

KITCHEN SINK CREEPS

WEEK 7.

Maniac (1980)

William Lustig

- Though made two years after *Halloween* (1978), William Lustig's movie seems to capture more about the nineteen-seventies than Carpenter's early hit, ever really could.
- What's more, it does not provide us with us the same 'the bogey man isn't real' escapism exhibited in the monster franchise efforts that would come to dominate the new decade, instead it seems to go back to a slightly earlier time.
- A dark grainy world, which might also be inhabited by *The French Connection* (1971) anti-hero cop Popeye Doyle or mentally disturbed vigilante Travis Bickle.
- It lives in a horror made not of hockey masks or razor gloves but one that is cut from sharpened hunting knives and strangled by lengths of piano wire.
- It is the environment of Frank Zito, and something about it is definitely way too real.
- Zito, played by Joe Spinell, who had previously popped up in *Rocky* (1976), *Godfather* (1972), *Godfather II*, Friedkin's *Sorcerer* (1977) and a host of other productions, exudes a kind of tacky authenticity, though other elements of the picture can spill into the ridiculous, Frank, with his sweaty overweight demeanour, who often manages to look threatening and pathetic at the same moment, is never less than convincing.
- His is a depressingly believable serial killer, one seemingly caught between his crippling guilt and overwhelming urge to brutally destroy his way into oblivion or celebrity.
- He lumbers from one murder to the next.
- A fleshy and unassuming night stalker at the edges of a chaos which the midnight sprawl of the city cannot hope to avoid.
- And yes, there is more than a whiff of other movies within the claustrophobic confines of *Maniac*. *Psycho* (1960), the aforementioned *Peeping Tom*, and the more contemporary *Driller Killer* (1979), all bleed into its grim shadow play.
- The icky parental issues highlighted hark back to Norman Bates's unhealthy mother obsession or Mark Lewis's cruel treatment at the hands of his sadistic father. And while its look lends itself more to Abel Ferrara's video nasty, there are also other visual nods.
- *Frenzy* (1972) is referenced when a single camera dollies ominously back out of a bathroom containing Frank's next victim, in a scene which mimics Hitchcock's famous use of restraint, within an otherwise incredibly violent storyline.
- Here though, that self-discipline is held only shortly, as moments later the woman in question is dispatched mercilessly before our eyes.
- Unlike the master of suspense, who required us to engage with our imaginations, to fully appreciate his work, Lustig asks us to leave them at the door.
- Though not based on any one true-crime case, the uneasy feel of the period was working its way into the movie's grimy subconscious.
- In England, infamous serial killer, The Yorkshire Ripper AKA Peter Sutcliffe was still at large and in the US Ted Bundy had recently gone on trial.
- Though it would be erroneous to suggest that such murderers had not existed in other eras, the seventies and eighties were certainly becoming an age of *that* kind of criminal, spurred on by a media that was ever clambering for its killer of the week, in an 'if it bleeds it leads' kind of depraved an immoral ratings war.

***Maniac* (1980) CONT...**

- *Maniac* didn't seem to reflect the stories behind the headlines so much, as question why television and other forms were so obsessed with them.
- Frank is shown eagerly devouring the latest newspapers in order to read about his most recent crimes, as though the print copy creates a distance between himself and reality.
- Of course, if that's the case then it could be argued that Lustig's film also exhibits a kind of hypocrisy.
- It may be a critical response in some ways, but it is also an exploitative piece which willingly offers up the same cheap thrills it supposedly derides.
- Much of its shock value lies in the casual nature of Frank's actions, though it stops short of employing the same kind of stark nihilism exhibited in the earlier *The Last House on the Left* (1971), it still leaves a bad taste in the mouth.
- There may be 'reasons for the protagonist's behaviour, unlike the villains at large in Wes Craven's grotesque social commentary, but these motivations are never fully explored.
- The potentially more cerebral elements of the story are cast aside and instead, its incessant brutality is hammered into the brain like those nails into the heads of the unfortunate mannequins.

