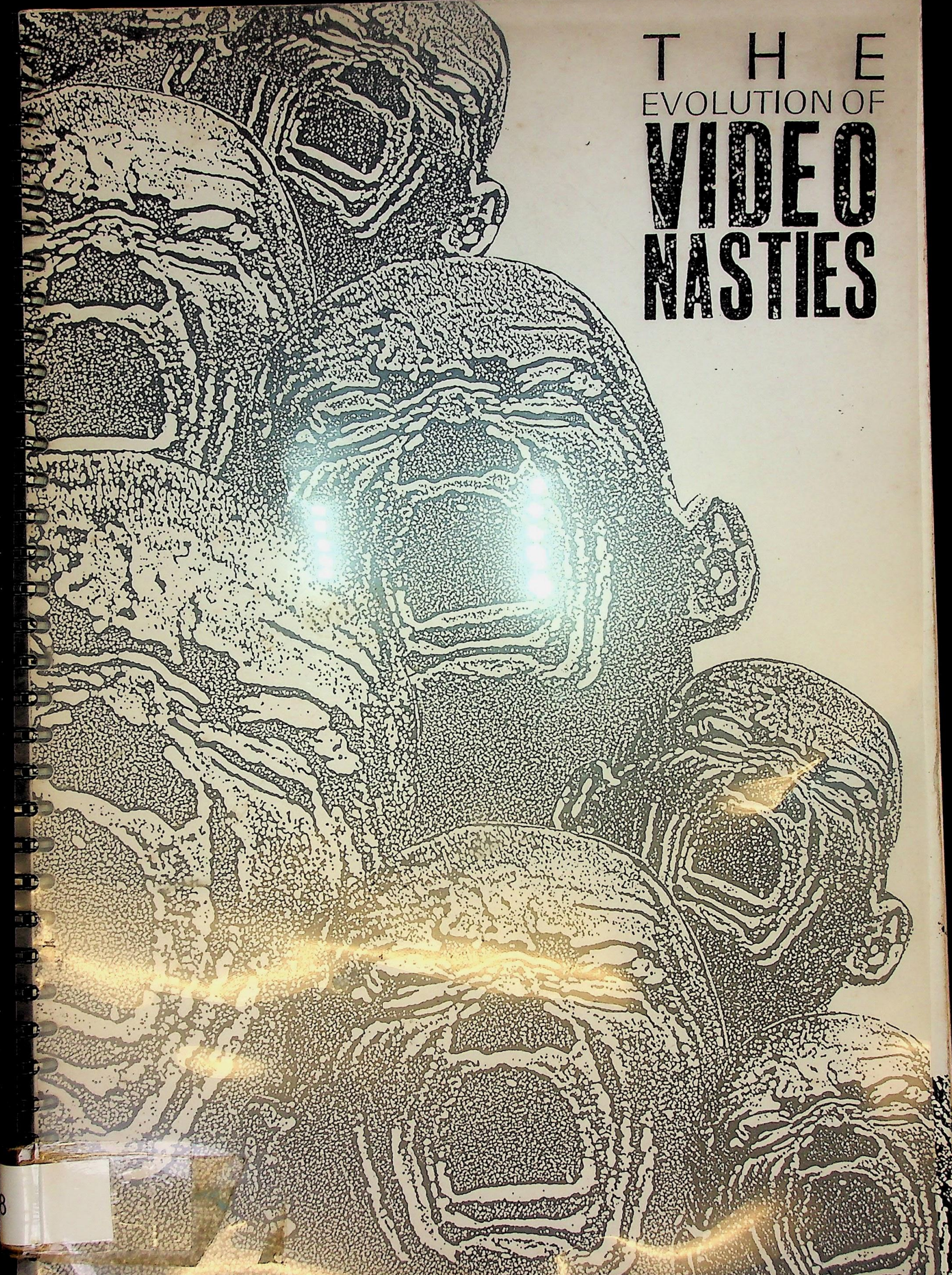
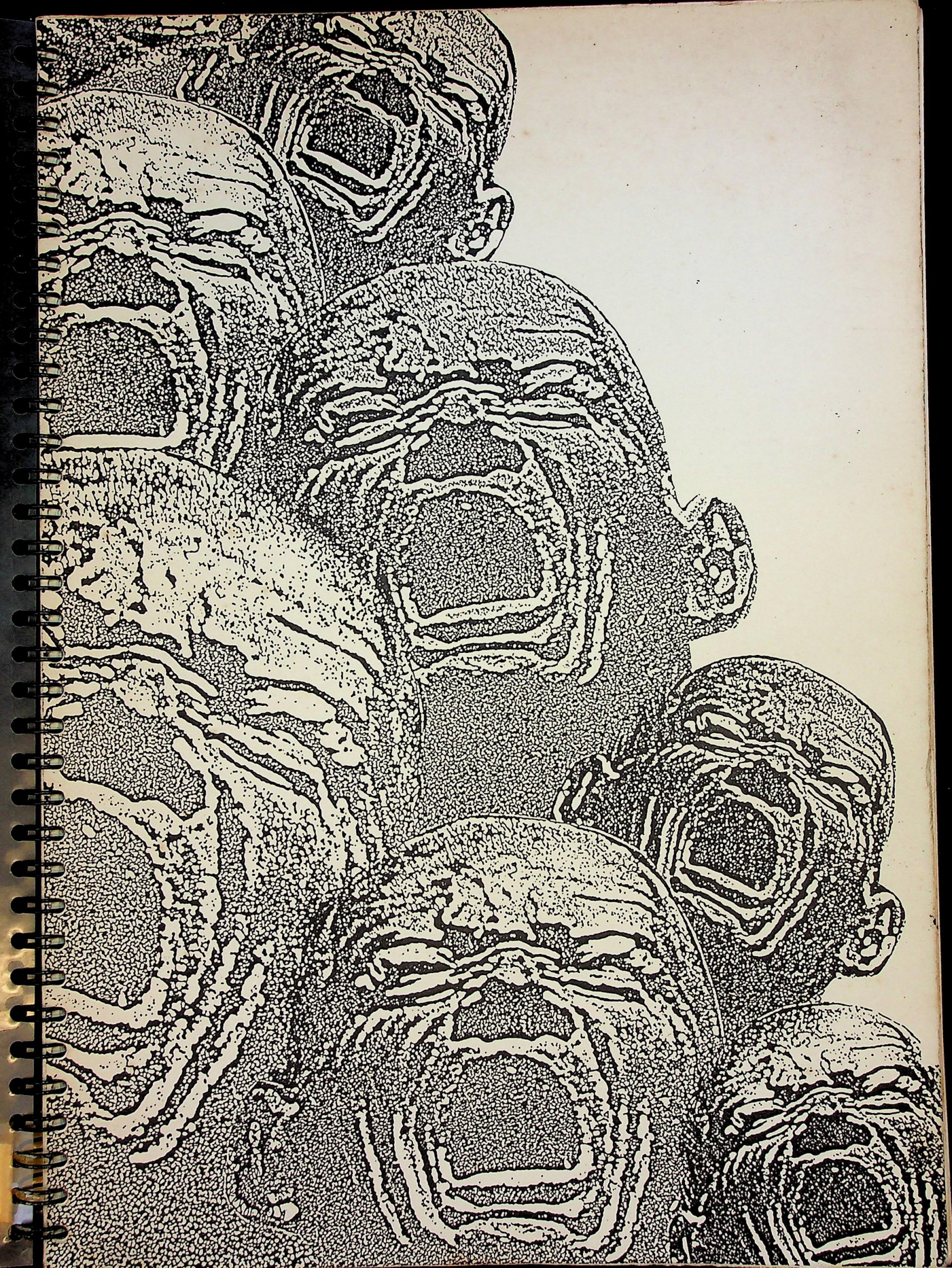


T H E
EVOLUTION OF
**VIDEO
NASTIES**





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THE EVOLUTION OF VIDEO NASTIES

The Evolution of Video Nasties

by Kevin O'Boyle

Submitted for Degree of Bachelor of Design in Visual Communication

April 1987

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Introduction

What I wish to discuss is an area largely neglected by the film criticism establishment. The area I have chosen to discuss is Video Nasties. What I wish to clarify is the term video nasties. The term video nasties is not a term of art but merely a label branded by the popular press for sensational headlines. This area of entertainment has not been documented very well in the past. What I have tried to present is a background of this violent theme. In my discussion I look at its evolution since 1899 to the present day. The beginning of my research starts in France with the French Theatre Guignol. The entertainment it had to offer was not a great deal different in subject matter from works of horror. But in terms of their treatment they were vastly different. From my research I find that Grand Guignol did not deal in horror pre se, though horror was very often a by product, but instead it dealt with gore! With the Theatre closing in 1959 my discussion moves on to how the gore theme evolved onto celluloid.

The puritanical intent of the Motion Picture Production Code, established in the early thirties, had been whittled down over the years to allow certain material to be shown on the screen. Only one taboo remained to be broken and that was explicit gore. Film maker - Herschell Gordon Lewis dared break this taboo. At this point I look at his brief film career examining examples of his work. After discussing 'gores' involvement in the Sixties avant garde film making I show its development in the Seventies and Eighties. This development led to the creation of the Splatter genre.

Discussing this genre I observe that the chief component in its shaping are the special effects. From this observation I concentrate on the work of makeup artist Tom Savini. With most of the films in this genre I •testing the limits of contemporary cultural acceptability mainly because in varying ways they don't meet certain standards utilized in evaluating direction, acting, dialogue, sets, continuity and cinematography, they have come under a lot of criticism. The effects of this have made this genre transform from celluloid to tape, becoming video nasties. The latter part of my discussion will look at the much hyped area of Snuff Videos. My discussion ends looking at David Cronenberg's "Videodrome" which itself speculates about this trend in explicit gore.

The lack of any form of censorship on video cassettes has made available to the public a vast number of extremely graphic horror films of the type critics have dubbed "video nasties". This is a highly descriptive term for the grisly bloodletting that usually takes precedence over any form of intelligent plot in this type of film. Hardly a week goes by without new tapes of this nature being issued and their popularity is easily recognisable by a glance at the top ten video sales rental chart. Obviously people are more attracted to material they cannot see on their television screens during the course of normal viewing and there is no denying the grim fascination that these video nasties can exert over their audience. Video Nasties of shoots of the horror film genre, aim not to scare their audiences necessarily, nor to drive them to the edges of their seats in suspense, but to mortify them with scenes of explicit gore. At its best and worst, watching a video nastie is a visceral experience matched by the amount of viscera shown on the screen. In video nasties violence is indeed the message, many times the only one!. The violence exhibited in video nasties has its sources in France, in the French Theatre "Grand Guignol".

Theatre du Grand Guignol.

The term Guignol was derived from the name of a marionette created by French puppet master Laurent Mourquette (1744-1844). What distinguished this puppet from his more celebrated counterpart, Punch and Judy, were his rough facial features and his earthy, peasant humour. Punch and Judy's routine appealed more to urban tastes. All puppet shows at the time (1780), however had one thing in common, they were brutal, violent and an overall heartless of tone. Revenge was a particularly common theme.



illus. 1

When cabarets offering live action version of the more horrific elements of the Punch and Judy/Guignol shows began to crop up in Paris, the name apparently carried over. In 1899, Max Maurey later centralised all of these cabaret routines under one roof calling his the Theatre of Grand Guignol. (illus. 1.)

