she would be right for this role?

Ali Abbasi: We had a really long casting process, over a year and half, to find these guys. I remember I was down to the last one or two people who I thought could work. And we did the casting with Eva, and one thing I remember was when we were trying the scene where they meet for the first time, in the customs area. And Eero [Milonoff], who plays Vore, was already cast, so I used him to choose the girls. So I told Eva to concentrate on that part: you see him and you've never seen anything like this before—you fall in love but you don't know what love is, because you haven't realized it, so you're more shocked than romantically attached. And she did this take, and he came and he looked at her, and she blushed. She was red all over her face. And I started blushing too. Suddenly it became so awkward, that situation. I hadn't thought about it being awkward—I thought it was funny and a little bit weird—but I hadn't thought about it being awkward and serious.

A lot of actors can change their physicality, their way of talking, but the most difficult thing is when you can create a signal or an emotion or an impulse that's so strong that it takes over your body and you don't really know what it's going to do with you. I was very happy with her performance. I was thinking purely technically—the more transformation needed, the more trouble, and the more I was afraid that she would look fake. She's also an excellent character actor. She's now doing Shakespeare's Richard III, and she's playing Richard, with really strange makeup that makes her look half like Santa and half like The Joker from the Batman movies.

Film Comment: As some have pointed out, her character has an interesting overlap with certain kinds of experience—whether that's the experience of sexuality, or being the outsider, culturally, whether an immigrant or any culture that's in the minority. What do you think

of that reading of the movie?

Ali Abbasi: As you say, this is about the experience of being a minority. Being a minority doesn't mean that you have to be queer, that you have to be brown, that you have to be a woman. Even if you're a male, middle-class person in a white, Western country, you can still experience being a minority. My point is that the experience of being a minority is actually quite universal. But, of course, there are some people who live with it all of their lives, they carry their looks with them, and there are some people who go in and out of it, some people who maybe experience it a couple of times. The important thing to me, I think, is that it's not a metaphor for being a transgender person, or how immigrants are treated—those are really important subjects, politically. If I wanted to do a movie about immigrants, I would do a movie about immigrants. I don't like people who can't say what they mean without metaphors. But I appreciate that there are layers of meaning there for people to read, and I agree that they are there, but for me it's more about the general experience of being a minority rather than a specific one.

Film Comment: Can you talk about your visual plan for the film? It's a beautiful film, from the get-go—the green of the grass in that early shot is so intense.

Ali Abbasi: I've been working with my cinematographer, Nadim Carlsen, since way back. We were in the same year at film school together, and we did my first little sketches at the film school together. We did Shelley together as well. Nadim, aesthetically, comes from still photography. He has a very specific taste, he knows what he likes and what he wants. He has a very experienced hand, even if he's not very old, and at the same time, he's not tricky to work with. This is my principle: I'm not interested in making beautiful pictures. If you sit there and think the music is great from beginning to end, then something is wrong. If you sit there and think, oh, she's such a great actress, look at that silicone mask—of course, at times, you can think about that, but if you think about it all the time... And especially with cinematography, I have this thing where, if a frame or a reel looks too good, then I cut it out, because I don't want to get from the cinematographic experience to photographic one. That was our main ideology, so to speak.

Then we were talking about how to bring life into this story, how to keep the realism, so that the magical becomes more believable and plausible. We decided to approach this with a kind of naturalism, a little bit of a social-realist approach. We were careful—we were still just following the actors around the room, but we wanted a little bit of reality present. Part of it has to do with cinematography, but part of it has to do with production design. The way we chose the police station, for example: we had a lot of choices for that location, and I had a lot of discussions with my production designer because I wanted to go with the boring one. She said, "It looks like every other police station we've seen. There's nothing special." But there isn't anything special about a police station.

We took great care not to create fantasy. At the same time, there are moments in the movie that are fantastical, and we tried to leave space for those moments, but we really tried to avoid enhancing those moments with smooth camera movements or special

treatment. Our idea was to treat all the elements—fantastical, realistic, poetic, the everyday banal—in the same manner, and that in and of itself would be a style.

Film Comment: There's one scene I hesitate to say too much about, but it's intimate and revelatory for Melander's character in a special and profound way. How did you think through staging that encounter?

Ali Abbasi: In the short story, the scene was there, but it was much more civilized. It was much more like, they started kissing, they're taking off their clothes, cut to the candle burning. And I thought that these aren't really like human beings, and the way they have sex shouldn't be like the way I have sex—they have differences. And, as you mentioned, this all comes from character: you have to find the logic of that character, the physicality of that character, the emotional life of that character, and you have to go with it. That scene wasn't particularly different from any other scene, really. There are a lot of technical aspects to it, but that's not like rocket science. The rocket science for me is with the actors. I do 80 percent of my work through casting. It's extremely important for me who I'm working with, because I give these guys a lot of freedom and choice and responsibility, and so it has to be someone who can carry that.

Film Comment: What are you working on next?

Ali Abbasi: I'm going to be doing a miniseries in Sweden. It's about a controversial artist—the guy who drew a caricature of the prophet Muhammad [in 2007]. I wrote a radio play about the guy who tried to kill this artist, and the Swedish TV heard this radio play and thought it would be interesting to take this artist and the guy who tried to kill him and put their stories together. It's like a political thriller—I think I'm in my political period. But you know, I wouldn't mind doing a Hulk movie.

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