The Poster Design

- On it, we see the lower half of an average Joe, a blue-collar type, in jeans and work boots, in one hand though is the dripping scalp of a female victim, in the other a lethal-looking blade.
- Blood swirls away at his feet and disappears into the black void he seems to exist in.
- It's a blunt reminder of the reality we might live in.
- Here is not a 'monster' but a man who might do monstrous things, and what's more, he doesn't come from hell, he comes from up the street or next door, waiting to drag you into the abyss, and when he comes you'll never know because he looks just like one of us.

Intentions and Ideology

- And though the film is arguably a social commentary, even if it's an accidental one, there is no avoiding its derogatory handling of women.
- For the most part, female characters are only introduced to us onscreen to be gotten rid of.
- Each of Frank's victims appear only to fit into the machinery of his dastardly set pieces.
- Like the shop dummies in his bedroom, they become props in his dirty little performances.
- To some extent this is the point of the story, Frank carefully selects his 'mother substitutes', reducing them to seventies style clichés of femininity - the nurse, the model, the hooker, etc.
- They become, no more than hairstyles and uniforms. Frank casts concepts like intelligence or actual fleshly bodies out with the trash. His apartment becomes an appalling suppository for lifeless *Stepford Wives*-esque creations.
- Yet once he has 'collected' each of his victims, who can never live up to the memory of his missing parent, he is compelled to seek out others to fulfil his unattainable desire.
- In one, blink and you'll miss it sequence, the face of Frank's mother momentarily appears on one of his targets.
- And while there is no actual rape, the sexual pleasure Frank gains from his bloody conquests is heavily implied.
- For all this though, the production remains an entertaining slice of pre-politically correct filmmaking, and there is much to enjoy or at least sneakily appreciate. It's broodiness and dark tones mix with its more bizarre elements in a low budget, dimly lit presentation, where the mise-en-scene is employed expertly to ramp up our understanding of this wretched piece of human detritus.

Maniac (1980) CONT...

- Frank's room becomes a shrine to his dead mother, illuminated only by burning church candles and the small portable television which hums in the corner.
- The killer's deep-seated Catholic guilt and fascination with the media buzzes away throughout in a Caravaggio-style benefaction.

William Lustig

- The seedier and more salacious nature of *Maniac*, should not be too much of a surprise given that William Lustig began his career making porno features such as *Hot Honey* (1977) and *The Violation of Claudia* (1977) under the name of Billy Bagg.
- This, Lustig admits was simply a way of getting into the industry, riding same the wave of success which the enormously profitable *Deep Throat* (1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) had also ridden.
- Lustig is the antithesis of the film snob, the working director who eschews the sort of auteur type pedestals to make deeply satisfying midnight movie schlock.
- At best his productions are unquestionably watchable, at worst, never less than cheesy background splatter, perfect for late-night boozy gatherings of like-minded horror kids.
- Lustig's third (non-sex) silver screen offering, the Larry Cohen penned and produced *Maniac Cop* (1988) is a hugely gratifying whallop of supernatural slasher fun, a sort of *Robocop* (1986) meets *Friday the 13th* (1980), which also stars Bruce Campbell from *The Evil Dead* (1981) and the wondrously lovely Laurene Landon.
- He would also go on to direct two *Maniac Cop* sequels, as well as *Vigilante* (1983), *Hit List* (1989), *Relentless* (1989), *The Expert* (1996) and horror comedy, *Uncle Sam* (1996), and is now CEO of Blue Underground; but it would be *Maniac* his first true production, that would cement his reputation, forever supplanting him as cult freak show proprietor to the ever-growing queue of willing cinematic rubes, ready to feel that vicarious splash of blood to the face.

Problems

- *Maniac* does take a few missteps though, the relationship which 'blossoms' between Frank and Anna (Caroline Munro) in the final half of the film is fairly ludicrous.
- It seems unlikely that she would be attracted to a lumpen shadow like our hollow-eyed protagonist, not because of his more obvious visual shortcomings but because he is so depressingly dull in his outlook.
- Unlike the real-life Bundy, Frank exudes none of his charm, wit or handsome exterior. But even if we accept this, the affair which the pair embark on, which thankfully is never consummated, feels forced and there only to carry the plot forward to the inevitable bloody climax.

