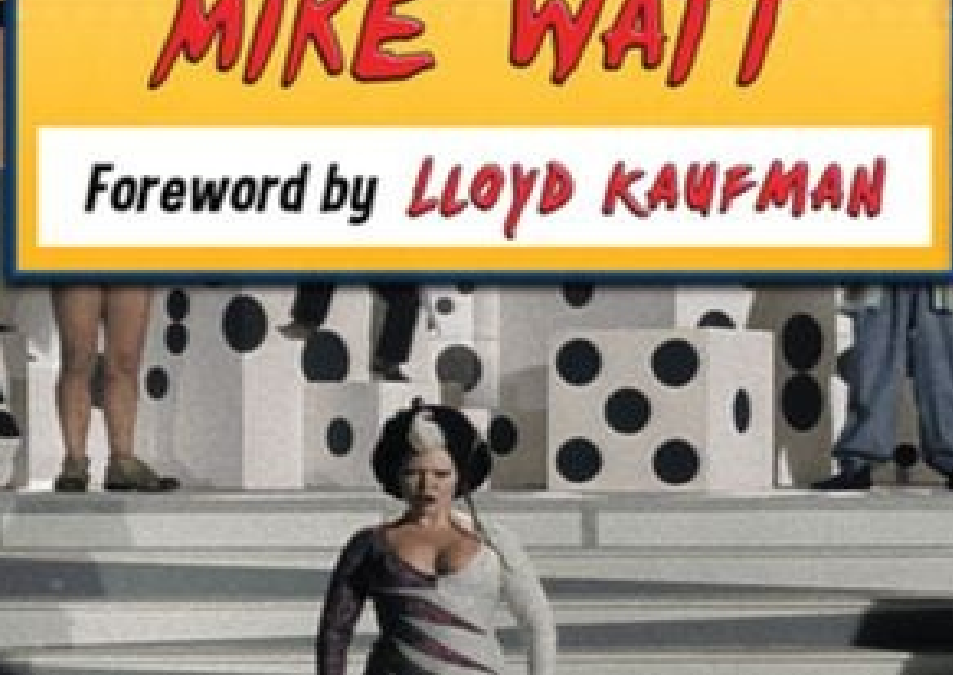


FERVID FILMMAKING

66 Cult Pictures
of Vision, Verve
and No Self-Restraint

MIKE WATT

Foreword by **LLOYD KAUFMAN**



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*66 Cult Pictures of Vision,
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On the cover: *top* the funeral in Blanco Town in *Straight to Hell*; *middle* Brother Bear and Brother Rabbit in *Coonskin*; *bottom* Queen Doris (Susan Tyrrell) and her court in *Forbidden Zone* (courtesy Alex Cox; courtesy Bakshi Productions, Inc.; courtesy FZ Distribution)

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For Mom and Dad,
for Phil Hall,

And for Amy,
whose uncanny sense of what may be
a “bad movie” sometimes meant
that she’d fall unconscious
before the FBI warning was over,
but who nonetheless made my
movie pursuits so much more enjoyable.

In memory of Frederick S. Clarke

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Acknowledgments

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I must extend praise and great respect to Phil Hall, whose ongoing column at *Film Threat*, "The Bootleg Files," inspired me to rip him off with my own column, "Movie Outlaw."

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me.

Finally, I have to thank my father, Bill Watt, for sparking my lifelong obsession with movies of all kinds, from John Ford's epic westerns, to the silent pioneers, the '40s "hard-boileds" and the screwball comedies.

Foreword

by LLOYD KAUFMAN

Some say that film criticism is dead, that the Internet killed and buried it in a shallow grave of message boards, blogs and IMDb posts. Others believe criticism is alive but if you can't sum up your feelings about a movie in 144 characters, then maybe you don't deserve the thumbs God (or whoever gave you! I happen to know for a fact that serious criticism still exists, because I've been married for 37 years, and because Mike Watt exists!

I also know that when Mike Watt writes about a movie, he chooses his words carefully, tries to put that film into a cultural, political and occasionally personal context, and then uses way more than 144 characters to express those thoughts. Maybe he uses too many characters.¹ I am a living testament to the fact that the eye can only read so many words before the brain starts thinking about sex.



Lloyd Kaufman and the Capitol Building, together again (© Troma Entertainment, Inc.).

