

## THE UNCANNY

Directed by Denis Heroux  
(1977) Severin Films Blu-ray / DVD

From 1968's *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* through 1974's well-received *From Beyond the Grave*, Amicus producers Milton Subotsky and Max J. Rosenberg were known as THE men behind the "anthology" thrillers. Unfortunately, not even the relative popularity of such omnibus packages could keep the studio afloat as explicit mainstream American horror imports (such as *The Exorcist*) forced smaller production houses to up the ante accordingly. After Amicus closed its doors, Rosenberg kept busy in the lucrative American film market (as producer and promoter) for the rest of his life, while Subotsky eventually parlayed his options on various unrealized projects into a retirement package (he was officially credited as an executive producer on the Stephen King vehicles *Cat's Eye*—itself an anthology—and *Maximum Overdrive* for selling back the rights to the King stories he owned). In between, however, he did his best to keep the multi-story format alive on screen. His final producer credit appears on 1981's cult favorite *The Monster Club*, but before that there was this all-but-forgotten Canadian co-production which went straight to *The CBS Late Movie* on these shores. Denis Heroux, director of 1976's highly unpleasant *Naked Massacre*, took the chair one last time for this mild-by-comparison thriller before turning his attention exclusively to producing (his most acclaimed release being 1980's *Atlantic City*).

Publisher Ray Milland indulges nervous journalist Wilbur (as played by Peter Cushing and whom he takes for a harmless conspiracy-theory crackpot) as the latter does his best to persuade him to release his latest manuscript to the reading public . . . before it's too late! Wilbur claims to have collected absolute proof that cats—domestic felines, to be specific—are evil and plotting to dominate the human race (tell us something we don't know!). Naturally, Wilbur's proof comes in the form of three separate stories . . .

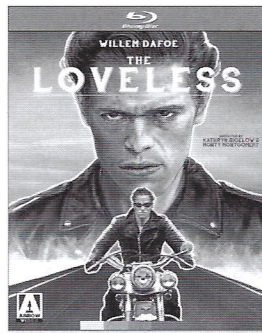
"London 1912." Wealthy dowager Miss Malkin (Joan Greenwood) changes her will to bequeath her estate to the care and feeding of her multitude of cats, much to the dismay of her irresponsible son Michael (Simon Williams). Michael, however, just happens to be having an affair with housemaid Janet (Susan Penhaligon), and he cajoles her to steal the only copy of the new will from the bedridden old biddy while she's sleeping. Things, of course, aren't that simple, and Janet finds herself faced with a dead employer and an army of angry felines who have no intention of letting her touch the will OR leave the mansion. Oh, but what are *they* supposed to eat in the meantime? This one takes a while to get moving but does pay off with some remarkably gruesome moments.

"Quebec Province 1975." Poor orphaned Lucy (Katrina Holden) comes to live on her aunt and uncle's sprawling estate. Much to Auntie (Alexandra Stewart)'s displeasure, Lucy insists on bringing her beloved cat Wellington with her. Far more troubling for Lucy is the constant bullying and humiliation she endures at the hands of her spoiled cousin Angela (familiar British child actress Chloe Franks is best remembered for chucking a voodoo doll of Christopher Lee into the fireplace in *The House That Dripped Blood*). What Angela doesn't know is that Lucy has access to certain books and relics left behind by her late family, and Wellington seems quite "familiar" with their workings. While this tale of supernatural comeuppance serves up sufficient satisfaction, it's all too obvious that the cat was shoehorned into a story that could just as easily have been told without it in order to make this segment fit the overall theme.

"Hollywood 1936." Donald Pleasence hams it up as an egotistical horror star who arranges a convenient "accident" involving a certain torture device associated with Edgar Allan Poe to rid himself of his nagging wife, the better to start afresh with ingénue Samantha Eggar. And as if he hasn't already done enough to incur the wrath of the late Missus' cat, he treats her surprise litter of kittens to a "burial at sea" (as appalling as that sounds, it takes place completely off-screen as a throwaway gag completely in keeping with such an over-the-top character as anyone with the name "Valentine De'ath" would have to be). The cat serves up fitting revenge in a plot twist brazenly appropriated from Bram Stoker's short story, "The Squaw."