The Ending

- The final section, feels most like a traditional horror, it throws over much of its earlier grittiness for something more dreamlike and spooky.
- When Frank persuades Anna that they should make a detour to his mother's grave before continuing to their dinner date, it becomes an old-style swirl of dry ice and blue for night lighting, creeping dangerously close to a more traditional feel.

Hellraiser (1987)**Clive Barker**

'Firstly, I wanted to make a movie that flew in the face of what I viewed as the increasing trivialisation of horror movies...I'm not terribly interested in going the easy way; I want to create a kind of undertow in a movie that may never leave your mind.'

Clive Barker

Hellraiser (1987) CONT...**The Set-Up**

- A puzzle box ‘the lament configuration’ – can open the doorway to another world
- The world is inhabited by sado-masochistic ‘Cenobites’
- *Hellraiser*, like many films before uses very specific kinds of ‘body horror’
- David Cronenberg, of course has made a career out of his obsessive ‘body horror’ tales
- Cronenberg himself saw it as “seeing the world through the point of view of the disease” – the subversion of say Disney’s anthropomorphic norms. However, there are marked differences between Barker’s and Cronenberg’s approaches

‘Barker thus significantly differs from David Cronenberg, for example, in not merely seeing the body in its own self-determined flux, but in addressing issues of restraint, repression and release ...’

Paul Wells

- Barker uses sado-masochistic action and suggestion and controlled forms of violence
- He contemporises the sexuality of the modern horror film
- Pain becomes not a consequence or punishment but an ‘aesthetic’
- This provides ‘an implied discourse of the (British tradition) of the Gothic – the attractiveness of the perverse and transgressive...’
- Barker explores the complexities/contradictions and tensions of ‘Englishness’
- On the one hand the English have traditionally been seen as inhibited, controlled, remote.
- On the other hand, they can be viewed as physically indulgent, brutal and impassioned

Killing and coitus are pre-eminently private acts, intensely personal experiences...because they impart a wordless kind of knowledge mediated by the body. Carnal knowledge shared by lovers, of by murderer and his victim or witness, does not involve the communication of discursive meaning between two discrete individuals, but a communion at the instant of death between bodies that are no longer distinct from each other.’

Joel Black**Criticism**

‘...a dreary series of scenes that repeat each other. What fun is it watching the movie mark time until the characters discover the obvious? This is a movie without wit, style or reason, and the true horror is that actors were made to portray, and technicians to realize, its bankruptcy of imagination. Maybe Stephen King was thinking of a different Clive Barker.’

Roger Ebert**Censorship**

- Two and a half shots were excised from the first hammer murder, including a close-up of the hammer lodged in the victim's head.
- In the scene where Julia murders another man, the actor playing the victim felt that it made sense for him to do so naked.
- The nude murder scene was shot but, ultimately, replaced with a semi-clothed version.
- Close-ups of Kirsty sticking her hand into Frank's belly, exposing his guts.
- Longer version of the scene where Frank is being torn into pieces by the Cenobites' hooks. A final shot where his head explodes and his brain messily splashes out was also cut.

***The Burbs'* (1989)**

Joe Dante

Joe Dante

- Perhaps what separates Dante's work from other directors at the time, was his ability to not only create memorably entertaining features but to also wear his love of cinema, past and present, firmly on his sleeve.
- Whether it be his visual or aural nods to *The Exorcist* (1973) or Sergio Leone and Ennio Morricone in *The 'Burbs*, his utter and complete immersion in his art is clear to see.
- Being a protégé of Roger Corman and still belonging to a world where the pages of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* are plastered on the walls, Dante exudes, via his work, an aesthetic which sits somewhere between grindhouse and Looney Tunes, no easy trick to pull off, and never more apparent than in his box office smash *Gremlins* (1984) and the segment he directed for John Landis's *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983).