Mike, however, understands something that all the casual film lovers with their own websites only hint at and that the rest of the world flocking to see the extra, longer and more extravagant *Avatar* seem to miss entirely: MOVIES ARE IMPORTANT. They're art! At their best, they are comparable to great music,² enriching our spiritual individual and collective lives. At their least, they are entertaining, a way to escape from the toxic waste and rampant chicken genocide all around us. If you agree that art is anything that is created by the hands of man (or gyno, or combination of the two) then all movies created are art. With the exception of *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Maybe the movies Mike chooses to focus on don't seem like art to the naked eye. But he tries to point out a few that you may not have heard of for some criminal reason. The devil-worshipping media conglomerates in charge of the movies, who dictate what we have the right to see or not see, have determined that a lot of these movies, art or not, are better off buried or relegated to the Dante-esque level of limbo known as "out of print." Often for no other reason than because they were created by me. Sometimes because they are out-and-out lousy; but lousy, like beautiful, is in the eye of the beholder.

Mike has chosen 66 of these little cultural oddities to explore in these pages. Because he loves movies. Because they are important. He is not saying that you'll die wallowing in regret if you don't see the majority of these things, but you may face God (or whoever) a little less fulfilled for want of viewing *Shanks* or *The Bed Sitting Room*.

Mike Watt knows more about cinema than ... well ... er ... well, dear reader, start digging into this book and you'll find out. If you love film, you should give this book more than a cursory glance before thinking about sex.

Although why *Poultrygeist: Night of the Chicken Dead* isn't in here is beyond me. Now let's make some art!

Notes

1. Speaking of characters, Mike Watt is one, indeed!
2. And masturbation.

Lloyd Kaufman is president of Troma Entertainment and the creator of the Toxic Avenger.

Introduction

In 1998, with my partners Amy Lynn Best and Bill Homan, I directed my first feature film, *The Resurrection Game*. Because we were but poor post-college students and because filmmaking is such an arduous, Sisyphean task, we became convinced early on that this also might be our *last* film. So we decided to make every movie we ever wanted to in one production. The script we hammered out was a satirical futuristic film noir with zombies, swordfights and an over-the-top puppet Greek chorus named “Necro-Phil.” To borrow an age-old idiom, we threw in *everything but the kitchen sink*.

It was a literal all-or-nothing scenario and we worked hard on both script and final edit to make the disparate elements work. This was no accident. The three of us were longtime aficionados of “the Kitchen Sink movie.” We loved it when the filmmakers piled on the familiar toppings and invented new flavors. Most independent artists’ first films are kitchen sink movies for the very same reason ours was: there may never be a second.

With respect to the short-lived “Kitchen Sink Reality” movement of British filmmaking in the late ’50s, also referred to as the “Angry Young Man” modern wave, in our view “Kitchen Sink” cinema meant “more is better,” or was at least more fun. Thus we used this term to describe movies like John Carpenter’s 1986 *Big Trouble in Little China*, John McTiernan’s *The Last Action Hero*, even Russ Meyer’s and Roger Ebert’s mega-epic *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Movies that took severe right-angle turns when you least expected them to, where the artists borrowed from all over the place to make something that was, if not unique, at least a wild and disorienting ride.

Movies that came out of Hong Kong in the ’80s and ’90s cemented this more-is-more subgenre. How else to describe a wacky, anachronistic musical with Jackie Chan and friends merrily fighting Nazis before everyone dies in the end?¹ Or three modern-day female superheroes band together to stop a living corpse and a guy who decapitates people with a bird cage?² Or a pair of goofy cops caught in a gun battle where their superior and the villain take turns spitting bullets into pistol chambers, can throw a handful of rounds and load a revolver, and shoot other bullets out of midair?³

To us, “Kitchen Sink Cinema” meant total chaos and total control. The filmmakers just don’t give a damn about market reports or box office; they’re just doing whatever the hell they want, out of either lack of budget or an overabundance of caché. The first *Matrix* is a Kitchen Sink movie, made thanks to the Wachowskis’ success with their lesbian thriller, *Bound*. Richard Kelly destroyed box office expectations with *Donnie Darko* and was thus handed the keys to the kingdom to make the thoroughly whacked-out *Southland Tales*. Darren Lynn Bousman cashed in all the stock he made on the *Saw* franchise and made *Repo! The Genetic Opera*.