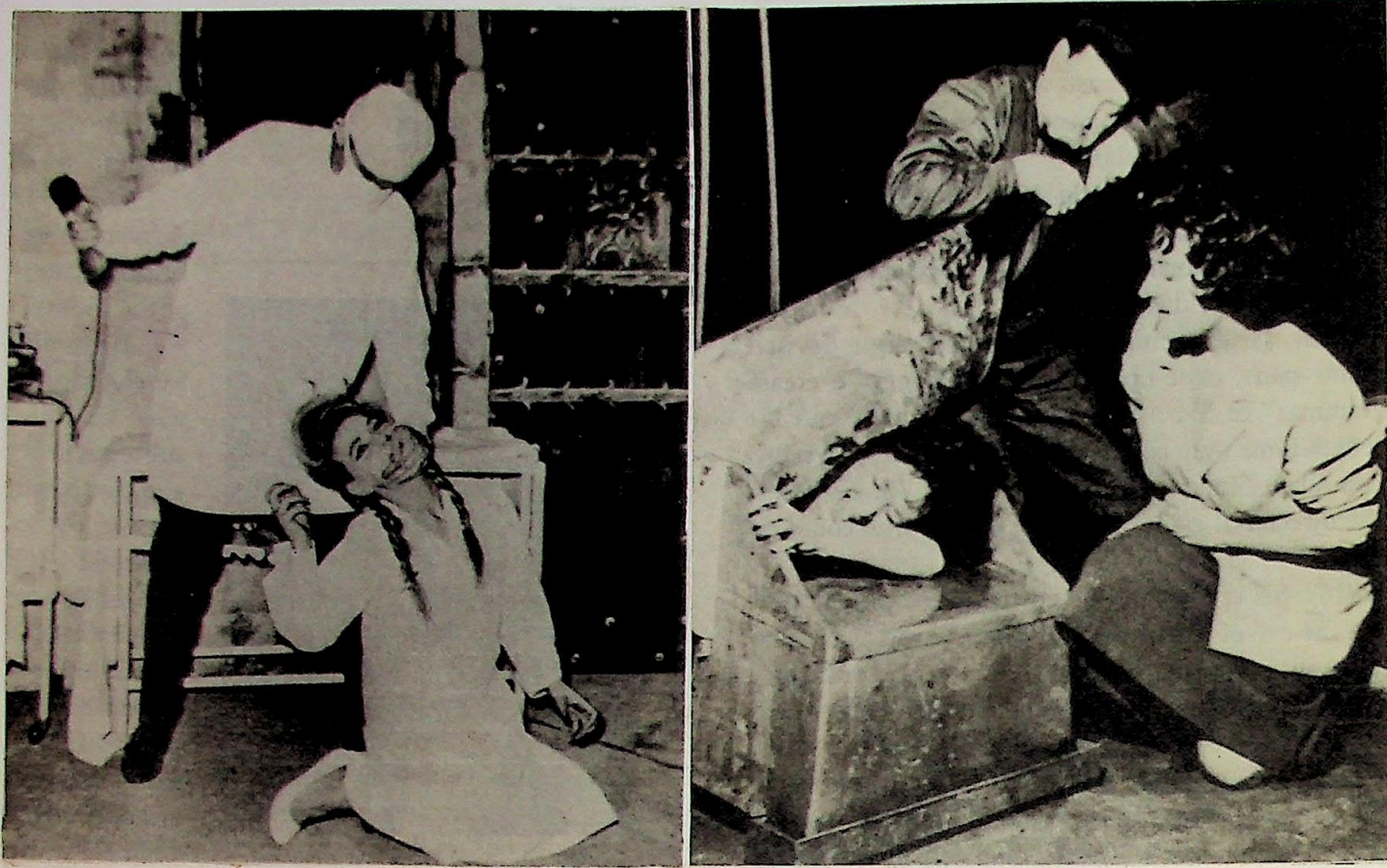
Maurey's Theatre specialised in short plays of violence, murder, rape, the supernatural and suicide. Many of them were adaptations of the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, written by a now forgotten dramatist named Oscar Metenier (1869 - 1930). Poe's "Murder in the Rue Morgue" and the "Tell-tale Heart" were particular favourites, as were originals like "L'Experiment Horrible", the title of which probably explains all. Subtlety, psychology, love, interest, all were sacrificed in these short dramas to the shock effect and the prevailing themes of pain and terror.

While at first Maurey's plays drew an audience composed of people with overly sophisticated and decadent tastes, their appeal later shifted to the working class audience (1920). Grand Guignol's audiences in the fifties attended performances, not for any cultural upliftment, but to marvel at the ultra-realistic effects performed right before their eyes by the actors on stage. The fact that these effects were always tied to scenes of explicit gore that they were gruesome or sickening did not seem to matter as much as the fact that they were mind boggling in their execution. The kick to be gotten was not from the deed portrayed, but from the overpowering effect of the trick itself. Here the medium alone was the message, the illusion was all. (illus. 2.)

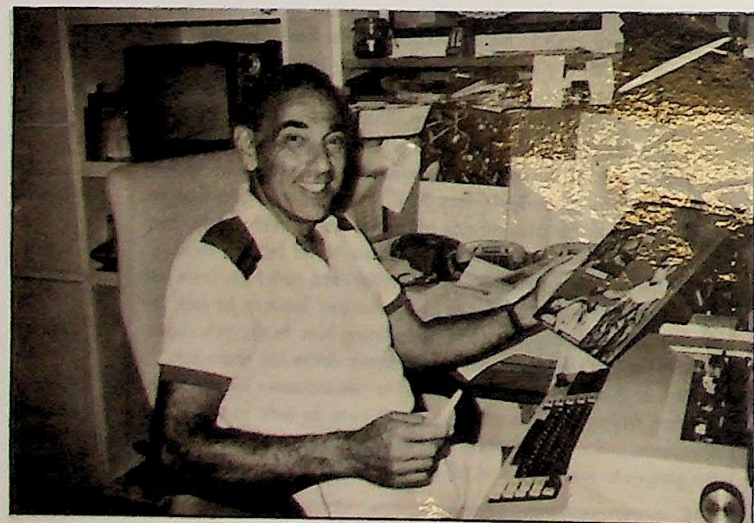
The Theatre du Grand Guignol flourished for over sixty years (1899 - 1959) finally closing its doors after realising it was competing with film. Yet Grand Guignol was far from finished it just made its transition from theatre to film in the guise of Herschell Gordon Lewis, - self described as the "Guru of Gore". (illus. 3)

The Rise of Splatter.

The end of World War two saw an increased use of 16mm film format, but mostly in industrial and educational applications. In the Sixties, the previously expensive 16mm movie cameras began turning up in pawnshops, at the same time they became significantly cheaper through mass production. Film making took a new turn - hundreds of people gained access to a medium previously restricted to a privileged few. The generation that grew up with the movies could now make their own and they wasted no time exploring and exploiting this new gift. Herschell Gordon Lewis headed this avant garde film making. A one time Professor of English at the University of Mississippi, Lewis began his career in film in the late fifties. The owner of a chain of film theatres in the Chicago area, he also headed up his own advertising agency. Both jobs provided good experience for his future endeavors, the former revealed to him the ins and outs of film distribution and exhibition, while the latter gave him a working knowledge of film production in the form of television commercials. With a "Foot" in each door, Lewis decided to combine his experience of both and exploit the possibilities of 16mm with magnetic sound tracks, improving creative



illus. 2



illus. 3

solutions of problems posed by circumstance and budget. In 1960, together with partner David Friedman, he formed Mid-Continent Films. Based in Chicago, Mid-Continent films began producing super-8 features aimed specifically at the "home-projector market".

Lewis and Friedman realised that if Mid-Continent films were to survive in the film making process, then it had better develop some kind of hook for its films, some gimmick that would pull audiences because they could not get it elsewhere. It began making nudist films. Mid-Continents first venture was "Lucky Pierre". Shot in only four days with Friedman acting as producer and soundman and Lewis as writer, director and cameraman "Lucky Pierre" had earned back its cost and more, within a short space of its release. "Daughter of the Sun" (1962), "Natures Playmates" (1962), "Goldilocks and the Three Bares" (1962) and "Bare and Beautiful" (1963) followed in quick succession. For the most part, nudist films were among the most boring, made during this period. These accounts of what supposedly goes on behind the gates of the worlds' nudist colonies consisted of little more than endless games of volleyball. Any activity that could possibly be construed as sexual was debarred. Rarely did people touch each other, and they never kissed or hugged. Nudist films, the type Mid-Continent produced, were just plain rapid, offering little more than endless shots of nude people having "fun in the Sun". *"We used to call them nudies, but again, in today's market place they weren't nudies at all because nothing was bared below the top half, and they were completely innocuous although in context there was a certain amount of daring to them". (No. 1.)*

But in 1963, nudity of the "tame sort" Lewis and Friedman had been using in their films had begun to creep into Hollywoods product. By 1964 the Hays Commission decided that nudity on its own had no erotic content and was therefore not obscene. The Hays Commission itself was appointed in 1931 by "The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America". The year was 1920, the press discovered that the wild life of famous motion picture stars sold newspapers. Sensational copy - more suggestive than substantial became the daily bill of fare and straitlaced citizens began complaining that something had to be done about the movie world, lest it corrupt all good Americans. The turning point came in 1921 during a party at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. Popular comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle took a young actress named Virginia Rappe up to his hotel room where she died of a ruptured spleen. With that the national press turned its full scandalmongering attention on movieland and everyone became fair game. Hollywood reporters became obsessed with tracking down any bit of scandal they could sniff. Popular celebrities were accused of everything from debauchery to trafficking in drugs. The nouveau-riche motion picture industry began to fear that the government would step in and impose laws on them, at all costs they wanted to protect and control their industry. So the association was formed appointing as its President William Hays.

It was its job in drafting up a stringent production code for films to follow, for example, brutal killing shall not be presented in detail, the technique of murder shall

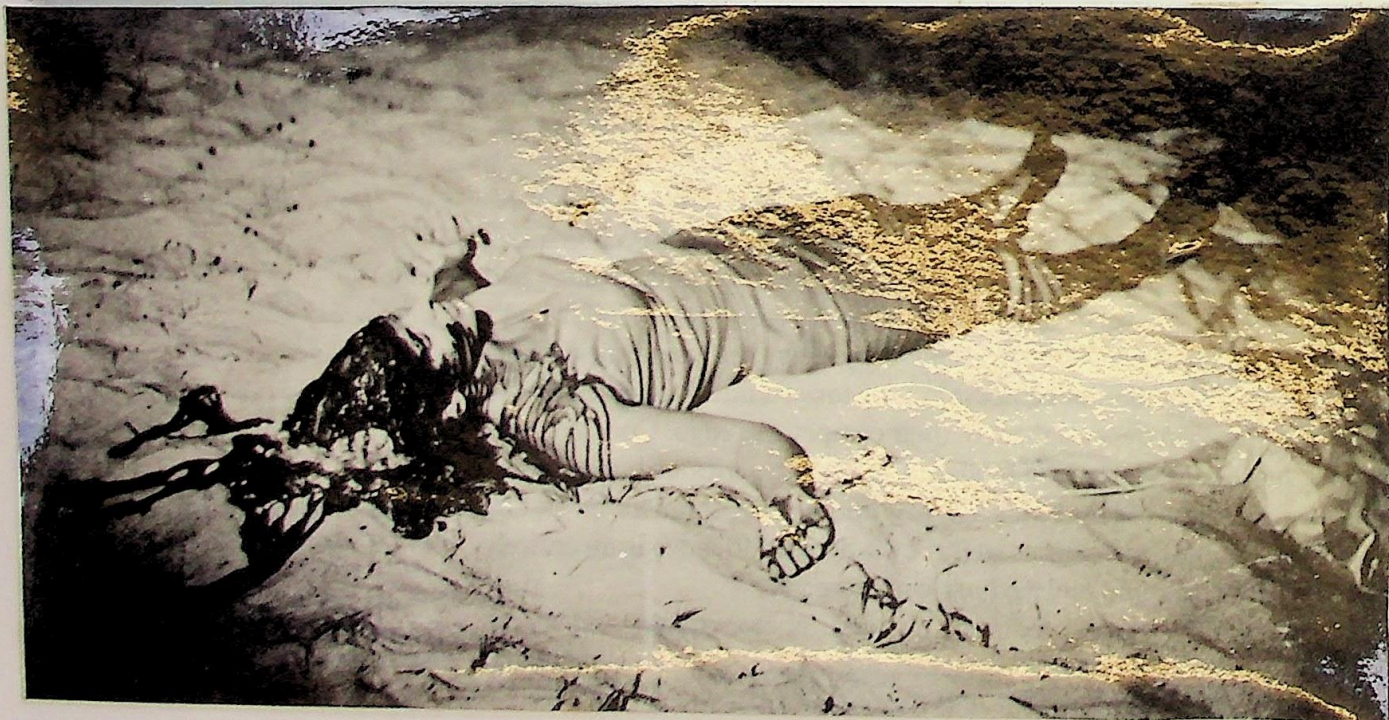
not be presented in a way that inspires imitation
illegal drug traffic must never be presented, seduction
or rape should never be shown by explicit method, sex
perversion or an inference of it is forbidden, children's
sex organs are never to be exposed, complete nudity is
never permitted. Repellent subjects included actual
hangings or electrocutions, "third degree" methods,
brutality and possible gruesomeness, branding of people
or animals, and surgical operations. Hays also created
a bureau, the Office of the Motion Picture Production Code,
to see that the rules were obeyed. At its decision
on nudity, Mid-Continent films quickly perceived that a
relaxation of censorship laws towards nudity and sex
on the screen would soon deprive them of their competitive
edge. Sex, then was replaced by gore and at that decision
Mid-Continent films was seen as producing illicit
material in the eyes of the law.

