

## Cinematic slaughterhouses...

# Horrors! Horrors!



The blood is not visible here, kiddies, so get out your cosmic crayons and fulfill your wildest fantasies. But don't let your mom see.

## Text by Lloyd Wasser

"This is beginning to feel like Dachau. Twenty gallons of blood, animal intestines for the zombies to eat—this morning I was eating a corned beef sandwich and somebody said, 'Hey, that's a prop.' We use corned beef in some of the artificial arms. We kill 'em every possible way, burn 'em, shoot 'em, blow their heads off."

—Gary Zeller, weapons expert for *Dawn of the Dead*.

George Romero was the guy who really started it all, way back in 1968, when his *Night of the Living Dead* terrified movie-goers everywhere. The tale of the dead who rise from their graves to stalk the living for food, *Night of the Living Dead* was the most explicitly violent horror film of its day. But it was only a stepping-stone to the productions facing us this year. With titles like *Blood Beach*, *Maniac*, *Scanners*, *The Bogeyman* and *Motel Hell*, this year's crop of horror films are nothing more than cinematic slaughterhouses. Why the need for explicit violence in horror films? Are exploding heads and bursting eyeballs really necessary? The debate currently raging over this issue is as bloody as some of the pictures under fire.

"You can't gross them out," said John Carpenter (creator of

### Gross out

*Halloween*) in a recent interview, "because you'll lose them. They'll sit and watch the movie but they'll stop enjoying it. If you don't gross them out, don't show the meat when the knife goes in, they'll do it right in their heads for you."

Carpenter's sentiments don't seem to be echoed by the majority of horror film directors, among them George Mihalka, producer of the latest Canadian exploitation flick, *My Bloody Valentine*.

"Gore has only become necessary in *My Bloody Valentine*," claims Mihalka, "because it's been used so often that if you don't have it, people would say your picture wasn't a horror film. Today's audiences have been spoiled by extremely good make-up and special effects."

Apparently Mihalka is right, for the latest horror films are being

rated on their use of gore rather than on suspense. *Fade to Black* and *Funhouse* (the latter directed by Tobe Hooper, of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) have recently come under fire for their lack of screen violence, with horror fans staying away in droves (*Fade to Black* closed after only one week in Toronto), while pictures like *Maniac* gross millions of dollars in the U.S.

*Maniac* deals with a psychotic who runs around murdering and

### Blood fest

scalping young models, and his terrible death at the hands of the re-animated corpses who proceed to dismember him on camera. This lovely picture will probably not be shown in Canada due to its extreme violence.

Violence in horror films is nothing new, and explicit violence goes as far back as 1963 (long before George Romero) to director Herschell Gordon Lewis, creator of such masterpieces as *The Gore-Gore Girls* and *Blood Feast*. The highlight of this latter film was the scene in which the young hero reaches into the mouth of one of his victims and rips out her tongue. Lewis used a sheep's tongue, veins and muscles still attached.

From Lewis, the gore was used more extensively by George Romero in his now-famous zombie film, and Tobe Hooper in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. But even in those films the violence was necessary to the plot. It wasn't



until after *Halloween* was released that a new spate of violent pictures emerged.

Morris Dickstein, in his excellent analysis of the horror film in *American Film* linked the new hungering for violence by

film fans to their repressive sexual needs.

"Another feature of the new wave of horror is a hard-core pornography of violence made possible by a virtual elimination of censorship," says Dickstein. "Horror films, apart from the ways they may mirror the social mood, have deep psychological sources that often involve a sexuality displaced in aggression: the sensual bit of *Dracula*, the long knife plunging into the victims in John Carpenter's *Halloween*. The murdered is a voyeur enraged by his own excitement, and the camera appeals to our complicity by putting us repeatedly in his

### Butcher knife

position, seeing what he sees, tempted to feel what he feels."

This thesis can be strongly reinforced by the opening scene of *Halloween*, in which the young murderer is the camera—and we become the murderer's eyes as he stalks his older sister through the house, an eight-inch butcher knife in one hand. By becoming the murderer, we are doing something forbidden.

"The reason that these films are popular in that...they all toy with the rage and anger we have within us," claims John Carpenter.

Numerous psychologists have found the new cycle of horror films to be extremely dangerous. And an equal number of psychologists have found such films to be a healthy release of aggression.

Ron Rose, writing in *Harper's*, is one critic of the new horror cycle who has linked the films to aggression: "I've begun to wonder whether there might not be some genuine menace in the horror film genre—so powerful in its manipulation of emotions and images that it might create nightmares in the waking world. Who can say that Charles Manson, who saw himself as the child of the devil, was not influenced in his speculations by *Rosemary's Baby*? And isn't there evidence to support the speculation that David Berkowitz was influenced by *The Exorcist*?"

On the other side of the coin, Morris Dickstein feels differently about the new horror films. "They have a cathartic or purgative effect. They lance and probe our encapsulated fears, and drain off feelings we didn't even know we had."

Whatever the final result, horror films are here to stay and as *Funhouse* and *Fade to Black* have shown, the violence is fading. This may suggest a return to the classical film styles in the next few years, starting with the summer release of *The Howling*, an honest-to-God werewolf picture without

a lot of blood and gore but a fair dose of superlative special effects. Audiences may be getting slowly bored with the blood, and most, hopefully, will turn to the best films rather than the worst as the year proceeds.

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