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# Schlock Value

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Michael Udel

**H**orror films may be the most abused offspring from the dysfunctional cinematic family. While the one necessary element of a horror film is obvious, your local video store (read Schlockbuster) will place anything with a chainsaw, a quart of chicken's blood, and a giant mutated rat in the horror category. The difference between a horror movie and a horrible movie is not only a matter of semantics but one of taste as well. Hollywood peddles the shock value of its gory special effects like crutches at a onelegged log rolling contest. No matter how trendy the spectacle may seem to its producers, for its viewers the experience is something less than spectacular.

The modern definition of the horror genre created by fashionable slasher flick icons like Jason, Freddy, Michael, and Chucky pays only superficial homage to its ancestors, who made the formula of "monster-as-antagonist attacks helpless female victim" a classic. Current horror films still subscribe to the time-proven plot of evil vs. innocent victim, but they add a contemporary wrinkle, reflecting society's emphasis on sensationalism. While there is nothing sensational in a story of a monster from beyond because we do not believe in U.F.O.s, Lock Ness Monsters, Yettis, or Sasquatches, there is something intriguing in a story of a man whose dog orders him to strangle ten women.

Upon hearing such a story of senseless murder, we react the same way as we do to any episode of Friday the Umpteenth. First, we sympathize with the helpless victim. We try to imagine the horror of being ruthlessly disemboweled by a psychotic maniac. And just as your TV news reporter will assist your imagination in creating a vivid picture with melodramatic crime scene photography, your horror film director will pump your movie screen as full of blood, gore, and fantastic mad men as his budget will allow. Next, when we watch the busty blonde in the negligee as she opens the closet door that will release her doom, we feel the abstract fear of driving past a mangled car surrounded by paramedics struggling to free its driver from the wreckage. We slow down to witness the ghastly scene and realize it could just as easily have been us. Third, we are exhilarated by our proximity to death. Hollywood and our media agree that more is better, quantity over quality, so it is no surprise we are most exhilarated by the greatest body count. If only five teenagers became Freddy fodder last time around, then ten must now be sacrificed to the great god of gore, or at least they should be slaughtered in new and creative fashion. Even today's jaded horror buffs appreciate an inventive decapitation. Audiences thrill to the cleverness of the latest mechanism of death like the Marquis de Sade fingering his newest leather whip.

Speaking of sadism and gratuitous one-upmanship, for

the true horror junky there are two remarkable "grossout" films available. Bloodsucking Freaks is the perfect example of a movie trying to outdo everything imaginable in order to disgust its audience. Despite being repulsive, the film is also ironic in its plot of a live stage featuring its actors as torture victims. We know the show is real, but the audience does not. The director has abducted some well endowed young ladies and is torturing, then executing, them on stage. The catch for us is that when we laugh at the snobby theater patrons who applaud the vile performance, we are laughing at ourselves, who ghoulishly enjoy the on-screen agony.

Another gruesome film recommended only for the hardcore viewer is Make Them Die Slowly. Delivering exactly what it promises, the movie depicts three scientists traveling to South America on an expedition to support the hypothesis that cannibalism is extinct. The scientists encounter two men in the jungle who have killed a member of an Indian tribe. To the scientists' dismay, the tribe is cannibalistic, and all but one of the five whites are cruelly tortured and killed, then eaten.

The movie is unnerving because some graphic footage of a leopard killing and eating a wildly resisting chimpanzee is mixed into the film. The director's editing technique gives the decapitation, cannibalism, and torture scenes of Make Them Die Slowly a rare authenticity reminiscent of the better Faces of Death sequences. When combined with the excellent special effects of the human slayings, the actual animal deaths imbue the movie with an all-too-realistic flavor of morbidity not even approached by another entry into the horror classification, with the possible exception of Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer.

Both films succeed in disgusting their audience, but only one of them creates even shortlived fear. Although Make Them Die Slowly deserves credit as a truly frightening movie, it achieves fear at the expense of whatever its viewer may have been trying to digest prior to the viewing. While the previous examples attempt to shock their audiences by any means available, much better films exist that succeed in scaring their audience through respectable means.

Browning's Freaks was considered so frightening that it was banned in Great Britain for thirty years. Where most current directors stock their films with mute, barbaric, unfeeling grotesqueries of humanity, Browning cast Freaks with a troop of circus performers who may appear to be less than human because of their misshapen bodies but are actually just the opposite. Freaks reverses the traditional roles of monster and victim and endears a band of visually disturbing characters to its audience, while making the most attractive person in the film the villain.

The audience is horrified when the most popular and gentle member of the close-knit family of sideshow freaks is duped by the lovely trapeze artist. The fear inspired by the freak's response to the attempted poisoning of their leader is genuine and shocking.

In 1932, Browning created a film of lasting quality and consummate horror, without relying on flashy special effects mutilations. Browning's movie depends on an intense climax and a believable plot to create the kind of horror film rarely enjoyed and seldom surpassed.

In the case of horror films, life does not imitate art. Any novice history student can recite a litany of atrocities committed by man against man. Despite the increasing sophistication of Hollywood's special effects artists, not even her most ambitious directors can equal 'the horror' of man's darkest heart.

A horror film entertains its audience with a story that moves us to the edge of our seats. A horrible film moves only our stomachs by using gratuitous dismemberment and voiceless psychopaths to imitate society's serial killers. Why go to the theater for that when you can stay home and watch the eleven o'clock news?