It's gore theme was not your ordinary bloodletting but
buckets of blood spilling, exposed raw meat, eye gouged
from the sockets, limbs hacked off, all in grand tradition
of Grand Guignol. *"Gore was easy because it was obviously
the kind of subject that could be handled intensively
rather than extensively"*. (No. 2.) The duo started
their sanguinary experiment with "Blood Feast" (1963).
Blood Feast produced, directed, photographed and scored
by Lewis, was filmed in only nine days on location in
Miami for a budget well under \$10,000. It's story dealt
with the revivification of a long dead Egyptian princess
by a lunatic who thinks he's a modern day equivalent to
Dr. Frankenstein. Filmed mostly in medium shots it
depicted scenes of girls tongues being ripped out,
brains being torn out and bodies being hacked up!



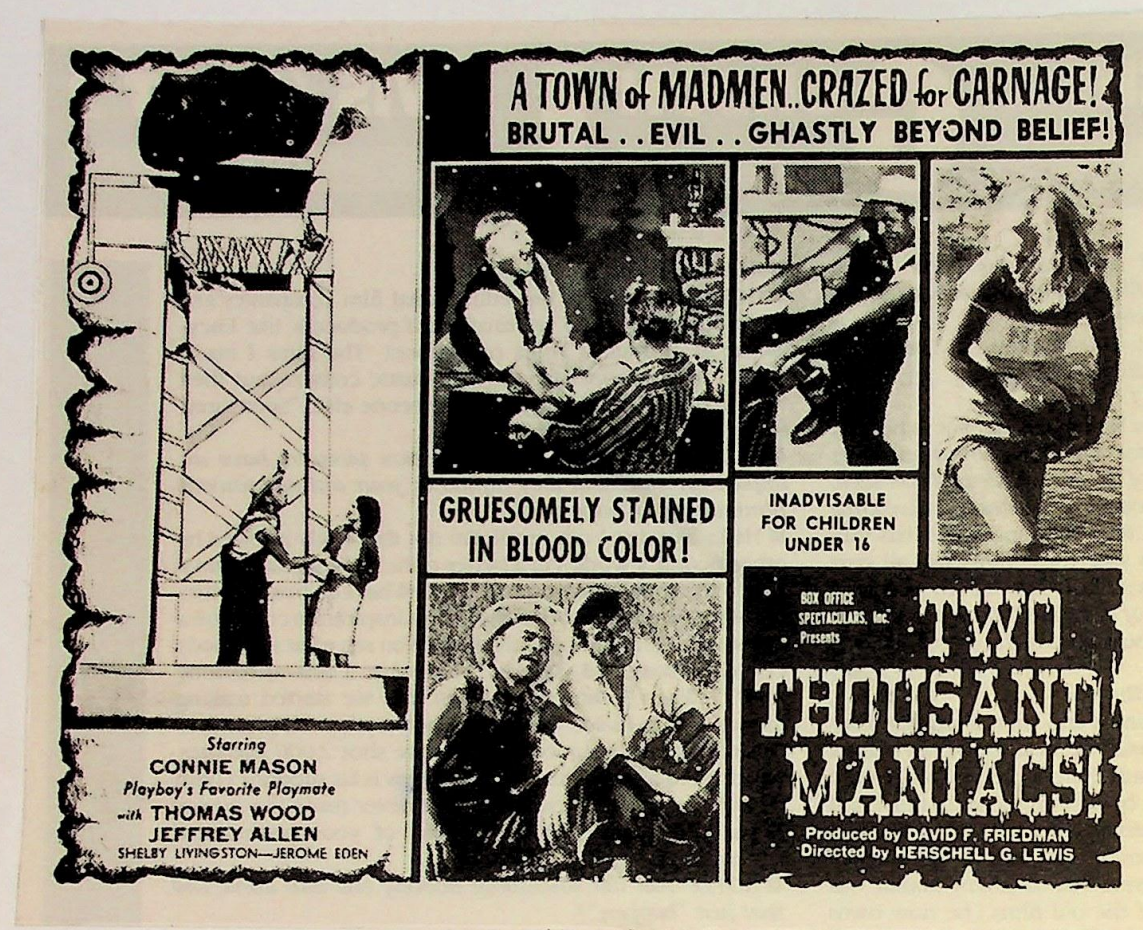
illus. 4

illus. 5



As Lewis intended, Blood Feast was a mindless, virtually plotless but high-spirited orgy of gore for gore's sake (illus. 4, illus. 5) that would never be tolerated in a commercial feature film. Released on 16mm prints "Blood feast" proved a massive hit with the public, so much so, that fines were imposed on people possessing a print of the film. Theatres were forbidden to show films of this explicit nature, so distributors found other venues such as halls and bars. Due to this circumstance the term "square up" reel evolved, Road agents - distributors carried two versions of the film, one cut and one not. If the police showed, the agent made sure the tame version was projected. If the police were to leave in the middle of the program, the Agent would then complete the performance by showing the uncut print containing most of the nudity and depravity.

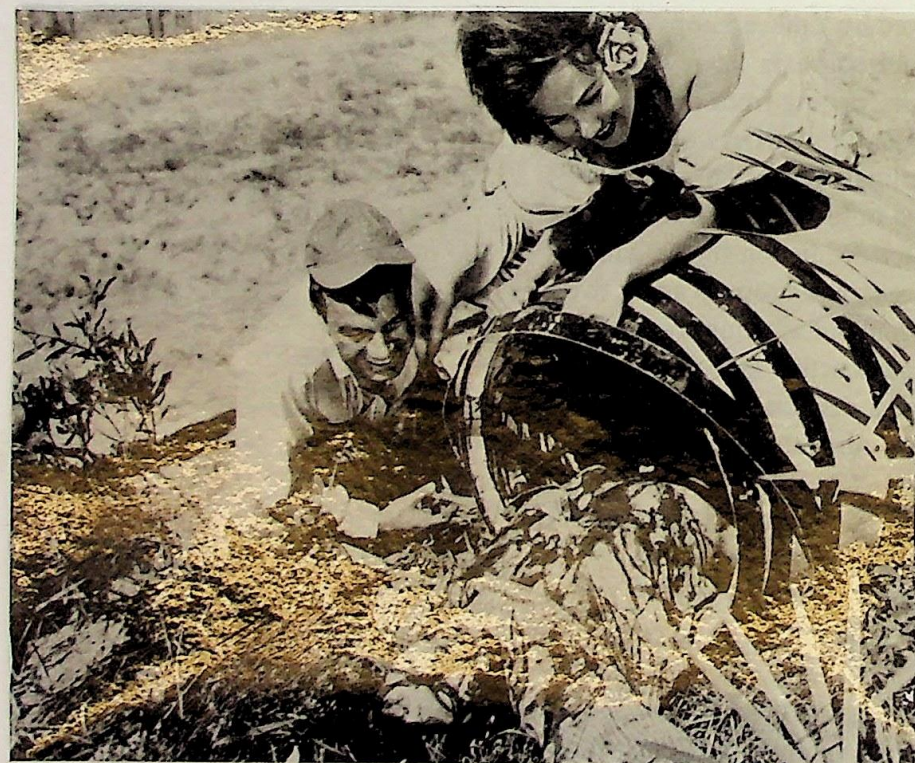
Bloodfeast was followed by 2000 Maniacs (1964), a bigger budgeted, more serious effort on Mid-Continent's part (illus. 6.) which tells the story of a Southern town ravaged by Yankee troops during the civil War that claims its revenge a hundred years later when its citizens kill and dismember a group of tourists visiting from the North. One sees in the story line revenge that breaks the barrier of time in ironic fashion. This is a hazy reflection of Rod Sterling's television series The Twilight Zone (1959 - 1963) (No. 3.) which seems to have had some influence on Lewis in the way he occasionally blended fact with fiction. The Twilight Zone influence would crop up again in "The Wizard of Gore" (1971). Like Blood Feast the carnage that ensues in 2000 maniacs is all in medium shot as we see a boulder dropped on somebody, another victim is drawn and quartered and finally some poor unfortunate is



illus. 6



illus 7



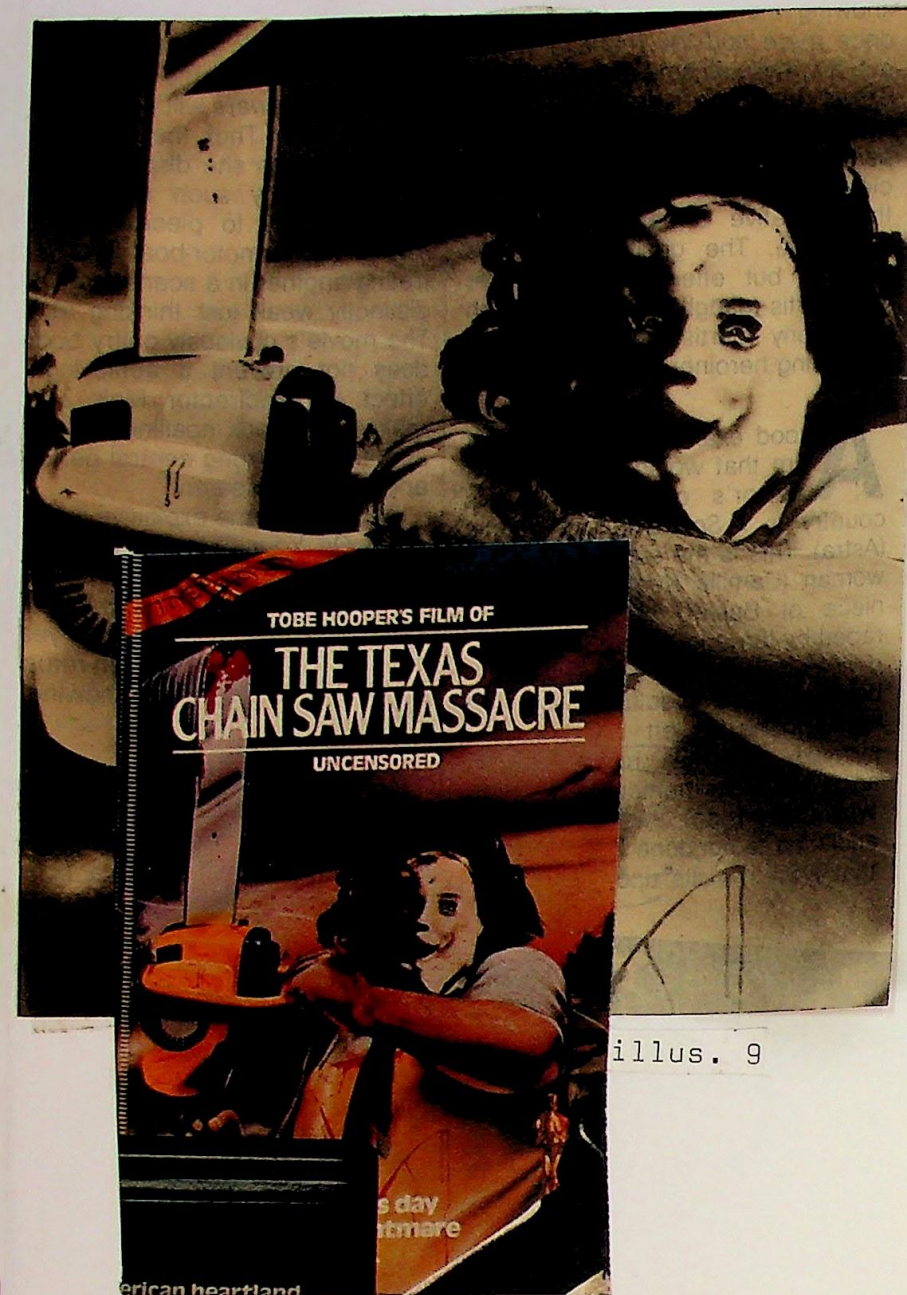
illus. 8

forced into a barrel lined with nails and rolled down a hill. (illus. 7, illus. 8.) But 2000 Maniacs didn't match the success of Bloodfeast and with more than the usual invested in it, it's failure caused the discontinuation of Mid-Continent films (1965) "When I shot Bloodfeast and we started making money with it I said 'Wow! look how rotten this picture is. What if we made a good one?' So we shot 2,000 Maniacs which from a production point of view is far superior and it never made the money Bloodfeast did. This is all part of your professional education" (No. 4)

