

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: DVD Horrors Movie Review: ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** (A look at a memorable 60's cult film from "Godfather Of Gore" Herschell Gordon Lewis)
Plus: A review of ***Trailer Park of Terror*** – A modern cousin to the cult classic – December 2008

Note: DVD Horrors is a Thoughts For The Month topic focusing on horror films made for the DVD and home video markets, and horror films that have been successful primarily upon release to DVD and video. The majority of the movies I review under this topic heading are low/no budget, non-Hollywood independent films, or foreign titles that don't see theatrical release here in the USA.

*Note: The following movie reviews of ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** and ***Trailer Park of Terror*** may contain plot details which could be considered spoilers.*

At my most recent trip to The Chiller Theatre Toy, Model & Film Expo I finally got around to picking up a movie by cult horror film guru Herschell Gordon Lewis, also known to some as the "Godfather Of Gore". I say finally because Lewis was a director I had heard about for some time, but someone whose work I had (for whatever reason) never gotten around to watching. ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** has an interesting story to say the least. It's about a group of people driving through Georgia who are detoured off the main highway into a quaint little Southern town called Pleasant Valley (population 2000). They are very quickly surrounded by the overly cheery townsfolk and informed by Mayor Buckman (Jeffrey Allen) they are to be the "guests of honor" for a centennial celebration. Despite confused reactions by the motorists and even some protests, they soon become reluctant guests of the jovial townsfolk. Unbeknownst to them however, Pleasant Valley isn't as pleasant a place as it initially seems; for they are to be killed in revenge for the violence committed by a group of Union soldiers at the end of the Civil War. It turns out

these soldiers slaughtered the entire town some 100 years ago, and once every century is payback time against some very unfortunate Northerners.

Two Thousand Maniacs! begins with the aforementioned scene of the motorists being detoured, an easy ruse by two guys simply moving a couple of road signs around. This extended scene is accompanied by a Southern-style sing-a-long tune about General Robert E. Lee, Yankees (Northerners) and the South rising again. It's an admittedly catchy tune even if one doesn't care for the musical style, and a song that immediately sets the tone and gives the proceedings a fun, almost comical feel. This feel-good vibe made me think to myself that this was going to be a brutal film. Indeed, when the first murder finally does happen it's quite a shock to the system. The mayor and his buddies keep smiling and laughing, continuing to act like it's a celebration even as they cut off body parts from their first unfortunate victim. After that other Northerners are dispatched in more elaborate, imaginative fashions, including the use of a giant boulder dropped from above and a spiked barrel, as well as one poor fellow whose body is pulled apart by horses running in different directions. It's like a psychotic small town carnival, with the fun-loving vibe continuing up until the point where the last remaining couple catches on to what is happening and attempts to escape with their lives. I thought this juxtaposition of mood was very effective throughout the movie, and one of the main reasons ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** has the impact it does. And of course, there's also the copious gore on display...

After viewing this movie I can see how the director achieved his gore moniker, because ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** really does have a visceral impact. In terms of realism I found the murder scenes to be quite believable and well-executed (no pun intended). And while today's horror fan may watch these sequences and not blink an eye, in 1964 they must've packed quite a punch on the drive-in movie circuit. Indeed probably for a mainstream film fan this picture would still be shocking today. However surprisingly enough, the movie is not the schlock-fest one might expect, sporting relatively smooth production values and good acting. And the supernatural twist revealed at the end, while not necessarily a total surprise, was creepy and unsettling nonetheless. Overall ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** is a very disturbing and memorable movie worthy of the moniker cult (horror) classic.