Kitchen Sink movies are rarely successful on the first go-around. They’re almost always cult films, though not all cult films are of the Kitchen Sink variety. Kitchen Sink movies are lightning strikes of inspiration, all the elements coming together for good or ill, to result in jaw-dropping wonder. They don’t have to be lunatic, either. Renowned artists like Peter Greenaway are known for nothing less than singularity of risky and contagious vision, but wouldn’t be considered anything less than an “art house” director. A Kitchen Sink movie results from whirl of ideas, of images, of themes or plots, inexplicably coming together despite conventional reason. Kitchen Sink movies come about when, 90

percent of the time, the artist is just left alone. The other 10 percent of the time, the movie finds its own audience after the producers or the director finally call it quits.

John Frankenheimer's 1996 version of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is a very good example of a Kitchen Sink movie that isn't very good. As is 2004's *Van Helsing*. Frank Miller's odious spit-in-the-face-of-Will-Eisner, *The Spirit*, was actually designed to be a Kitchen Sink movie (in fact, early on in the film the villain actually clobbers the hero *with* a kitchen sink), but it failed miserably because it tried too hard. Or not hard enough. (Or, in fact, hated every living being that comprised its audience.) Nearly every movie made by Terry Gilliam has been a Kitchen Sink movie, as have those of David Lynch and Werner Herzog.

Some of the very best are nearly or completely unknown to mainstream audiences. Those are generally the most fun, even when not the best made, because once you discover them for yourself you feel like you've joined some secret society. Or at least you've become part of the joke.

Ben Solovey, 26-year-old Florida State film school graduate, is undertaking a mission to restore the original 16mm negative of Harold P. Warren's anti-movie, *Manos: The Hands of Fate*.⁴ About the *Mystery Science Theater 3000* favorite, he says, "This is a movie that says things you don't understand and invades your personal space."⁵ I spotlight a number of movies like that. The ones that creep up on you and won't go away, constantly hiding your keys and forcing you to join it at its cousin's wedding.

I focus on a handful of low- to no-budget independent movies as well. Some were made by people who have since become friends of mine. (The independent film world is a very small community; we trip over each other.) That's not why they're here. All the movies listed had some sort of passion driving them, a need to get the movie made. This passion is palpable and unmistakable. If you're into the whole metaphysical way of thinking, it's almost as if you can feel the movie vibrating right inside the DVD case. Whether you like the movie or not, you can't deny that *something* was behind it, that it could have been great were it not for money or time or support or any number of things. Still it exists and it has left some very weird footprints in the sand.

To support my case, I've consulted a variety of sources, including interviews I'd conducted myself with some of the actors or artists during my years at *GC Magazine*, *Film Threat*, *Cinefantastique*, *Femme Fatales* and *Sirens of Cinema*. I did this for the same reason all writers cannibalize themselves: it was convenient.

Some of the movies I talk about are not available commercially. You can scour Amazon or eBay for used VHS copies, or visit the artist's personal website, but forget any hope of finding a "legitimate" studio DVD release. It's my hope that by having some of these titles brought to your attention, you're so moved by the very synopsis that you petition the rights' holders. Movie-only DVD-R releases from such outfits as Warner Brothers and MGM have proven there's a market for the off-market. It's even cheaper to make a movie available streaming-only on Netflix or Amazon. To the studios I say, "There is no excuse that these movies are not available." Even if the master is damaged or there are music issues, find some way to release it. You want to stop piracy? Make the movies available. At the very least you'll make three or four people really happy.

And happy people go on to spend money. Especially movie addicts. They—we—need our fix. We need our secret handshakes, our knowing nods, our code words like "42" and "Frodis." And above all, we

need our Kitchen Sink movies because ... just because. The rest of the world has Julia Roberts and Tom Hanks. We need our Paul Bartels and Alex Coxes and Lloyd Kaufmans. And until we get it, books like this will be necessary to spread the word. Give us what we want and ... well, we won't go away, but we'll all become better customers. This I can virtually promise. Bet your sink on it.

Notes

1. *Fantasy Mission Force* (1983, Chu Yin-Ping).
2. *The Heroic Trio* (1993, Johnny To).
3. *Pom Pom and Hot Hot* (aka *Hot Hot and Pom Pom*; 1992, Tung Cho Cheung).
4. See <http://www.manosinhd.com/> for more information.
5. Chris Heller, “‘Manos: The Hands of Fate’: Carefully Restoring the Opposite of a Masterpiece,” NPR, Monkey See Blog, December 12, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2011/12/12/143573040/manos-the-hands-of-fate-carefully-restoring-the-opposite-of-a-masterpiece>.

