



Land Squid!

And a big almost for *Monsters*

MONSTERS: Written, directed and filmed by Gareth Edwards. Visual effects and production design, Gareth Edwards. Music, Jon Hopkins. Starring Whitney Able and Scoot McNairy. Magnolia Pictures, 2010. R. 93 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

It's such a pain in the ass when you're a photojournalist who gets commandeered into getting the boss's daughter home safely when the U.S./Mexico border is frequented by a species of aliens that look rather like land squid with way too many tentacles.

Via a series of not entirely convincing events, Andrew Kaulder (Scoot McNairy) finds himself in just this position. Some sort of employee/freelancer for some sort of publication, Kaulder happens to be in the area when a monster attack happens.

Some people are hurt, some buildings are destroyed, but the point — for the privileged Americans — is that Sam Wynden (Whitney Able), pixieish and blonde, needs to get home. Clearly she cannot accomplish this alone. Not with kilometers of “infected zone” between her and America.

Director/writer/jack-of-all-trades Gareth Edwards has a pretty decent idea in *Monsters*, which is hardly the first film to suggest that scary alien beings are sometimes a little misunderstood, but his execution is lacking. *Monsters* looks great; its ruined buildings and pulsing alien lifeforms are thoroughly convincing, and the film's lush vegetal settings give it an

organic feel that underlines its vague notions about boundaries, misunderstandings and the results of mistrusting those we consider “other.” (Hello, *District 9*, I see you over there, lording it over this subgenre of sci-fi flicks with your undeserved Oscar nomination.) The actual monsters, glimpsed mostly in pieces or on television news reports, are fascinatingly alien but feel like props popping up to move the action along. A good alien movie requires a careful balance between too much and not enough information, and *Monsters*' text intro, which outlines where the creatures came from, feels disconnected from what actually happens in the film, six years after first contact.

But mostly a combination of plot and awkward dialogue weakens the film. For a while, every sentence Sam utters seems to begin or end with “Kaulder,” a jarring distraction from the natural flow of conversation. The series of contrivances

that lead Sam and Kaulder into the infected zone piles up like an awkward sitcom: Trouble on the train tracks! Uncaring ferry operators! Too many shots of tequila! The budding attraction between two people with nothing in common but their situation!

Reading about the film's shoot — a tiny crew hiring locals for small parts, shooting by the seat of their pants while their leads improvise — gives plenty of reasons to give Edwards and his cast and crew a lot of credit for perseverance and moxie, but the result is still underwhelming. *Monsters*' patchy framework of ideas and allegory pulls bits and bobs from the headlines: natural (or unnatural) disaster, immigration, journalistic ethics and understanding between cultures. The way locals shrug at the alien threat, lacking the option of a theoretically safer life on the other side of the American border fence, says more than any clunky conversation Sam and Kaulder might have about the value of photographs of dead children, or the ease with which they might forget all this once they get home. *Monsters* is a huge *almost*: The themes almost gel. The story almost transcends its clichéd beginning. And then the end (striking imagery aside) almost undoes the stronger parts of what's come before. Just this side of disappointing, the movie is a hell of a calling card for Edwards' ability as a low-budget maker of visually enticing films — provided he can make room for a writer on his tiny crew. **EW**

Monsters opens Friday, Jan. 14, at the Bijou.

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