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The Lair Of The White Worm

(BRITISH)

Variety — 8-31-88

A Vestron Pictures release of a White Lair Prods. production. Executive producers, William J. Quigley, Dan Ireland. Line producer, Ronaldo Vasconcellos. Produced and directed by Ken Russell. Screenplay, Russell, from Bram Stoker's novel; camera (Technicolor), Dick Bush; editor, Peter Davies; music, Stanislas Syrewicz; sound (Dolby), Ray Beckett; set design, Anne Tilby; costume design, Michael Jeffrey; choreography, Imogen Claire; special makeup effects, Image Animation; additional camera, Robin Browne; stunt coordinator, Stuart St. Paul; production manager, Laura Julian; assistant director, Chris Hall; casting, Gail Stevens. Reviewed at Montreal World Film Festival (noncompeting), Aug. 29, 1988. (Also in Toronto and Boston film festivals.) MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 93 MIN.

Lady Silvia Marsh Amanda Donohoe
Lord James D'Ampton Hugh Grant
Eve Trent Catherine Oxenberg
Mary Trent Sammi Davis
Angus Flint Peter Capaldi
Peters Stratford Johns
P.C. Erny Paul Brooke
Dorothy Trent Imogen Claire

Also with: Chris Pitt, Gina McKee, Christopher Gable, Lloyd Peters, Miranda Coe, Linzi Drew, Caron Anne Kelly, Fiona O'Conner, Caroline Pope, Elisha Scott, Tina Shaw.

■ **Montreal** — Those who hated "Gothic" (and there was good reason to) are strongly urged to give Ken Russell another chance and consider this rollicking, terrifying, post-psychedelic headtrip, "The Lair Of The White Worm." Vestron Pictures should gear up to exploit the huge cult hit potential of an original, fun-filled nightmare.

Adapted from a tale by Bram Stoker, creator of Dracula, "Lair" features a fangy vampiress of unmatched erotic allure. Lady Sylvia Marsh, as she goes by in her Jaguar-tooling civilian existence, lives in a sprawling mansion not far from the state-of-the-art castle inhabited by Lord James D'Ampton.

Hugh Grant ("Maurice") essays Lord James as a kind of post-Prince Charles democratic nobleman, insufferably in command but eager to rub shoulders with the hoi poloi. Lord James even throws open his castle for a wild party, inviting all and sundry. Among the guests are Lord James' tenants, Eve and Mary Trent and Mary's new boyfriend, Angus Flint.

Eve and Mary have been running their parents' country inn since mom and dad disappeared one night on a walk through the woods. Angus is an archeology student who's been digging in their front yard. On the day of the big party, just before nightfall, Angus finds a bizarre, unclassifiable skull.

The castle party is celebrating Lord James' inheritance of the estate as well as a family holiday commemorating a legendary ancestor said to have slain a dragon. In the Lampton clan mythology, the dragon is represented as an overblown, jawsy white worm, a model of which is ceremonially slain at the festivities.

In a bit of class-system byplay probably best appreciated by U.K. audiences, the uppercrust Brit noble and the tart-tongued Scottish ("Scotch is a drink") scholar engage in some mano-a-mano intellectual sparring, and come away admiring each other's erudition. They agree that the whole dragon-snake-worm business can be traced back to pagan religions that flourished in Olde England when the Romans ruled.

All this unfolds with a jittery energy that suggests something is definitely out of kilter in this neighborhood's collective reality. It might have something to do with

Lady Sylvia who has moved back to her ancestral manse at just about the time of Lord James' return.

Soon the duke and the digger divine an eerie connection between the mysteriously burgled skull, the white worm legend and cases of snakebite plus more strange disappearances close by the Lady's mansion. Then things start to get scary.

Russell dips into his "Altered States" cornucopia of transdimensional visual effects, creating startling tableaux of 3-D palpability, no specs needed. He also succeeds in evoking a shocking sensuality from gore-splashed scenes.

Amanda Donohoe as the vampire seductress projects a beguiling sexuality that should suck the resistance out of all but the most cold-blooded critics. She is also hilarious, a virtue shared by everyone and everything in "The Lair Of The White Worm."

Does Lord James act in time to save the beautiful Eve (Catherine Oxenberg) from the human sacrifices reserved for virgins? Does Angus marry Mary or has he bitten off more than he can chew? How does one really kill a vampiress? It's possible that many will return for a second viewing even after they know the answers. — *Rich.*