All About Evil (2010)

One thing I find most lamentable about our googolplex society is the death of showmanship. Generations of today's moviegoers have grown up in the absence of lobby cards, much less the theatricality of live introductions, giveaways like "Percepto" or "Smell-O-Vision," or even the thrill of watching a red curtain part to reveal the silver screen behind. With the exceptions of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Repo! The Genetic Opera*, or even *Showgirls*, with shadow casts performing at midnight events across the country, there's no interactivity in going to the movies. The days of leaving bright sunshine behind for the dim excitement of a Saturday matinee, handing your ticket to a monster inside the door and signing up for "fright insurance" with a busty nurse, are long gone.

While William Castle¹ is widely considered the master of such gimmickry, he wasn't alone in this type of performance art. "Spook shows" featuring ghoulies in costume running through the audience at the precise moment of their on-screen counterparts were commonplace throughout the '50s and '60s. But sometime after 1980, the idea of a motion picture as "Event" had died, giving way to the revolving-door patrons and popcorn sales, with the movie second place—third place, now, after fifteen minutes of commercials and endless trailers for all-too-familiar-seeming upcoming films. "Step right up" has mutated into "Free Refill on Superlarge Bucket." And "Oh, yeah, there's a movie too."

A San Francisco-based entertainer who went by the name "Peaches Christ"—think a glamorous Dame Edna taking over Bette Midler's Vegas act to show B-movies—felt the same way. "I created the character Peaches Christ as part of my passion for cult movies. I've always loved strange, underground, transgressive cinema and have been attracted to drag since I first discovered Divine and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* back in high school," says filmmaker and Peaches' alter-ego Joshua Grannell. To give the character an outlet, Grannell created the "Midnight Mass" stage show and film screenings.² When her first feature was to premiere, she was determined to launch with style. Thus she returned the "event" showcase and the *All About Evil 4-D Tour-de-Fierce*.³

A modestly-budgeted labor of love produced by Darren Stein⁴ and written and directed by Grannell, *All About Evil* is an unabashed homage to groovy ghoulishness. With a starting point of Roger Corman's *Bucket of Blood*, *All About Evil* adds in liberal dashes of Herschel Gordon Lewis⁵ exploitation, Ted V. Mikels' audacious illogic⁶ and a generous pinch of John Waters' camp.⁷ "I grew up in Maryland, a weirdo queer kid obsessed with horror movies. So when I discovered that John Waters and his crew of misfits were making the

movies just down the road from where I lived, I became truly obsessed with them. I know that I've been hugely influenced by John Waters and Divine. The influence is unmistakable," explains Grannell. "John did not have too much of an association with the film, other than offering some advice.... John came to the set one day for lunch which was a real thrill for everyone. It was as if our movie received a blessing."⁸



Peaches Christ promo shot for a *Midnight Mass* (photograph by Jose Guzman-Colon, courtesy Joshua Grannell and Robert M. Barber).

The phrase “a horror movie made for and by horror fans” gets tossed around a lot, but rarely is it applied more appropriately in describing Grannell’s feature. *All About Evil* satirizes the American desire for fame as well as the sometimes-unhealthy need to please one’s parents at any cost. Natasha Lyonne⁹ stars as Deborah Tennis, the recent inheritor of the Victoria Theatre in San Francisco, a run-down Vaudeville-cum-art-house her father kept alive with decades of grindhouse cinema fare. Now, Deb loved her father and he loved her right back. Despite all awkward evidence to the contrary, he was convinced that she had “star quality.” Her stepmother, Tammy (Julie Caitlin Brown,¹⁰ introduced to the viewer in a literal *Wicked Witch of the West* get-up—with a pre-teen Deborah as an ersatz Dorothy) believed otherwise. After the old man rings down the curtain for the final time, witchy Tammy demands that Deborah sign the movie house over to her so that it can be sold to land developers. That’s when mousy, twitchy Deb finally snaps, messily murdering her stepmother out in the lobby. In a post-carnage daze, the blood-covered woman accidentally projects the security footage for the audience. After a moment of stunned silence, the audience cheers this new *avant-garde* short film and demands more.