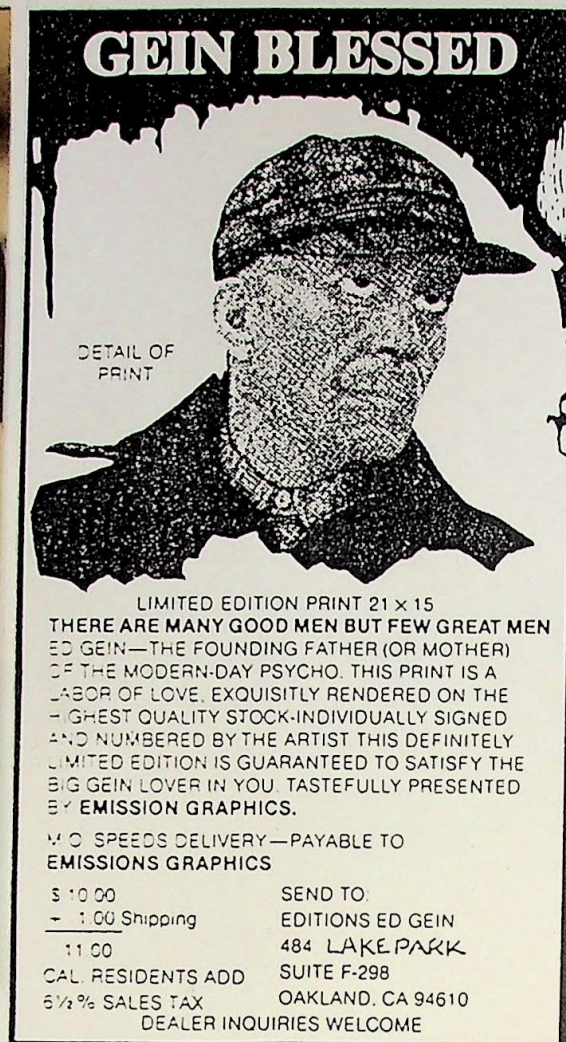
Lewis and Friedman parted ways, David Friedman returned to sexploitation and later became the president of the Adult film Association of America, distributing porno films and video while Lewis remained with gore. In 1969 Lewis opened a film and theatre in Old town Chicago called "The Bloodshed". The Bloodshed featured many of Mid-Continent's films and staged live shows, with explicit gore a la le Theatre du Grand Guignol. Sadly the Bloodshed wasn't economically feasible and with local residents complaining its doors closed within a few months. However the stage shows provided the inspiration for his best film "The Wizard of Gore" (1970) shot on 16mm and in the tradition of Theatre du Grand Guignol, its story tells of Montag, a Magician who invites women from the audience to participate in his act. Again filmed in the medium shot the carnage involves his visitors having spikes pounded through their heads and swords rammed down their throats. These illusions are shown in a series of jump cuts, alternating between two separate realities, the scene of the victim placidly enduring assault as though in trance, juxtaposed with the sight of the victim becoming gore. Particularly eerie is the aftermath of the sword swallowing scene,

where the two victims stand calm and erect on either side of the magician, sword handles protruding from open mouths, intercut with scenes of their bodies broken like puppets, crumpled and bloody, while the magician takes his triumphant bows between them. The Wizard of Gore is singular in Lewis's work for it consciously acknowledges the idea of Gore as entertainment. The centre plot revolves around the concept of people paying their money to passively observe a maniac subjecting people to spectacular torture!

In 1972, Lewis made his last 16mm feature, ending his "infamous" filmmaking career with his goriest film ever. With a combination of sexploitation and gore, "The Gore Gore Girls" (1972) was his grand finale. Tempering the hardness of pure violence with a sense of humour, Lewis parodied the genre he had found in 1963. For example, "The Gore Gore Girls". The story of the murder of strippers working in a nightclub - displays Lewis's personal sense of humour in two scenes. In one scene a woman's nipples are cut off, one breast squirts white milk while the other yields chocolate milk, and in another, a woman is stabbed while blowing bubble gum, the bubble fills up with blood. There is no doubting Lewis's strange sense of humour and it was probably this attitude and being disgusted by the financial chicaneries inherent in the film industry, that made him quit (1972). In 1977 Lewis surfaced as a founder of a direct mail marketing agency and today, has little desire to return to the uncertain financial realities of film making. In retrospect, Herschell Gordon Lewis's films succeeded by sheer imaginative force. As the progenitor of explicit gore, he was singularly aware



illus. 9



illus. 11



illus. 10

that films need not be expensive or have serious content. Lewis learned by breaking taboos of decency, people would pay money to see them broken. Lewis merely, exploited this.

The public were willing to pay again, four years later with Tobe Hooper's "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. (1974) (illus. 9) Although made in 1974 "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre had to wait until 1976 to receive general release. Philip Williams, member of the British Censorship Board, was so outraged by the film, that he contacted British Customs to complain that they let it into the country in the first place. Yet its understandable why it was granted a certificate, unlike Lewis's explicit gore, the murders in "Texas Chainsaw" are violent yet largely bloodless and seen very swiftly. The only disturbing occurrence is the sense of decay and disorder which prevades the film (illus. 10). Hooper originally shot "Texas" in 16mm format and later blew it up to 35mm for cinema release. Openly influenced by Herschell Gordon Lewis. *"When I saw people being sick I knew I had found a director after my own heart"* (No. 5). Based loosely on Ed Gein - Ed Gein was a mass murderer in the fifties who lived on an isolated farm in Wisconsin. What made Ed Gein notorious was the fact that he manufactured various household items and pieces of apparel out of body parts of his victims (illus. 11) "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" is set in the Texas grasslands and is about a family of raving psychotic cannibals preying on a group of holidaying youngsters. As already stated, the gore content in the film was minimal, so what made this film gain it's disturbing reputation? The consistently high caliber of acting throughout "Chainsaw" in fact is the



illus. 12

FRIDAY THE 13TH



illus. 13

major contributor to its reputation. Ed Neal, the actor who plays one of the films three principal psychopaths, is the first of the cannibal killers introduced to the screen. Neal's performance as the scarfaced middle brother who revels in his job at a local slaughter house, sets the tone of relentless derangement that continues throughout the film. (illus. 12) Equal performances by Gunnar Hansen and Jim Siedfow as the two other crazy brothers develop this atmosphere. When finally released the title alone had the audience anticipating before it had entered the theatre. However its title was more suggestive and people craving a "bloodfeast" would have to wait another four years.

Finally in 1980, Paramount Pictures turned a blind eye to their normal stance of producing what they considered high quality films. To coincide with America's Halloween festivities, Paramount released on October the 31st, 1980 Sean Cunningham's schocker "Friday the 13th". (illus. 13) Not content with one-sheets, posters and the advertising impedimenta that goes into film promotion, Paramount issued vomit bags. In large bold type the words "You may need this when you see Friday the 13th" helped to precondition the audience to accept whay they were going to see before they had actually seen it.

With definite shades of Grand Guignol and keeping in the tradition of Herschell Gordon Lewis, Friday the 13th was scorned by critics who deemed the film "amateur night at the butcher shop". Cunningham's film was illogicial and completely empty headed which was all the more stranger for a major film corporation to have released it. Dispensing with any story line, Friday the 13th only

wanted to terrify us with its real star, its grisly special effects. As with the purpose of Grand Guignol, Friday the 13th was a showcase for its gruesome special effects. Towards the end of the film, the heroine is found locked in a prolonged struggle against a psychopath. During the fight, the heroine armed with knife, in a final burst of murderous rage swings the knife wildly and in one clean stroke cuts her assailant's head off. The realism in which this beheading is staged, is a major characteristic of this genre. In close up we are exposed to every bloodspurting detail. This painstaking attention to detail gave birth to a new term in cinematic phraseology, "Splatter". The main fascination and major characteristic of the splatter genre are the bloody special effects. In fact one can assume that this element alone can be perceived as being the most important element in splatter film making.

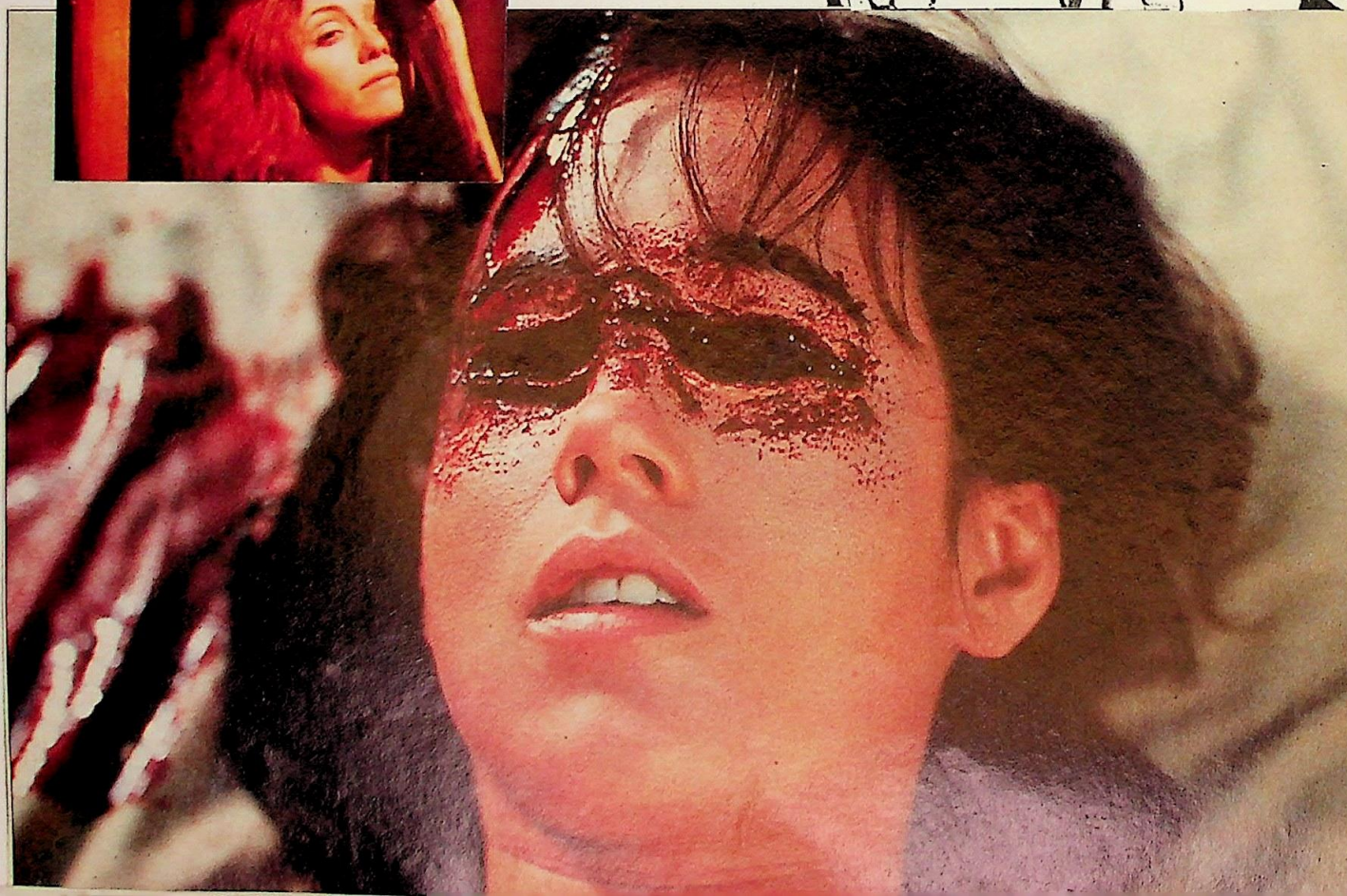
Today the special effects man in tandem with the director has assumed a considerable role in the film making process. As so many of today's films - particularly in the case of splatter genre - are increasingly effects orientated. The one time technician has advanced to the position of unofficial co-director. The first sign of this change in regard to the makeup artist came in 1974 with William Friedkin's "The Exorcist". Make up artist Dick Smith's execution of the baffling make up and prosthetic effects made him a star overnight. Smith's profound impact on film in the seventies encouraged a number of younger make up enthusiasts like Rick Baker, Rob Bottin and Tom Savini to pursue careers in make up. With the relaxation of censorship rules pertaining to scenes of explicit gore, violence and other taboo subjects on the screen had much