***The Burbs'* (1989)**

- Tapping into older horror comedies like James Whale's hilarious and unsettling *The Old Dark House* (1932), *The 'Burbs*, centres around the strange goings-on of newly arrived neighbours the Klopek's, but more importantly on the batty reaction to this state of affairs by the incumbent occupiers of the surrounding houses.
- Ranging from simple curiosity, outward racism to break-ins and physical property damage, all facets of Uncle Sam's slight problem with outsiders are highlighted here.
- Despite taking a stress-relieving week off work to re-charge his batteries, Ray soon finds himself in the middle of a witch-hunt cooked up largely by his overreacting suburbanite pals.
- Dante's suggestion is that certain swathes of the urban middle class have grown so bored with themselves and others, they desperately cling on to whatever 'entertainment' comes their way.
- This boredom of the soul, it is hinted at, is partly inspired by the insipid TV channels which spew out mind-numbing garbage for hours at a time.
- From the movie's opening moments which see Ray, standing on the lawn outside the Klopek's residence, feeling the ominous rumblings through his naked toes, we get hints that everything in the neighbourhood is not entirely well.
- Like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), which sought to strip away the layers of the domestic idyll and expose the unhealthy fascinations that lurked behind the white picket fences, Dante too, doesn't hold back in his jokey deconstruction of truth, justice and the American way.
- And though the 80s saw more than its fair share of comedy-horrors passing through its doors, with pictures like *House* (1986), *Evil Dead 2* (1985) and *Creepshow* (1982) providing us with plenty of blood-spattered laughs, it's arguably Dante who more ably gets to the heart of the matter, with his relatable B-movie style productions replete with monsters, suspense and boatloads of satire.
- *The 'Burbs*, like his later *Matinee* (1993), appears to be a more heartfelt concern.
- Though Dante had offered convincing ensemble pieces throughout his career, *The Burbs* present us with a family unit that feels more real.
- Though they may be surrounded by odd caricatures and American grotesques played beautifully by the likes of Bruce Dern, Corey Feldman and Rick Ducommun, Peterson and his remarkably patient wife Carol (Carrie Fisher) lean closest to our audience perspective.
- Though his immediate peers seem convinced of The Klopek's guilt, Ray's continued doubt that he is perhaps not pursuing the right course is most telling of his more humanised character.

The Burbs'* and *Heathers

- And yet while it may have an emotional centre, this doesn't fully detract from its more satirical ambitions.
- In this sense, it arguably has more in common with *Heathers* (1989), Michael Lehmann's wildly cynical teen comedy, released the same year.
- While Dante's targets are perhaps painted with broader strokes, *Heathers* zooms in more explicitly on the concerns that blight a so-called free country.

The Burbs' and Heathers CONT...

- Homophobia, organised religion and the education system or all given short thrift in this highly stylised social commentary which doesn't so much poke fun as bludgeon to death.
- Interestingly, both movies contain 'explosive' content both metaphorical and physical, which seems to perfectly reflect how the 80s had figuratively crashed and burned and how the coming century would blow to bits its outdated ideas about sexuality, race and the nuclear family.

The Burbs' and Social Commentary

- *The 'Burbs* (1989) delivers an excellent summation of mainstream America's seeming refusal to shine a light on itself and its paranoias, misconceptions and wrongheadedness.

“They are not the lunatics. It's not them. It's us.”

- And despite the movie's denouement which sees the mad neighbour's interference seemingly justified, it is clear that Dante, with his custom brand of domestic satire, is suggesting that clearly, his country's problems run deeper than the odd collision course with Foreign extremes.

Many aspects of American society are represented

- The gun nut
- The air-headed trophy wife
- The embittered war vet
- The heavy metal kid
- And the greedy freeloader
- And while it's all played for laughs, Dante never quite lets us off the hook.
- But though *The 'Burbs* and its cast of players might be seen as a microcosm of American society, presenting us with a fascinating inward glimpse of a culture which has somehow lost sight of itself, it is mainly, unquestionably, a fun, highly regarded piece of Hollywood entertainment.
- A gloriously witty depiction of a confused country that cannot decide whether to hate itself or carry on the romance with a fraudulent urban dream.

“I hate cul-de-sacs. There's only one way out and the people are kind of weird.”