

Written by Kier-la Janisse

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The 2010/2011 curriculum for Montreal’s [Miskatonic Institute of Horror Studies](#) for youth aged 14-29 is under way, and we’ll be posting writing/reviews from the students as the year progresses. Stu

dents can take individual courses (most comprise a trio of three-hour classes on consecutive weeks) or sign up for the full curriculum, which runs weekly through May 2011. Writing work is optional, but those who complete those assignments will get their work posted here on Fango’s Miskatonic blog—great exposure for budding horror scribes!

Below are some of the first ramblings to emerge from the Institute, the result of the Intro to Horror Film Criticism course, wherein I subjected students to some of my favorite genre films (I even named my Blue Sunshine microcinema after one of them!). Next up: Kristopher Woofter’s course on Reality Horror!

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BLUE SUNSHINE

Jeff Lieberman, USA, 1976

By Ariel Esteban Cayer

When an LSD-type drug called Blue Sunshine causes seemingly normal people to lose all their body hair and go batshit insane more than 10 years after the initial intake, bodies start to pile up and Jerry (Zalman King), who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, is falsely accused of the murders. Needless to say, BLUE SUNSHINE is an odd film—part cautionary tale and part investigative thriller. Made in 1978 and expanded from Lieberman’s anti-drug commercial “The Ringer,” the film has been mostly forgotten despite Lieberman’s small but loyal cult following, which is mostly due to his successful SQUIRM (1976) and more recently SATAN’S LITTLE HELPER (2004).

From the opening sequence, set to a big, bald and blue moon properly foreshadowing the events of the film, it is determined that the movie will connect the storylines of the various “victims” being introduced. The idea of the common man turning into a homicidal maniac has been exploited time and time again, but in this context, it proves to be particularly terrifying. Part of it comes from the fact that they have no idea what is coming their way, aside from the occasional head-splitting migraine. While the disjointed narrative makes it hard to stay entirely interested for the film’s short 90 minutes, Lieberman takes some rewarding risks in his direction and offers us some good sequences, such as Jerry’s re-enactment of the murders or the disco-riffic lead-in to the climax. As a B-movie mashup of body horror (although one will argue the body isn’t as drastically transformed here as in, say, the ’80s work of David Cronenberg), investigative thriller and social commentary (which will be addressed in a moment), it works.

While Lieberman himself has often denied any political interpretation of the film, BLUE SUNSHINE remains interesting in its portrayal of the former hippies-turned-yuppies generation and makes a bold statement about drugs and politics, the most obvious example being the main antagonist (and dealer of the drug back in the day) now running for the Senate. The irony of the situation is quite striking when one comes to realize he’s the indirect cause of all the atrocities depicted on screen. Do the bald-headed killers stand as physical representations of the hypocrisy through which the youth of the ’60s quickly abandoned their hippie ideals in order to attain higher class status, or is this meant as cosmic irony and not much else? Ultimately, the interpretation will depend on the viewer, but one thing is sure: In this film, drugs are deadly and they will catch up with you.

BLUE SUNSHINE loses steam as a result of its repetitious investigative formula, but what mostly drives the film is King’s crazy performance. Overacted all the way through, his unique character is the anchor that keeps the film worth watching. That said, BLUE SUNSHINE could have benefitted from a tighter script and for that reason, it might lose some of its viewers’ attention. Truth is, aside from the very good idea at its core, BLUE SUNSHINE is far from being essential. Nonetheless, the film will interest people looking for cult, bizarre B-movies of the ’70s. Mixing

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various genres, it remains unique and will surely spark one's interest to seek out other Lieberman films. Undeniably, the man has good ideas.

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COMBAT SHOCK

Buddy Giovinazzo, USA, 1986

By Nancy Ryan

What happens when a filmmaker creates a horror film that takes place in a setting dangerously close to real life? *COMBAT SHOCK* tells the story of Frankie, a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder who, despite his repeated attempts, fails to help meet the basic physiological needs of his family during the early-'80s economic recession in the United States. By using this realistic approach, *COMBAT SHOCK* reinvents what it means to be a horror film.

Fear represents the core of the horror genre; the main character usually suffers from it when his physical or mental integrity gets threatened, while the viewer usually catches it by means of character identification. In typical horror films, the threat is usually direct and centralized, which means that it can be identified and subsequently dissolved. In *COMBAT SHOCK*, Frankie's physical integrity is threatened by his lack of sleep, lack of food and drinking resources, violent gang members and an impending homelessness. As a result of those threats, the aggravation caused by his post-traumatic stress disorder and the added pressure of being the sole provider for his family, Frankie's mental integrity disintegrates as well. In *COMBAT SHOCK*, the source of all of the main character's struggles and fears is indirect, vague and intangible; its villain is A

merican society

. What can you do about that kind of villain? Nothing. The main character has no control over his life and cannot do anything to dissolve the threats to his physical and mental integrity. The fact that lack of control is at the root of what constitutes fear makes this aspect one of the main causes of COMBAT SHOCK’s effectiveness.

Even scarier for the viewer is the fact that the villain of the film as depicted in COMBAT SHOCK truly exists in real life for many people. Most viewers consciously or subconsciously understand that the events portrayed in COMBAT SHOCK could happen to them, which is almost never the case in most horror films. American society is the villain in many Americans’ lives, but is also the hero of the rich and the powerful. COMBAT SHOCK reflects reality even through its ending: those who are spoiled by American society are probably the only ones who can put an end to the American nightmare (the title of the director’s cut of COMBAT SHOCK) experienced by the poor and the socially excluded. Hence the everlasting status quo.

For those reasons, COMBAT SHOCK is a deeply nihilistic horror film that constitutes a terrifying and traumatizing experience for the viewer, more so than most typical genre films. Furthermore, the fact that this film takes place during a postwar economic crisis makes it more relevant than ever.

{jcomments on}