illus. 14



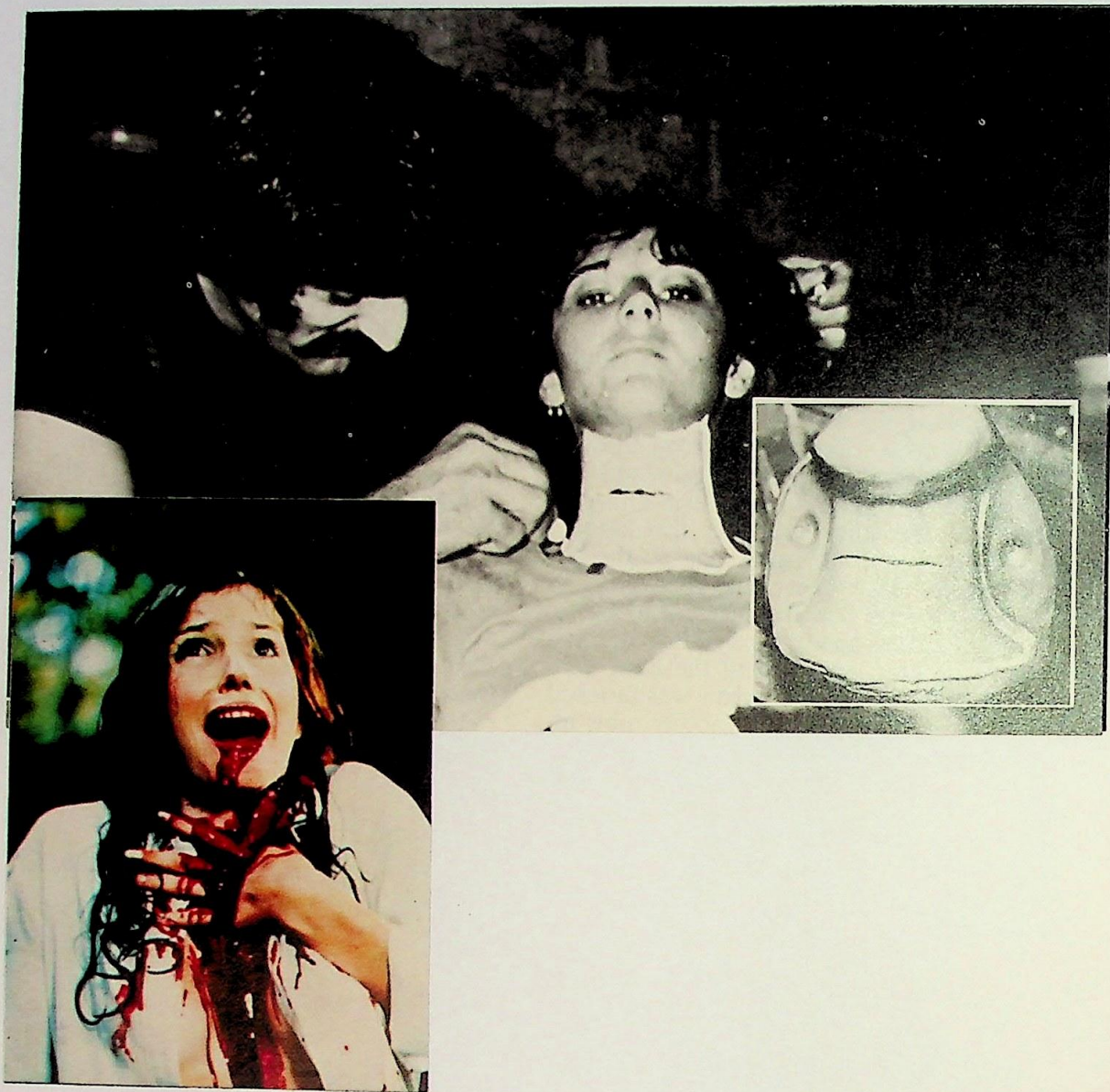
TOM SAVINI



to do with the professional rise in stature of the special makeup effects technician during the seventies and now the eighties.

When the call for "realism" went out someone had to emerge to meet the demand. In the case of splatter genre most makeup artists steered away from projects that were overtly splatter orientated.

However, Tom Savini is the artist most associated with the Splatter genre. Nicknamed "The Gore King" or "King of Splatter" (illus. 14) the effects that are created for splatter films have been called "Savini like effects", earning him a considerable reputation among the splatter directors. *"Tom's enthusiasm is infectious and I find myself listening to his descriptions as one of his fans might. I'm almost able to see the sequences as Tom bounces around and explains it, its a kind of preview of coming attractions. Not only does Tom execute what the script calls for but he often brings new ideas to the party. A particular sequence will stimulate me to create a sequence designed specifically for that effects inclusion".* - Sean Cunningham (No. 6) Savini has the distinction of being one of the few makeup artists whose work is met with comments like "Sick and Gross". Savini's notoriety is received from how realistically he has created effects for such films as *Deranged Maniac*, *The Prowler* and *Friday 13th*. Take for example the throat cutting sequence in *Friday the 13th*. One sees a frightened girl up against a tree and the back of a figure approaching with a knife. We see the knife gleam on the right side of the frame and sweep toward the girl. As it does the figure effectively blocks out the scene for a few frames. Here the cutting of the film takes place.



Then we see the girl lift up her head, revealing a cleverly concealed throat cut appliance, the blood pumps out as the knife gleams on the right side of the screen appearing to be a continuation of the slash. For safety even the knife blade was a replica copy made by Savini to look realistic. In this momentary film cut, the audience is fooled by a visual illusion of a continued action. (illus. 15)

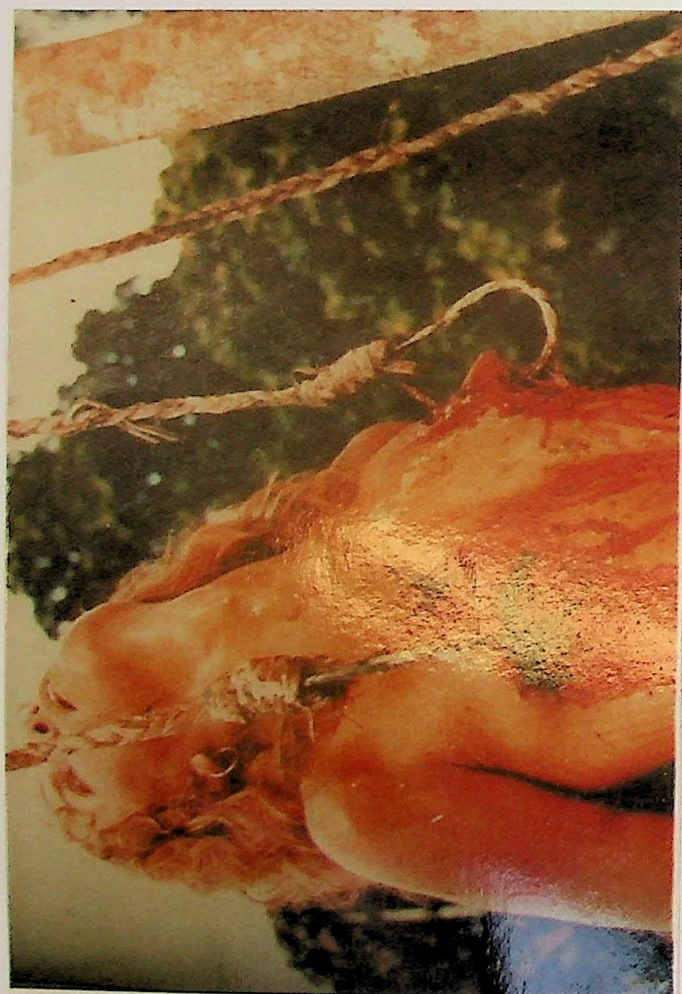
About such effects Savini says "There's something about seeing the real thing that sets me apart from let's say some other make up artists who haven't." Having served his time in Vietnam as a photographer, Savini became a make up artist finding his past experiences a considerable source of inspiration. "I personally have truged through muddy fields and found myself not three or four feet away from a human body, a human being blown nearly in half by a grenade blast. I have walked around and nearly stepped on a human arm one end of it jagged and torn and the other its fist clenched and grabbing the ground, completely severed from the body it was once attached to, I have walked around through hospitals talking to friends who've had private parts of their bodies blown off, so I have been really close to real gore. When you're forced into a situation like that, your body, your mind has a way of taking care of itself, of protecting you and your mind and in my case, I felt a kind of safety behind my camera, photographing this stuff. There was a distance between me and it. Perhaps my mind was seeing it as special effects. If I've got anything of a reputation at all, I'm probably notorious for how real my stuff looks. I would say in that respect the realisim of my work probably does come from that experience" (No. 7) Yet Savini does feel

some remorse for his participation in the splatter genre. When he first started doing this type of work he felt it was justified because it showed violence as being horrifyingly ugly. People would turn their eyes away from the screen because it was presented as being ugly to commit murder. But as this theme of violence has developed, audiences are becoming more desensitized to all horrors.

Back in 1980, Savini was new in the field and eager to please. The collaboration of Sean Cunningham and Tom Savini, resulting in "Friday the 13th" sparked off a controversy. Chicago Tribune film critic and co-star of the syndicated television series at the Movies, Gene Siskel, together with his "At the movies" compatriot Chicago Sun - Times and Pulitzer Prize winning film critic Roger Ebert led a campaign to run Splatter off the screens. Triggered by Paramount Pictures release of Friday the 13th both critics felt the film to be purely exploitative in its graphic portrayal and extremely vicious in its attitude toward women. Gene Siskel was appalled that a major studio such as Paramount would lower itself to releasing such a film. In an open letter to Paramount's top executives, Siskel attacked the studio for having gotten behind such a "blatantly violent and exploitative film as Friday the 13th." The critic urged Tribune readers, who were sympathetic to this cause to boycott all Paramount releases, regardless of their content, as a gesture of unified protest. By this time, Roger Ebert had also joined in the angry fight. The big move came when both critics devoted a special edition of their national syndicated P.B.S. "Sneak Previews programme"



illus. 1b



to a vitriolic assault on what they termed "a disturbing new trend" in today's films. Subsequently, the pair had appeared on N.B.C.'s "Today" and a host of other television and radio programmes in an effort to get their views across. As a result, they themselves have become media stars and the controversy they helped start has developed into a minor cause celebre.

Siskel and Ebert's anger with the splatter genre is directed not just at the forms basic blood and gore content but more significantly at its violent attitude toward women. (illus. 1b.) Splatter films, they say, aim most of their violence at female characters who are sexually liberated and who act independently of men. Those female characters who are more dependent on men come through these films relatively unscathed. The two critics also found offensive about these films the fact that when these independent women are finally dealt their hack and slash "comeuppance", the camera in most cases assumes the point of view of the killer, his heavy breathing filling the soundtrack as he bears down on his helpless birds of prey. On behalf of the splatter genre's defense, John McCarthy - regular contributor to publications, "Cinefantastique", "Film Makers's Newsletter", "Classic Images" and "Take One", argues against Siskel and Ebert's analysis of Splatter. In an article in "Cinefantastique" (No. 8, Vol. 5) McCarthy points out that Siskel and Ebert are wrong in their assumption that splatter is a disturbing new trend. He points out that the splatter genre had been struggling for many years to reach maturity. "If in fact, the freedom of the screen had not been restricted for almost forty years, the art of the film like the art of painting and literature before it, would in all likelihood

already have had its flirtation with realism sometime ago, Censorship only served to delay the inevitable appearance of splatter films." (No. 8) As regards the genre's treatment of women, McCarthy explains that Siskel and Ebert are really giving this genre much more credit for having a brain in its head than it actually deserves. According to McCarthy, a film like Sean Cunningham's "Friday the 13th" is not guilty of expressing an anti feminist viewpoint, for it has no viewpoint at all. It's not about anything; "Friday the 13th" exists mainly as a show case for its grisly and bloody special effects. The fact that so many of the female characters who get stalked and killed in these films has less to do with any dark and sinister underlying message, than it does with society's changing attitudes towards women as a whole. The only real danger, McCarthy points out, is not that they are seducing viewers into craving more violence. It is that their appealing superficiality will eventually foster a generation of filmgoers that demands little else from films except gaudier, more contrived melodramatics and increasingly more mind boggling special effects. If a film doesn't deliver these surface goods, that film will be deemed a failure.