Fortunately for Deb, she has a conspirator in the house’s original usher, Mr. Twigs (the sepulchral

Jack Donner¹¹), who has quite the cinematic eye. Soon, they've recruited a pair of creepy institutionalized twins (Jade Ramsey as Veda, Nikita Ramsey as Vera¹²) and a vicious street thug (Noah Segan,¹³ looking like the illegitimate son of *Pink Flamingos*' David Lochary) to assist the newly-dubbed auteur "De-bor-rah Ten-ees" in filming the doing-away of anyone who annoys her. The includes the gossipy librarian Evelyn (Mink Stole,¹⁴ carrying the Waters association further), noisy cell phone users, rude popular chicks, and just about anyone else lacking in manners. These murders are turned into wonderful little pre-show tags with titles like *The Maiming of the Shrew*, *The Slasher in the Rye* and, my personal favorite, *The Diary of Anne Frankenstein*.

Unfortunately for De-bor-rah, her biggest fan Steven (Thomas Dekker¹⁵) becomes increasingly suspicious of these new little movies—particularly because he recognizes the victims as people he hasn't seen in a while. Making things difficult for Steven, however, are his concerned mother (a delightful Cassandra Peterson¹⁶) and a school full of adults who think he's about to go all Columbine on his English class. Hard to get people to believe that your "older woman" crush is killing people when they think you're the one with the screw loose. All of this spirals towards the simultaneous screening and filming of De-bor-rah's masterpiece, *Gore and Peace*. By this time, the entire town has embraced her celebrity and they're all willing to drink the Kool-Aid ... one last time!

Prior to *All About Evil*, Grannell and his sick little family had made a quartet of short films—"Our budget was usually no more than fifty dollars. I often say we made those little movies with nothing more than a wig and a dream."—and one of these, *Grindhouse*, focused on a woman whose own short delighted audiences blissfully unaware that the on-screen deaths were actually real. "The idea for *Grindhouse* was something I felt I could further develop and so when I decided to begin writing my first feature film."¹⁷

Clever and well made, Grannell's script and direction keeps *All About Evil* skipping briskly along. There are no slow spots to speak of, and even better, no "low budget" performances. If it weren't for the occasionally cramped *mise-en-scène*, you'd never know this wasn't a slick Hollywood comedy. Eye-rolling, classic-diva-channeling Lyonne and wonderfully desiccated Donner have the best roles and are given the most scenery to chew, providing the film its breathless "What will they do next?" pace, while Peterson and Dekker keep the movie grounded in reality.

For his first feature, Grannell populated the cast with people who have become his family, both famous faces and his core Midnight Mass cast. "There are loads of our SF folks in *All About Evil*; many other people from our earlier shorts were included, like Vinsantos, Timmy Spence, Tria Connell, Chris Hatfield, Bobby Barber, Heklina, Putanesca, Martiny, and more. Loads of our extras are real Midnight Mass audience members and fans, so the entire *All About Evil* movie is sorta populated by our cult."¹⁸

Lyonne was among the newcomers, brought to the production by cinematographer Tom Richmond, who'd photographed her in *The Slums of Beverly Hills*. At the point of her signing on, Lyonne was recovering from five years' worth of bad press surrounding her struggles with alcohol. For Grannell, her past was part of the appeal. "Natasha is incredible! I love that she's had scandalous press, and when we were casting the movie, she was always on the top of my list. She's so talented, and I'd heard that she was working again. She's healthy, and really doing well.... I was telling her that the movie was partially inspired by the fabulous Doris Wishman,¹⁹ the only real female exploitation filmmaker

and as I was trying to explain who Doris Wishman was, she interrupted me and told me she'd met Doris! She had already made that connection to the screenplay. It was perfect. We talked about old movies, classic Hollywood actresses and more, and before I knew it, she was on her way to San Francisco. I love Natasha in the movie."

What Grannell has added is the aforementioned missing showmanship. *The All About Evil 4-D Tour-de-Fierce* officially began on May 1, 2010, with the film's premiere in San Francisco. "The last time I spoke to you, my dear children of the popcorn, I extolled on the concept of sleaze as our communion," writes journalist and actor Michael Varrati. "In a way, the extravaganza that took place at the Castro Theatre on the evening of May 1st, 2010, is one of the purest, most true examples of this unity through cinema."²⁰



Mr. Twiggs (Jack Donner, left) and director Joshua Grannell (photograph by Brian Dettor,

Road-showing the movie in theaters across the country, Grannell dons his “Peaches Christ” persona—a Divine-slash-Elvira showgirl that is all attitude, towering hair and Bettie heels—and puts on an audience-pleasing pre-show.

