

heartbeat, of our main character, and took the concept of theme songs to a whole new level. *Shaft* may be more famous, but *Sweetback* was more groundbreaking. In a brilliant stroke, Stax released the album in advance of the film's debut as a means of cheap publicity, quickly breaking into the Billboard Top 20, and the idea of the pop soundtrack was born.

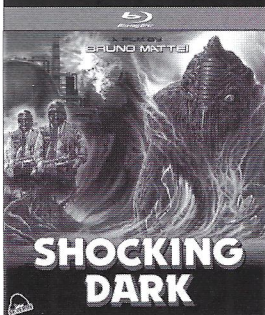
Despite getting lumped into the category it spawned, *Sweetback* is no Blaxploitation flick. It bears little resemblance to the movies that came after in style and substance, but make no mistake, those films do owe this movie, and Van Peebles, an undeniable debt. It's a film that should be heralded and seen more often than it is.

Luckily, Vinegar Syndrome has done right by this landmark. The video presentation has been restored in 4K from its original camera negative, which at times betrays the film stock challenges Van Peebles had to make the movie. But the print now reveals rich colors in ways the old DVD and video sources never could. When *Sweetback* first uses his handcuffs as a weapon of choice, blood sprays across black in vivid crimson in a way that probably hasn't been seen in decades.

The company also goes the distance with an array of special features that do the movie the justice it so deserves. First up is a 23min career interview with Van Peebles, shot at his home in France. It's the best feature, full of rewarding stories and insights, although it does have a distracting watermark of the production company throughout the entire piece. Also included is an interesting 32min interview with actress Niva "You're pushing my buttons, baby!" Ruschell; a 36min Q&A with Van Peebles that was shot at the 2013 Black Panther Film Festival; the aforementioned "The Real Deal (What it is!)" documentary that Van Peebles made for the 2003 DVD release; a rewarding commentary by historian Sergio Mims, who puts the movie in context of the era, the culture and cinema history, while never forgetting to comment on the wild ideas happening onscreen; an archival gallery, trailer and a booklet containing a detailed summary of the wild production by Travis Crawford.

Sweetback is one of the seminal films of the 1970s, of independent cinema, of avant-garde cinema, of black cinema, and of cinema PERIOD. Run out and get this limited edition Blu-ray and see what it's all about. You can't and shouldn't escape the context in which it was made, but you won't be able to deny the terrifying relevance it still holds nearly 50 years later.

Constantine Nass



SHOCKING DARK Directed by Bruno Mattei (1989) Severin Films Blu-ray

During its glory years of the late 50s through the mid-80s, the Italian film industry developed a well-deserved reputation for recycling successful formulas until entire genres were run into the ground and exhausted. While Hollywood itself is no slouch in this department, Italian Cinema furiously blended art and crass commercialism at a pace rarely seen before or since during these years to create a bottomless well of genre material for those

brave enough to take the plunge. The results range from the sophisticated and sublime to the stupefying and unwatchable, but there is always more to see. Always more. The sheer bulk of Spaghetti Western and Sword-and-Sandal material from the 60s attests to this, as do the endless (but often engaging and sometimes brilliant) Giallo offerings that came slightly later.

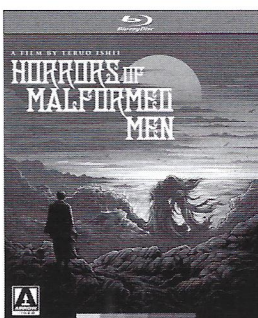
By the 1980s, the Italians had ramped up their output of science fiction, in reaction to successful film franchises of the era like *Star Wars*, *Alien*, and *The Road Warrior*. These pictures seldom lived up to their inspirations, hobbled as they were by minuscule budgets in a genre notorious for relying on expensive special effects. Many, however, can still be heartily enjoyed as camp and even sometimes as horror, as gore elements from the era's zombie films occasionally creep in. Most Italian Sci-Fi offerings of the 1980s wear their influences on their sleeve, and you can typically tell what they're ripping off with one glance at the title font. Bruno Mattei's *Shocking Dark* (1989), takes the tradition of the exploitation film rip-off to a whole new level.