But Siskel and Eberts campaign hadn't fallen on deaf ears, and film distributors had become very weary of investing in such ventures as:-

Hell Night (Tom De Simone, 1981)

Madman (Joe Giannone, 1981)

Bloody Moon (Jesus Franco, 1982)

Vice Squad (Gary Sherman, 1983)

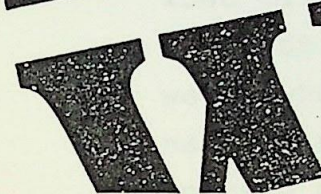
The Sender (Roger Christian, 1982)

Visiting Hours (Jean Claude Lord, 1982)

Gory, Gory, Hallelujah

Or, We Don't Scare
Like We Used To

BY CARLOS C. VIDEO DANGERS



illus. 17

'Nasties' on TV

We're being 'swamped' with video n

IRELAND is now a "dumping ground" for video nasties, according to the president of the ICA, Mr. Lou Broughall (Oct. 18). Any responsible-minded person would agree totally with this statement. She states that youngsters are even clubbing pocket money to hire out these degrading films.

The question we would all like to ask is why isn't the Government doing something about this. It is bad enough having adults "looking" at these films, but when youngsters and children are getting free access to them also then it is really getting serious.

Of course any adult whether they be parents or not, who buy these degrading films need psychological help. They are to blame for the present situation. These people who stock these films should be arrested and put out of business.

We have heard also the last few weeks the kind of books which are available to us. We are speaking of the 10 to 17 year group. These filthy books are coming from the water. Like this is they are being sold in this country.

I am, however, an ardent supporter of the cinema, the only place, in my opinion, to fully appreciate a film worthy of big screen presentation.

My first grievance—I have become increasingly disturbed by the number of

prejudice time the num attempt centra As points contain films a directed seems to are not this sub quick to other iss equal right they more this most a "Why, for women not with regard posters and which adorn countless throughout the Many women these same pl the female body displayed in a cheapest and degrading way same women bi papers which do job as the calen posters.

If women w make a stand o subject we would see a change in the tent of those same papers.

We are close to th rival of satellite multi-channel televi which will give every a wide viewing ra With the amount violence and filth whi we already have on o

And youngsters are even clubbing pocket money to hire out the nasties which often show appalling violence and explicit sexual acts. Mr. Broughall claims that it is but a matter of time before the situation will be such that people will be up to the neck in them.

Mr. Broughall said that he had seen some of the nasties and that they were "appalling". He said that he had seen some of the nasties and that they were "appalling". He said that he had seen some of the nasties and that they were "appalling".

Evening Herald, Friday, March 20, 1987 13

Video nasties war

SENAN OLONY Minister, Collins has ed to act im to clamp the import nasties.

Censor
urges
tough
action

of unedited es into Ireland g "a total of the job of former film k Hall said, warned that ous situation change "until ights a fire Minister for

had been tied under present legislation. "When I made representations about videos to the Department of Justice I was politely told that it was not a hot political issue," he said. "Mr. Noonan had this on his desk for two years, and he was followed by Mr. Dukes.



Ecstasy—for adults only.



GERRY COLLINS Hot Issue



The Texas Chainsaw Masacre—a real nastie.

"It is two years since I was told that legislation to curb video nasties was being drafted. How long does it take to draft an Act?"

"Nothing is being done, and I am sure that nothing will be done until the public creates a hullabuloo and campaigns on the issue. Write to

your TD," he urged. Mr. Hall said that sometimes pictures were available on video while they were still on cinema release.

"And if something has been left out of the cinema version, straightaway you create a market for the video. See the uncensored version!"

He pointed out that the film censor also had no powers in relation to visual material transmitted by RTE. "They can put on anything they please, and the censor has nothing to do with it."

If censorship was removed completely it would unleash "a deluge

of filth that is too dreadful to contemplate," he said.

The answer was to extend censorship to cover the loopholes.

But Mr. Hall said that he was not sure about the links between on-screen violence, cruelty and sex and the upsurge in crimes of these types in society.

"I would like to think that our young people might be more mentally resilient than to allow such meretricious trash to influence them. But essentially it is a job for psychologists to decide . . ."

Mr. Hall said that the general and technical standards of film-making had fallen deplorably since his time.

And he said that horror and "splatter" movies were not doing cinema any good, even from a purely commercial viewpoint.

DIRECT FROM THE FACTORY!

Basket Case (Frank Henelotter, 1982)

Vigilante (William Lustig, 1983)

Mausoleum (Michael Dugan, 1983)

House on Sorority Row, (Mark Rosman 1983)

Faced with these consequences, the splatter genre manifested itself into video in the form of Video Nasties.

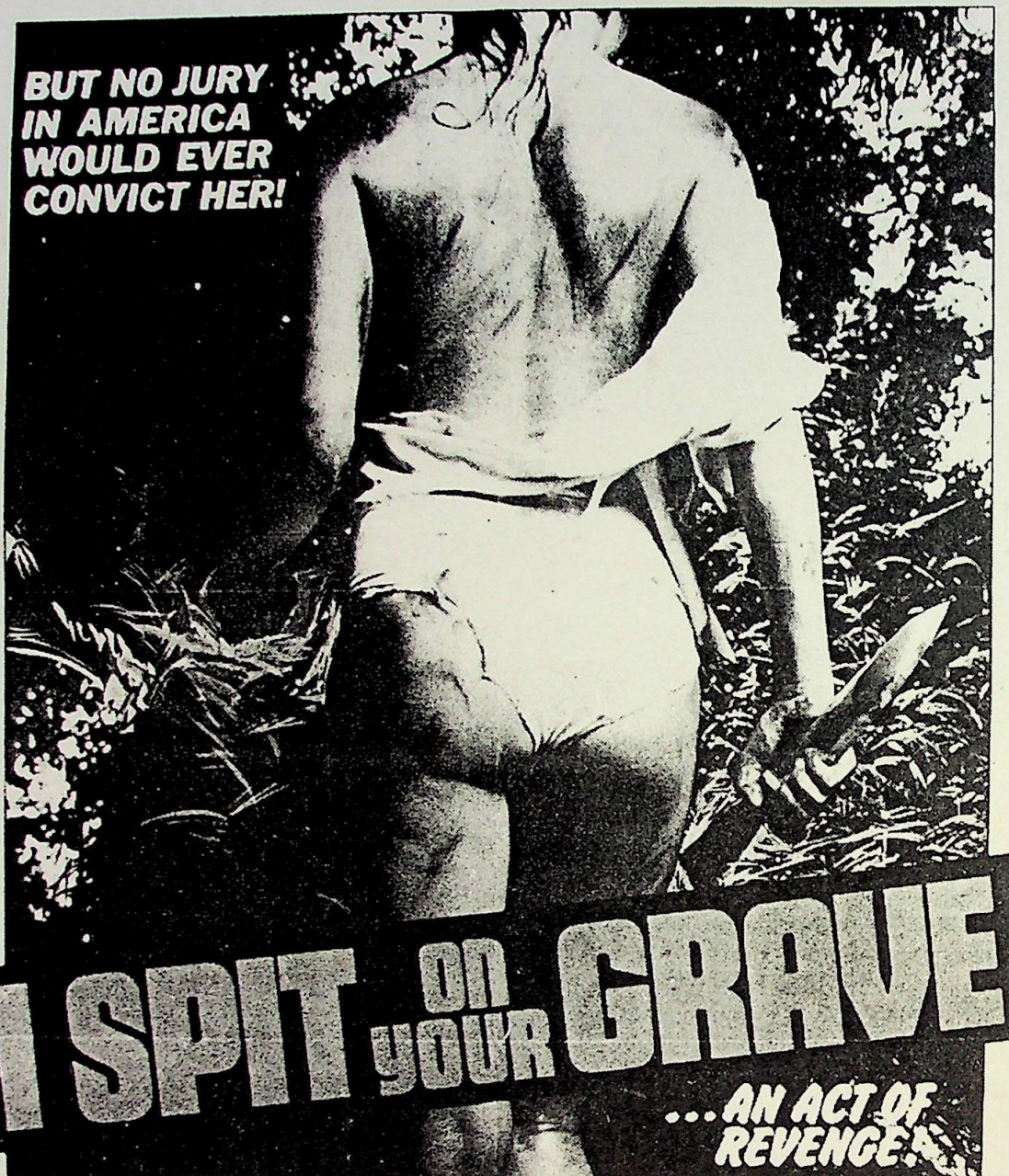
Within the last three years, the British Isle has become the most video conscious nation in the world. Today over one third of every household in the British Isles possesses a video machine, almost double the percentage of owner rentals in the United States. In 1983 alone, pre-recorded cassette sales reached £70 million, while rentals amassed £380 million. (No. 9.) With statistics like those and the fact that video recorders have enabled viewers to watch whatever they want, whenever they want, video nasties have thrived. In doing so, they again have sparked off another controversy. (illus. 17.) In an article appearing in the Evening Herald, 20-3-87, Irish Justice Minister, Gerry Collins has been urged to act immediately to clamp down on the import of video nasties into Ireland. According to former film censor, Frank Hall, the flood of unedited video nasties into Ireland is making a total nonsense of the job of censorship. At present, the Office of the Film Censor is not empowered to give videos a vetting before they go on general release. Mr Hall, who was censor for eight years until he left last December (1986), said people had complained to him about video nasties during his term of office even though his hands had been tied under present legislation. "When I made representations about video to the Department of Justice, I was politely told that it was not a hot political

issue". Mr. Hall goes on to say "Justice Minister Michael Noonan had this on his desk for two years and he was followed by Mr. Dukes, it is two years since I was told that legislation to curb video nasties was being drafted. Nothing is being done and I am sure that nothing will be done until the public campaigns on the issue". Mr. Hall later says that sometimes pictures were available on video while they were still on cinema release. "If something has been left out of the cinema version, straight away you create a market for the video. See the uncensored version". The article ends with Mr. Hall saying that the general and technical standards of film making had fallen deplorably. "Horror and Splatter movies were not doing cinema any good, even from a purely commercial viewpoint". In another article printed in the 'Irish Independent' 12-10-86, it states that since a £100 fine was brought in for a first offense of possessing a video nastie in Britain in 1983, video nasties were not selling there anymore. Because of this Ireland has become a dumping ground for such material. The article goes on to say that in Ireland, most of these Video shops have no classification of the material. These obscene videos could be seen on shelves in the past, side by side with "Mary Poppins" and other childrens material. The article concludes that children were clubbing together pocket money to hire out video nasties.

So just how obtainable are video nasties and how does one recognise them on video shop shelves? A good indication to a video's content is by looking at the video cover and analysing the images depicted on it. The following examples are video nasties, that were obtained from just one video retailer in Dublin.

**THIS WOMAN HAS JUST
CUT, CHOPPED, BROKEN, and BURNED
FIVE MEN BEYOND RECOGNITION...**

**BUT NO JURY
IN AMERICA
WOULD EVER
CONVICT HER!**



I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE
...AN ACT OF REVENGE

JERRY GROSS presents "I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE"
A CINEMAGIC PICTURES PRODUCTION
A MEIR ZARCHI FILM

starring
CAMILLE KEATON • ERON TABOR • RICHARD PACE • ANTHONY NICHOLS

produced by JOSEPH ZBEDA • written & directed by MEIR ZARCHI

DISTRIBUTED BY THE JERRY GROSS ORGANIZATION Color By METROCOLOR

R RESTRICTED
UNDER 17 REQUIRES ACCOMPANYING
PARENT OR ADULT GUARDIAN

illus. 18

"I Spit on your Grave."