Usher and usherette characters greet ticket holders at the door and present them with Dixie cups emblazoned with the “P-C” logo. A city-specific emcee introduces Peaches (at the New York show, the ever-fabulous and amazingly talented filmmaker/personality Alan Rowe Kelly served as the master of ceremonies) and her cabaret of monsterized mash-up dancers—including a were-woman, “Troll Girl,” usher “Frankenwaffles Extravaganza” (Varrati) and a ’50s alien. Before the movie even rolls, the audience is treated to a drag revue cabaret. In San Francisco, Peterson and Stole joined in the pre-show festivities, and in New York, Lyonne herself was on hand, introduced by her own special video montage. The capper is a song-and-dance performed by Trixxie Carr (as De-bor-rah) called “Star Quality,” leading to a near suicide-pact with the crowd that culminates in a short fourth-wall-breaking video moment exhibiting Deborah at the height of her madness and glory. What the “4-D Experience” does is amp up the audience. Like any warm-up gig, the songs and dances and clever video all work to get the audience excited. And an excited audience is always more receptive to the main event. Its ’70s glam meets “Emergo” and “Feel-o-Rama” shot the theater through with energy and made the movie feel that much more special. It was inspired and, of course, a midnight-movie fan’s dream. Even if the movie fails to live up to the amping, the amping itself staves off disappointment for that much longer. But Joshua Grannell loves the movies he’s celebrating in *All About Evil* and loves the spectacle that Peaches Christ brings to screenings of these movies.

Without the floor show, *All About Evil* is a solid and entertaining horror-comedy. Its in-jokes are seasoning for the hard-core horror buff, never distracting from the central story—even a less-than-subtle exchange between Peterson and an Elvira poster serves as more of a wink and less of a self-referential pat on the back.

It may seem odd to say, considering how drag is known for its extravagance, but Grannell’s directorial success relies on its restraint rather than its excess. The movie isn’t a Peaches Christ vanity project—aside from a pair of cameos, Peaches barely appears in the film. Gore is provided but the movie admirably avoids the scatological humor that has pervaded mainstream gross-out comedies. Except for some profanity, this movie could easily be something you’d stumble upon while late-night channel surfing. As if—the most shocking of all ideas—the cast and crew had set out to make a good movie first and foremost, rather than a *mishegoss* of fanboy moments. As stated by Grannell, “We’re attempting to someday hopefully be a true cult movie—that would be wonderful—but you can’t make a cult movie; it becomes a cult movie. If the fans decide to embrace *All About Evil* and put it up on a pedestal and watch it over and over again, then maybe sometime down the line we can refer to it as a cult movie. But it’s not a cult movie yet. It’s brand-new and it needs to find its audience.”²¹ That in itself is more than enough to recommend it.

Notes

1. “King of the Gimmicks,” director and producer. See entry on *Shanks*.

2. Christian Sellers, "All About Evil," *Gorezone Magazine*, December 2009, p. 63.

3. For more information, please visit <http://www.peacheschrist.com>.
4. *Jawbreaker* (1999).
5. "The Godfather of Gore": *Blood Feast* (1963), *Two Thousand Maniacs* (1964).
6. *The Corpse Grinders* (1972), *The Astro-Zombies* (1969).
7. *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974).
8. Sellers, p. 67.
9. *Slums of Beverly Hills* (1998, Tamara Jenkins), *Freeway II: Confessions of a Trickbaby* (1999, Matthew Bright).
10. *Babylon 5* (TV series), *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* (TV series).
11. *Star Trek* (1968, "The Enterprise Incident"). His most recognizable claim to fame was as the judge during the re-inactments of the Michael Jackson trial. He also appeared as a gravedigger in Jackson's posthumous documentary, *This Is It*.
12. Their professional debut was in Bryan Singer's 2003 *X2* as mutant twins.
13. *Brick* (2005, Rian Johnson), *Deadgirl* (2008, directed by Marcel Sarmiento and Gadi Harel; written by *Terror Firmer's* Trent Haaga).
14. *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974).
15. TV's own John Connor from the *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* Fox series.
16. Best known as "Elvira, Mistress of the Dark," host of the 1981 TV Show *Movie Macabre* and subsequent movie spin-offs.
17. Sellers, p. 63.
18. Sean Abley, "Gay of the Dead: All About Evil Writer/Director Joshua Grannell (Part Two)," *Fangoria* Online, Mar. 9, 2010, http://www.fangoria.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=195:gay-of-the-dead-all-about-evil-writerdirector-joshua-grannell-part-two&catid=48:gay-of-the-dead&Itemid=162.
19. See chapter on *Satan Was a Lady*.
20. Michael Varrati, "A Whore for the Gore—The All About Evil World Premiere Experience," May 10, 2010, <http://www.peacheschrist.com/?p=2243>.
21. Michael Guillen, "Midnight Mass 2009—Interview with Joshua Grannell (aka 'Peaches Christ')," *Twitchfilm.com*, July 5, 2009, <http://twitchfilm.com/interviews/2009/07/midnight-mass->