Such will probably not be said about the more recent direct-to-video zombie flick ***Trailer Park of Terror***, a movie that owes a debt to ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** as well as a long list of other films both classic and current. Interestingly enough, my friend and I happened to watch these two movies back to back recently. And as one can imagine we were surprised to hear ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** referenced within the first few minutes of ***Trailer Park of Terror***. This is because the newer film uses a similar idea as its main premise. In ***Trailer Park of Terror*** a young woman named Norma (Nichole Hiltz) is first seen angrily walking through her trailer park residence to meet a nice young man ready to take her to a dance. Her anger is directed at the various low-life characters who share the park with her, people who look at her as white trash and want nothing more than to keep Norma oppressed and under their control. Norma's dreams of escaping this hell with the kindly young gentleman are shattered when the vile rednecks accidentally kill him during a fight. Following her hysterics Norma wanders aimlessly down the road when she runs into a dark stranger dressed all in black (Trace Adkins) who seems to know everything about her and her situation. This smooth talking, but somehow sinister fellow believes in an eye-for-an-eye vengeance, and after an unspoken deal Norma is soon walking back through the trailer park dispatching her former tormenters one after

another with a huge shotgun. She then turns on the gas at her place, lights up a cigarette, and moments later the whole park goes up in flames. Thus ends the history of this particular trailer park... or does it? For years after the blaze people begin disappearing where the charred remains still stand, and as a result the place is renamed Truckers Triangle (like The Bermuda Triangle). We then cut to the present day and meet Pastor Lewis (Matthew Del Negro) and the group of troubled teens he is chaperoning. Faster than one can yell Bang!, their bus crashes during a rain storm right near the remains of the trailer park, which is suddenly no longer a burned-out shell, but rather looking just like it did before Norma's violent rampage all those years ago. And of course the Pastor and his group soon find themselves seeking shelter from the storm there, welcomed by a now seemingly rejuvenated Norma. Pity this poor group...

Obviously ***Trailer Park of Terror*** borrows its central idea from ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** about people being slaughtered and then returning years later for bloody vengeance on innocents. But beyond that the film goes off on its own wild path, meandering between different styles and elements with a sort of kitchen sink approach that yields decidedly mixed results. Billed as a dark comedy, this film is primarily a gory zombie movie about a group of mean-spirited rednecks who pick up their (now undead) lives right where they left off after Norma's deal with the devil. They torment, torture and kill the unfortunate young people to keep up their part of the bargain, and don't seem at all to mind doing it. And the once kind-hearted Norma has sold her soul and is now their zombie queen, presiding over her motley crew and mainly concerned with keeping up the murder rate in order to sustain her outwardly beautiful appearance.

The interesting back-story notwithstanding, once the tale of the stranded teens begins it's pretty standard material. That's because the teen victims are generally unlikable and/or seriously flawed (with the exception of one who is just a bit less unlikable and therefore destined to survive), which makes them unsympathetic. This puts most of the focus on the zombies, who are admittedly quite charismatic, though somewhat stereotyped rednecks. They include a guitar-wielding hard rocker with a mullet hairstyle, a nasty southerner mainly concerned with his drugs, an Asian masseuse who gives fatal massages, and a horrible obese woman who's constantly looking for "raw meat". As you can imagine by the descriptions these characters are a bit over-the-top, which at times gives the movie a campy ***Evil Dead II*** or ***Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*** vibe. However at other times, such as when one unfortunate fellow is hung up, cut up and then deep-fried in a steaming vat of cooking oil, the style turns towards the current cinematic torture trend of such grueling films as ***Hostel*** and ***Captivity***. All this isn't to say the movie is a total disaster though, because it does certainly have its moments. And there's no doubt the abundant carnage on display will please many a gore hound. However overall I didn't find the film to be that compelling, given the unsympathetic protagonists and the uneven tone. Or put another way, this was an ambitious horror romp that never quite decided what it wanted to be. It could just be my personal taste however, and for fans of outrageous zombie gore films it may rate more favorable. Either way one thing that can be said is that ***Trailer Park of Terror*** is a wild ride with hard-rocking southern-styled music to match. (Although personally I must say I prefer the catchy tune from ***Two Thousand Maniacs!*** -- "Robert E. Lee Broke His Musket on His Knee...")