"I spit on your grave" typifies the explorative images used on video nastie covers to precondition its audience (illus.18.) It's cover relies on visual impact. On it, it depicts a provocative photograph of a nearly naked woman. The sexual impact of the picture is strengthened by the overall size of the image placed in the centre. This picture contains an object of sight and that is the weapon she is carrying in her right hand. This contrasts with the latter, causing a clash between analytical and emotional engagement - what we once thought was a sensual image has taken on a different more ominous meaning. "No jury in America would ever convict her". This statement conjures up the conclusions that some sexual offense has been committed against the woman. All these elements are deliberately designed for these interpretations. Such preconditioning helped Meir Zarchis' 1981 film "I Spit on Your Grave" of being a "cause-celebre" in America when it was released at the height of the violence against women controversy. Singled out by Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert in their campaign against, "I Spit on your Grave" was considered so extreme in its depiction of rape and graphic violence that the distributor was forced to withdraw it. Later that year it was released on video. It is basically about New Yorker, Jenny Hills who goes to a secluded country retreat to work on a novel. There she is brutally gang raped by three locals and a mentally retarded delivery boy. She is left for dead but after recovering sufficiently, sets out to demand vengeance in a way that only low budget film makers seem to have the. warped imagination to master. The protracted rape where the novelist is sexually tortured is as degrading and as

NOTHING CAN PREPARE YOU FOR
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SHE FIGHTS BACK.



WHERE NOTHING IS OFF LIMITS

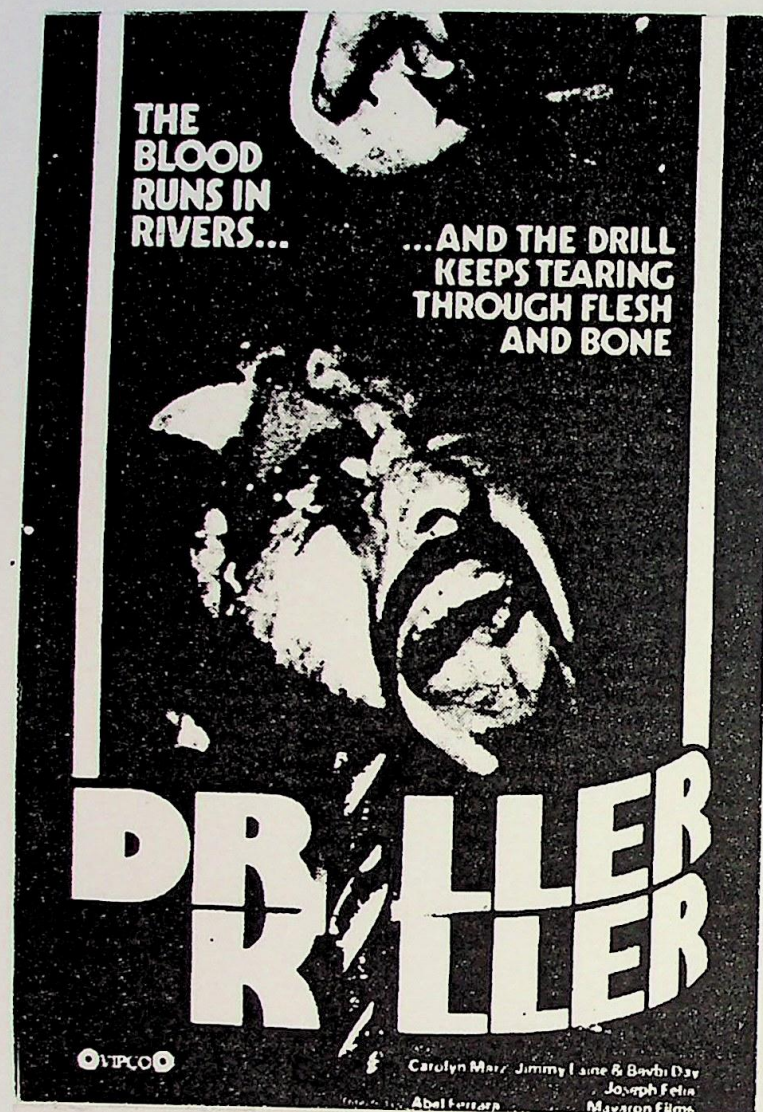
EDWARD L. MONTORO (1983) A MARK ROSMAN FILM
"THE HOUSE ON SORORITY ROW" Starring KATHRYN MCNEIL EILEEN DAVIDSON
Music by STEPHEN F. BAND Executive Producers JOHN PUNCHOCK and W. THOMAS MCMATHON
Produced by MARK ROSMAN and JOHN C. CLARK Written and Directed by MARK ROSMAN
DISTRIBUTED BY MCA HOME ENTERTAINMENT INC. R-RESTRICTED
PARENT STRONGLY CAUTIONED SOME MATERIAL MAY BE INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN UNDER 17

illus. 19

squirm inducing as anything ever seen in the video nastie market. It arguably does give the character the sufficient motivation to wreak her terrible revenge on her four tormentors but it would be hard to believe that this justification was uppermost in writer/director Meir Zardi's mind.

"House on Sorority Row"

"House on Sorority Row" (1983) is formula design as regards video nasties. Here the pretty heroine strikes a typically endangered pose, arms supporting her copious breasts, (emphasising her cleavage). (illus. 19.) The illustration shows her on her knees, looking up at something. The accompanying text, "Nothing can prepare you for what happens when she fights back" makes the assumption that the woman will undergo something unpleasant. This atmosphere is made more unsettling with the church like window behind her. Symbolising faith, the religious aspect is again emphasised by the use of the colour purple. In contrast to the religious symbols the impending menace may be read into the actual title. The words "The House on Sorority Row" are scratched and irregular, suggesting tension. The actual word House makes room for a second message with the letter 'O' being made into a demonic symbol, there is a clash of elements hinting at the nature of the video. In essence, Mark Rosman's film is just another retread of "Friday the 13th". But for all that strives to maintain a level above all the obvious pitfalls that have plagued other such video nasties. Originally titled Seven Sisters, the story focuses its attention on a group of graduating girls who decide to hold their last end of term party at



(illus. 20.)

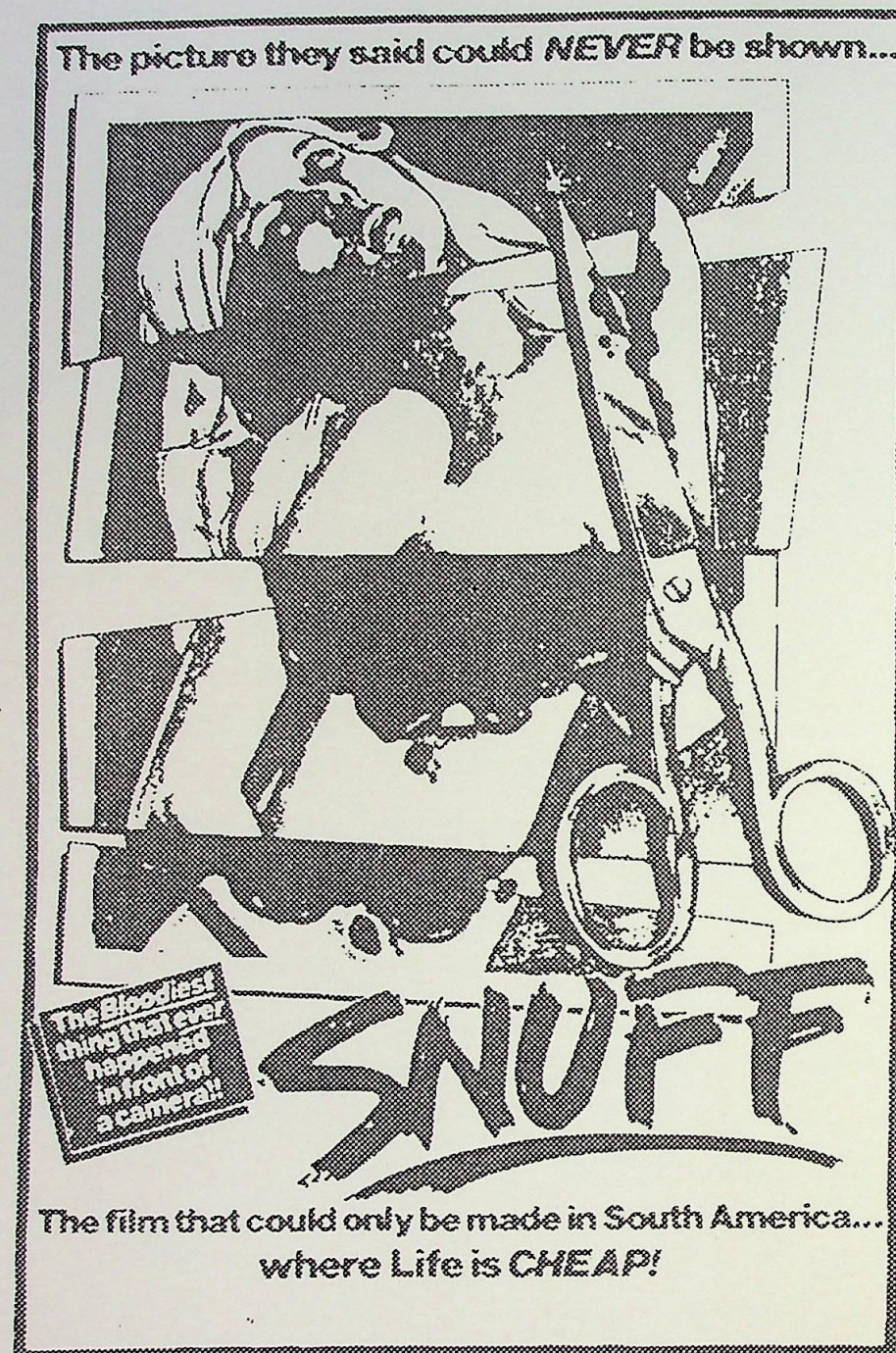
their sorority house without the blessing of their old house mother. Unknown to them she has a dark hidden secret that goes back to a traumatic birth delivery years ago while under the influence of experimental drugs. The girls unlock this when they decide to pull a last prank on the old woman which results in her death. As the party begins, the girls are still fighting amongst themselves as to whether they should call the police or stash the corpse and it is this underlying unease, well conveyed by cross cutting the merriment of the party guests with the panic-stricken actions of the girls and ensuing mayhem, that maintains the interest and gives this video nastie some merit. As retribution catches up with all the girls but one, she must fight the psychopath, who turns out to be the doctor responsible for the old woman's plight, trying to cover up his past unethical mistakes.

Although a sharp, piked walking stick is the murder implement in the House on Sorority Row, the gore quotient is at a very surprisingly low level, and that follows for the sexual content. Both aspects show remarkable restraint as Rosman is more partial to milking the horror from the situation for all its worth rather than rely on easy shock. These are usually very peculiar traits for a splatter director.

Driller Killer

Driller Killer (1981). (illus. 20.) Thanks to the extremely blatant packaging of the video, Driller Killer became the most criticised video of all time. "The blood runs in rivers and the drill keeps tearing through flesh

and bone", reads the text. Accompanied with a picture of a bearded man having his forehead drilled, the aim of this video cover is to get an effect of surprise by a forceful, distinct visual image. It's impact is purely because of its violent nature, not alone is it a picture of a drill penetrating somebody's head but it is a photograph, suggesting an idea of reality. This was a major factor along with press publicity in "The Driller Killer" selling effectively. The film stars the director under the pseudonym of Jimmy Laine. Director Abel Ferrara Ferraras character plays a struggling artist in New York City. Living in a flat with a pair of nymphets and has as downstairs neighbours a punk rock group who continually practice 24 hours a day, life has dealt Laine a bad card. It all becomes too much for Laine. Taking to the streets with his portable power pack and electric drill, the carnage begins with Laine's killing of the people he is afraid of joining in the gutter. "The Driller Killer" is filled with stereotypically violent images of people being killed by the drill wielding maniac. On the subject of the film's violence, Ferrara says *"To me it's a comedy you know what I mean, like drilling people, that's a joke, that was our sense of fun."* The real horror in "The Driller Killer", according to Ferrara, is not with Splatter, - which is high on the sick scale, - but from the neighbourhood in which Laine freaks out. *"That's where I live, the awfulness is there. A lot of the film is real, but if we staged something we were sure that there was something twice as bad going on two blocks away"*. On the subject of his morals, Ferrara replies, *"We are not really violent people. We don't even have guns, we're just trying to put over a frustration of not having money"*. (No. 9.)



illus. 2 .