Anguish (1987)

For anyone who thinks Charlie Kaufman invented meta-movies like *Adaptation*—or worse, that Wes Craven created this broken-fourth-wall technique for *Scream*—let me tell you about *Anguish*.

Written and directed by filmmaker and painter Bigas Luna,¹ *Angustia*, as it is known in Spain, starts out telling a twisted story of a man and his mother. John (Michael Lerner²), with bad eyesight and thick glasses, is a timid, backward orderly working at an ophthalmology clinic. His mother, Alice (the wonderfully creepy Zelda Rubinstein³), surrounded by caged pigeons and loose snails, lives in a world of delusion. She believes that John is a world-famous surgeon and believes that if he goes out and cuts out other people's eyes, adding them to her squishy collection, this will somehow restore his own po-vision. She holds sway over him via a combination of hypnotism and telepathy; John is her willing slave and devoted son. And he's pretty good at cutting out eyes. (Note to the squeamish: the genuine eye-surgery footage on display here might drive you to the permanent fashion choice of swimmer's goggles.)

Just as you settle into the rhythm of the gruesome plot, the camera pulls back and we find that John and Alice are characters in a movie called *The Mommy* showing in the Rex Theater.⁴ Two teenage girls, Patty and Linda (Talia Paul, Clara Pastor), watch with the audience, and poor Patty isn't reacting well to the film. It's freaking her out; she wants to leave. A man sitting in an aisle seat diagonal to her keeps checking his watch and looking back at her. The dread created by *The Mommy* seems to spill directly out of the screen to splash over Patty, making her increasingly panicked and agitated.



Alice (Zelda Rubinstein) and John (Michael Lerner): a portrait of psychopathic mother and son (courtesy Bigas Luna).

Before long, in *The Mommy*, John has entered a similar movie theater (playing Willis O'Brien's silent *The Lost World*⁵) and resumes his eye surgery on unsuspecting audience members. He keeps a set of surgical tools strapped to his wrist, enabling him to select one sharp ow-y thing after another to do his work in flickery dark. Meanwhile, in the Rex, the jittery man in the aisle seat calmly leaves the theater (walking up the aisle just as on-screen John does the same in a fantastic multi-level shot), shoots the counter girls, blocks the doors and returns to begin his own reign of terror. Before long, both The Mommy (Ángel Jovè) and John are committing their horrific acts simultaneously, and the audience of reality and fantasy are panicking in equal proportions. The bodies begin to pile up at an alarming rate. For Patty, real life meets film life in a horrific instant.



John (Michael Lerner) under his mother's hypnosis (courtesy Bigas Luna).

If ever a movie was meant to be seen in a theater, it's *Anguish*. Watching it alone on television can't possibly have the same impact as seeing it "live," adding that third element of audience participation and meta-reality. The movie begs for that extra layer (how wonderfully horrific would it be to have an actor leave his seat at the very instant John and The Man walk up the aisle?). As Richard Scheib pointed out in his review on *Moria*, "It is a shot where you cannot help but look over your shoulder and wonder if you cannot get a glimpse of an audience watching you."⁶

But even when viewed at home, *Anguish* is a unique, satisfying little thriller that seems to directly address society's love for horror movies. The auditorium for *The Mommy* is packed pretty tightly, everyone seeking escapism through other people's horrific deaths—how would they react when confronted with similar tragedy in real life? How would we, as a member of a theater audience, feel after watching two other audiences decimated by madmen?