Widely marketed as *Terminator II*, *Shocking Dark* was released two years before the real *Terminator 2*, and is actually an almost point-by-point remake of *Aliens*. The film concerns the adventures of the Mega Force (no relation to the Barry Bostwick picture), a military team who are sent to a dystopic, nearly abandoned Venice, Italy-of-the-future by the faceless, monolithic Tubular Corporation to sort out something or other having to do with pollution and monsters. While most rip-offs would be content with appropriating *Aliens*' "future soldiers vs. killer monsters" set-up, along with some of its look and atmosphere, Mattei and screenwriters Claudio Fragasso and Rossella Drudi steal virtually everything they can from *Aliens*, including assorted plot and character points which are fairly superfluous to the story and serve mainly to constantly remind us that we are watching a theft in progress. Hey, remember in *Aliens* when Newt, the little girl, slid down a ventilation shaft and became separated from the group? Well, the same thing happens here to a young girl the Mega Force rescues from the debris, shot from pretty much the same angle. Corporate stooge with a deadly hidden agenda? Check. Motion tracker scene where characters realize the monster is right on top of them? Check. Time travel and a stalking android? No, those are some of the bits they've taken from *Terminator*. Cheap-looking puppet monster? No, that's all *Shocking Dark*.

There is literally nothing here that can be taken seriously. There are, however, plenty of guffaw-out-loud moments, groaners, eye-rollers, and head-scratchers (like a character named Samuel Fuller), as well as a show-stealing performance from Geretta Geretta (*Demons*) as "Koster," the female commando who, constantly and abrasively, gives all of her comrades shit for no discernible reason. There is a saying that nobody ever sets out to make a bad movie. Maybe not, but Bruno Mattei also did not set out to make a good movie here, according to all the evidence. It's a cash grab, pure and simple, but a pretty enjoyable one. Fans of pure 80s Italian genre cheese will find much to appreciate in *Shocking Dark*, but the film can really only be appreciated from that perspective.

Severin Films has provided *Shocking Dark* with a new 2K transfer which renders the film much more visually pleasing than it ever deserved to be, full of shiny 80s colors and vivid foam and plastic props that nearly jump off the screen. Extras include a couple of featurette interviews. One features Fragasso and Drudi, who seem downright embarrassed about even being associated with this picture (they also wrote *Troll 2*), but sheepishly shrug and discuss how and why it was made. The other interview features Geretta Geretta who appears to have had a lot of fun working on the film, and as a Portland, Oregon native with a good number of 80s Italian genre credits, probably has a lot more stories to tell.

Chris Herzog



HORRORS OF MALFORMED MEN Directed by Teruo Ishii (1969) Arrow Films Blu-ray

Prolific director of Japanese genre material, including various Yakuza pictures, pinku eiga erotica, the first six Super Giant super hero epics, and plenty of other crime and action pictures, Teruo Ishii dropped *Horrors of Malfomed Men* on an unsuspecting public on Halloween 1969, and the world of Asian cinema changed forever. Well, perhaps it should have, but filmgoers apparently had no idea what to make of the picture's queasy grotesqueries and modern dance-inspired surreal lyricism. *Horrors* made little impression at the box office and was subsequently buried in the vaults by executives fearful of a *Freaks*-like backlash against the film's focus on human deformity. It finally received a solid DVD release from Synapse more than a decade ago, and now Arrow brings us a beefed-up Blu-ray presentation which really does this intriguing film justice.

Horrors is based on stories by Edogawa Rampo, a sort of Japanese version of Poe, Conan Doyle, and Edgar Wallace all rolled into one. Rampo is sufficiently revered in Japan that his name is included in the film's original title, but I will leave it to the literary scholars to determine what portion of the glorious horrors we see on the screen can be attributed to Rampo, and how much came straight from the fevered brain of Ishii, who also co-wrote the script. Although the film begins with a disorienting cold open in a chaotic mid-1920s mental institution women's ward, it soon morphs into what appears to be a lightly macabre but otherwise conventional amnesia noir with Gothic undertones.

Our protagonist Hirosuke (Teruo Yoshida, *Goke*, *Body Snatcher from Hell*) is a male resident of the asylum who knows he is a medical student but otherwise has very sketchy memories of his past. After making his escape and attempting to chase down a few clues, he stumbles into a murder frame-up and flees to the countryside, where learns from newspaper photos that he is a dead ringer for the recently deceased scion of a prominent but dissipated local family. Determined to investigate further, Hirosuke, (rather drastically, it must be said) impersonates the dead man, claiming to have crawled out of the grave after recovering from his illness. The stunned family embraces him, although a few suspicions remain. After blackmail notes appear and more murder ensues, Hirosuke decides to get to the bottom of things once and for all by voyaging to an outlying island where Jogoro (Tatsumi Hijikata), the family's patriarch, has set up his own Colonel Kurtz-like private kingdom with an army of followers. It is here that the film takes a hard left turn, replacing the trappings of its atmospheric but earthbound detective story with pure nightmare fuel.

Tatsumi Hijikata was a founder and prime mover of a genre of modern dance known as Bhuto, a post-War development which embraced absurdism and transgression, and his physical performance here embraces the form completely, with Jogoro scuttling about the frame like a demented crab in first appearance in the film. Jogoro's followers are also played by Bhuto dancers in full Avant Garde costume with an array