"Evolution of Snuff."

The chief fear most critics harbour about video nasties is that they might eventually seduce audiences into craving the real thing on screen. Instead of staging somebody being murdered, actually murder that person, record it and sell it as entertainment in the form of snuff videos. The concept originated back in 1975, from a film entitled "Snuff". Released that year, its advertising traded on a persistent rumour that its on screen mayhem was not simulated, but in fact bloodily real. (illus.21) Also its title traded on an equally persistent rumour that there was a new form of pornography then beginning to spring up in underground film circles across America. Snuff films, super low budget films in which performers were actually being murdered on screen in order to provide a new and sick kind of entertainment for jaded audiences. These audiences were thought to include isolated pockets of Americas jet set located in Los Angeles and New York City. But the film "Snuff" is a hoax. It began as a low budget, 1971 Argentinian Zombie film entitled "Slaughter", which was picked up for U.S. distribution and retitled "Snuff" in order to capitalize on the American publics growing curiosity about this bizarre new form of underground film making. Some added scenes of a young girl being hacked up by the film's cast and crew were then staged and shot in the New York area by independent splatter and porno film maker Michael Findlay (No.10) and later sandwiched into the release print in order to spice up the film's otherwise dull plot. Snuff was then released on video in 1979 by Alan Shackleton's Monarch Pictures with the slogan "Made in South America - where life is cheap". Implying of couse, that the films blood

and gore were real. The video also excluded any mention of cost or other technical credits in order to perpetuate the myths surrounding its purportedly illegal manufacture.

With the enigma around the credibility of a film like "Snuff", there is no doubting the carnage seen in Snuff documentaries. Solely manufactured for video consumption snuff documentaries are the new trend in entertainment catering for those with morbid tastes. It's roots may be traced back to the sixties avantgarde film making which established Herschell Gordon Lewis in gore. With an eye for the bizarre and unusual 1963 saw the release of Ralph Johnson's Mondo Cane. Shot in 16mm Mondo Cane's documentation of strange behaviour, bizarre customs, rituals and past times proved a big success with the public, spawning a deluge of sequels that comprise the Mondo genre, fore runner to snuff documentaries. Ralph Johnson's original Mondo Cane had been inspired by a little known film maker Kroger Babb. Kroger Babb had exhibited a "Pre-Mondo" film in the forties when he came across footage of a tribe in the Congo that, among other things, cut the throats of cows and drank the blood as it oozed out. Another scene showed the members of the tribe rubbing themselves with animal excrement for protection against evil spirits. Babb saw potential in the footage, re-edited it and gave it the title Karimojd (1942). Its strangeness packed audiences in for a glimpse of the sensational goings on. Twenty two years later, Ralph Johnson was to start a genre which would again expose audiences to the bizarre.

Unusual rituals played a prominent feature of nearly all the Mondo films. For example, footage from a small town

in Italy, documents people who fill a garage with food and drink for an annual feast. Part of the celebration calls for the men of the town to smash through the garage doors using their heads as battering rams.

Some begin to bleed from the ears and mouth, go into convulsions and have to be carried off (Mondo Macabro).

In a more solemn ceremony, a crowd of churchgoing women wash down the parish steps using their tongues. As the clean up progresses, their tongues become raw and the steps are covered with streaks of blood (Mondo Pazzo.64).

Another area given generous coverage in Mondo films is the animal world. "Mondo Bôlaro. 64 depicts the famous "run of the bull" in Pampalona, Spain, where people see how close they can actually get to a rampaging bull.

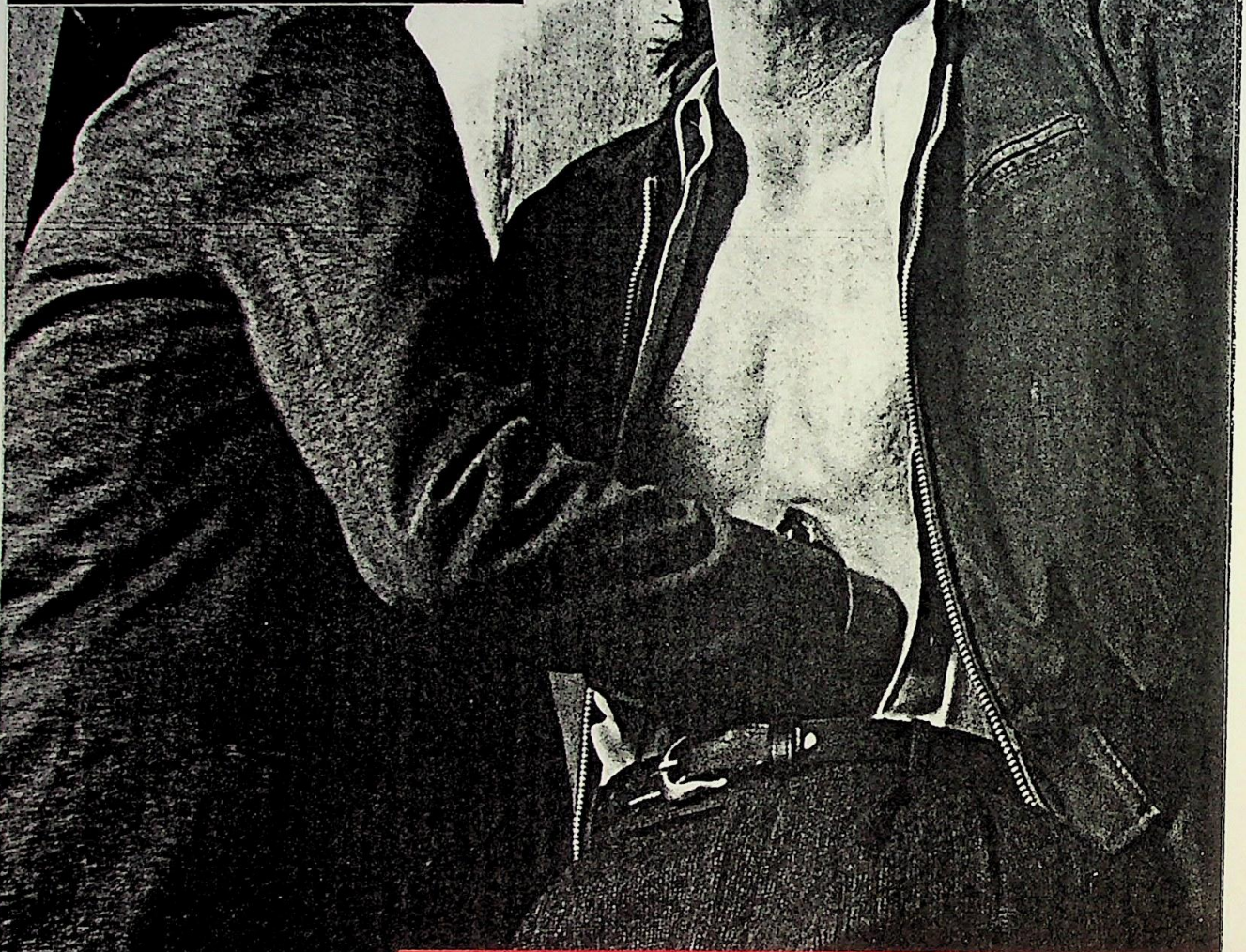
Many spectators do get safely away but the real excitement is watching those who don't. Another show of bravery also involving a bull, appears in Mondo Pazzo 64.

Intended to demonstrate the readiness of noble young bull fighters to unflinchingly face death. A single file line of six matadors slowly approach the bull to see just how close they can get before retreat is necessary. By the time its necessary to retreat the bull smashes into the line of matadors and slams them to the ground.

However, the footage most favoured by Mondo film makers is that depicting the more brutal side of primitive life. Scenes showing unusual games in which participants inflict and receive painful wounds provide a highly emotional viewing experience. In one "match", two natives smash each other over the head with logs, each taking turns until one drops unconscious. Another competition involves natives throwing rocks at each other. Each stands perfectly still as a stone smashes into him and

bounces off, apparently with no ill effect. Lastly natives of New Guinea dive hundreds of feet with only a vine tied to their ankles to break their fall but sometimes they break their necks instead. (Go, Go, Go, World, '68) All this was disguised as entertainment and with the word "Mondo" in the title, guaranteed a large audience.

NS
Mondo films peaked in the sixties which saw the release of more than 20 such films. The seventies was a far less prosperous time for the genre with poor distribution and the decline of 16mm and 8mm format. For a while it appeared that the mondo breed of film had outlived its shock value and was on the brink of extinction. All of that changed with the release of "Faces of Death" on video cassette in 1980. Narrated by a doctor, aptly named "Francis B. Gross", "Faces of Death" presents all kinds of death, both human and animal. A sequel titled "Faces of Death Part Two", continues Dr. Gross' study of death with the same combination of exploitation and edification, again on video. "Faces of Death" and its sequel were the first in a resurgence of the genre on video in which even more blatant forms of both animals and humans are depicted. Scenes depicting the slaughter of an entire herd of elephants in three minutes, or goats thrown into water to be eaten alive by sharks do not exactly recapture the humour of its earlier counterparts. But it is meant to, Grainy, supposedly real video footage of a white hunter shooting Amazon Indians is very questionable as to what category it falls into. The new breed of Mondo films in the shape of snuff documentaries - are gorier and more explicit, keeping pace with changing times.



VIDEODROME

illus.22

Canadian director, David Cronenberg, speculates on the video age in his 1982 film "Videodrome". "I wanted to deposit the possibility that a man exposed to violent imagery would begin to hallucinate, I wanted to see what it would be like if in fact what the censors said would happen, did happen". (No. 9) James Vernon, head of The British Board of Film Classification had this to say about Cronenberg's film, "The interesting thing about Videodrome" is that it really puts the case against video nasties, that is infact the subject of the Film. A thoughtful viewing of Videodrome would simply confirm the campaigns that were run by newspapers against video nasties and what was said in Parliament. The film totally acknowledges the dangers of sadistic videos". (No. 12)

Adopting the highly unstable first person perspective of voyeuristically inclined video freak and cable station controller Max Renn. Cronenberg takes us on a discomforting trip through the outer limits of T.V. programming and the viewing psyche - sado - erotic fantasies populate both and first investigates then penetrates the charged space between subject and screen. Renn, hooked on the apparent pirate broadcasts of the Videodrome channel, finds himself immersed not only in ideological conspiracy - hypnotized by T.V. signals - but also in evolutionary turmoil - hallucinating his own genetic adaptation to video's privacy and developing a brand new orifice in which to receive living software. (illus.22) With Cronenberg giving no indication where reality might be situated in this complex scheme, we can't help but share Renns fasination. The films disgust factor is high but it is complusive and therein lies the core of Cronenberg's film, into the very debates about representations of sex

and violence on Video. Can an evergrowing public desensitized really crave an amoral drive towards bigger and more sensational violent shocks asks the film?

Having looked at the evolution of this violence theme my answer to "Videodromes" question has to be no, I would disagree that the splatter/video nastie, phenomenon is indicative of a growing appetite for violence spreading throughout society as a whole. If anything the graphic images of fictitious carnage portrayed in this genre are serving to desensitize audiences to the threat of real violence. Because of this genre treatment of violence, rape and murder it makes audiences fear that this violence and the way it is portrayed might happen to them. This fear that people who go to see these films do so purely because of the violence in them is another false supposition. The main reason they are so popular are because of the special effects they have on show. Audiences perceive the splatter in this genre as an element of the special effects and enjoy it mostly on that level. The more realistic the effects, the better the reaction. We know these grisly effects are contrived, courtesy of the ingenuity of the effects technician so we judge them on that basis. In relation to Snuff and the enigma around it, it will only cater for the minority who generally will crave the notion rather than the effect. The real danger with splatter is that audiences will no longer demand quality in content but quantity in gore.

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5. "Shock Value", Delta, New York, John Waters, Chapter 3. Page 54
6. "Bizarro", Harmony Books, New York. Tom Savini, Chapter 2, "Special makepu effects and the director". Page 9.
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9. "Shock Express", July '85, No. 1 "Thrilling to Drilling", article by Kim Newman Pg. 2
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