While *Anguish* wasn't my initial introduction to multi-layered fiction, the images and ideas stuck with me and would not leave. Shot on a low budget in Barcelona (Lunas is said to have imported an enormous backdrop of Culver City, California, to recreate the city's famous hills and make the movie more "American"⁷), *Anguish* piles on tension, mixing it with misdirection. Both "movies" are shot on the same film stock and he doesn't often make a clear delineation between *The Mommy* and the footage of the viewers, and this is clearly intentional, to keep the real viewers off balance up until the very end. Lerner and Rubenstein's *Mommy* world is lit with garish colors and deep shadows; the "real life" footage is shot naturally, with only the light of the screen illuminating the bulk of the action. Scenes set outside the theater in bright daylight add to the surrealism of the movie. The overall approach is extremely effective.

One aspect of the film that is especially chilling is in the presentation of “The Killer” or “The Aisle Seat Man,” played by Ángel Jovè. Twitchiness aside, there is nothing about

Jovè that screams “murderer.” Every movie theater has at least one patron whose fussbudgeting borders on tweaking. How far-fetched would it be for this everyday moviegoer to turn out a vicious killer? Jovè is so normal, particularly when compared to the larger-than-life cinematic psycho portrayed by Lerner, that his resulting rampage seems all the more “real.” He could be the person sitting right next to you in the theater, waiting for that final synapse to snap and give him permission to slice your jugular.



Director Bigas Luna puts himself on the big screen in *The Mommy* (courtesy Bigas Luna).

Shot in English with the primary actors either English-speaking or effectively dubbed, *Anguish* has no subtitles to pull you out of the experience. It's only at the very end that the movie falters, just a little as Lunas struggles to unify his central theme. But it's such a small price to pay for what you've just seen.

If you ever hear of a theatrical screening of *Anguish*, make sure you're the first in line. Grab an aisle seat. Stay through the closing credits. As the names scroll, the camera pulls back just slightly to reveal yet *another* audience, members gradually getting up to leave. So what layer of reality is the real one? And is there an audience behind us, as Scheib suggested, watching *us* get up to leave? What will happen as we make for home?

1. Best-known for the “erotic food movie,” *Jamón, jamón*, 1992.
2. Academy Award nominee for the 1991 Coen Brothers movie, *Barton Fink*.
3. *Poltergeist*, of course (1982, directed by Tobe Hooper or Stephen Spielberg, depending on who you talk to).
4. Adding another level of delight to my experience, as I was also then an usher at the Rex Theater in Pittsburgh.
5. 1925, directed by Harry O. Hoyt (*The Return of Boston Blackie*, 1927), based on the novel by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*), adapted by Marion Fairfax (*Lilies of the Field*, 1924) and starring Wallace Beery (*The Champ*, 1931) as Professor Challenger.
6. Richard Seheib, “Anguish (Anguista) Review,” *Moria—The Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review*, <http://moria.co.nz/horror/anguish-1987-anguistia.htm>. See also Stephen Soderbergh’s explanation of “breaking the fifth wall” in the chapter on *Schizopolis*.
7. At least according to an IMDB post from someone professing to have been part of the crew. www.imdb.com/title/tt0090644.

Animal Room (1995)

Hope is a waking man’s dream.—Aristotle.

Inscribed on a plaque hanging on his principal’s wall, this is the summation of Arnold Mosk’s life. It summons the question, “If I have no hope, am I therefore asleep?”

It’s an existentialist dilemma that plagued most of William Shakespeare’s tragic heroes. Shakespeare is a clear influence on the themes of *Animal Room*, written and directed by Craig Singer,¹ and emptiness comprises the infinite space of the characters’ nutshell.

The film’s title refers to an isolation chamber located in the basement of an otherwise healthy high school. It’s there that the “toxic” students are placed—the bullies are psychopaths, disruptive and dangerous. The extremely bipolar Doug Van Housen (Matthew Lillard²) leads one particular group of outcasts who worship him homoerotically as both messiah and father figure. He feeds off their dependence and he, in turn, feeds their aggressive and misanthropic natures. Apart from the group, the weak in the *Animal Room* herd is Arnold Mosk (Neil Patrick Harris³). Like the others, he comes from affluence and is highly intelligent, but suffers beneath the shadow of a drunkard mother. LSD provides his escape, and for that dependence he has been banished to the realm of carnivores. Doug and his droogs brand him a favorite victim, and abusing him is their escape from whatever afflicts them.

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