As written by Michel Perry, *The Uncanny* mistakenly believes that its central gimmick will compel on its own. However, as the cats in the various stories do nothing but provide E.C. Comics-style justice to a bunch of rotters, there's no substance to the suggestion that cats are at all "evil" or that any decent folks have anything to fear from them; as such, much as it's always nice to have Milland and Cushing around, the framework story falls completely flat while the individual tales, while occasionally amusing, come off as flat and predictable. Still, fans of the anthology thriller and cast completists will certainly want this title in their collections, and Severin has served up a perfectly acceptable transfer of a film that was never razor-sharp to begin with. A trailer and an enjoyable contemporary recollection by Susan Penhaligon (the segment is called "The Cat's Victim," so it's too late for spoiler warnings) account for the extras.

Shane M. Dallmann



## THE LOVELESS

Directed by Kathryn Bigelow  
And Monty Montgomery  
(1981) Arrow Video Blu-ray

A retro, rockabilly-themed drama with an eclectic cast and creative team, *The Loveless* is an amalgamation of an AIP biker flick, an art house experiment and *American Graffiti*.

Written and directed by first timers Kathryn Bigelow (Oscar winning director of *The Hurt Locker* and cult fave *Near Dark*) and future David Lynch producer Monty Montgomery (*Wild at Heart*), *The Loveless* owes a lot to *The Wild One* and bears at least a superficial, Technicolor-drenched resemblance to Coppola's *The Outsiders* that hit screens a year earlier.

A founding member of New York's experimental theater The Wooster Group, Willem Dafoe was fired from Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* a year before joining the cast of *The Loveless* in his first starring role. Dafoe plays Vance, the defacto leader of a motorcycle gang stopping in a small southern town and wreaking havoc while en route to a Daytona, Florida motorcycle race. Dafoe is striking and polished in a role that would have jump started his screen career had the film garnered any attention when first released.

Also along for the ride is rockabilly singer Robert Gordon. Gordon initially made his name as an outlier during the early days of NYC punk rock. Gordon's musical debut had him fronting the Tuff Darts, a post-glitter outfit that was a regular at CBGB. Gordon soon jettisoned the Tuff Darts and teamed up with 50s fuzz-guitar god Link Wray for a series of rockabilly revival discs that were precise and earnest. Gordon also provides a large share of the soundtrack tunes for *The Loveless*. Despite Gordon's usual "authentic" sound, the featured songs are rather contemporary by 80s standards. A bit anachronistic for a period flick peppered with a few genuine oldies and some generic 50s numbers blaring from the prominent neon-lit jukebox.

Gordon certainly had a built-in "look." He had a thousand-yard stare and a sullen rebel countenance that was his stock in trade long before he ever stepped onto a movie set. He's a passable actor and holds his own even when he isn't given much to do.

The film is surprisingly restrained for a biker flick even when you take into account Bigelow's origins in the Museum of Modern Art film program. There are a lot of artsy slow burns and some gorgeous cinematography (via Doyle Smith), but everything is just a tad too colorful and slickly packaged. The fact that most of the action takes place in broad daylight sometimes gives the whole affair a *Happy Days* feel when you're hoping for something more along the lines of Kenneth Anger's equally bright and shiny biker homage *Scorpio Rising* that combined the requisite art house look with some genuine menace. Some of the moody, neon-lit diner scenes here hit the stark and atmospheric notes that David Lynch would later put to good effect in *Twin Peaks*. And while it's difficult to assign credit (or blame) with any specificity in a film with dual directors, *The Loveless* does feel like an antecedent to Bigelow's later works. She gives actors plenty of space and is not prone to showy camera moves or fearful of letting a passing glance stand in for fancy exposition.

A gang of bikers taking a reluctant respite in a one-stoplight town is a pretty standard exploitation road map. As you might expect, Dafoe and company are not exactly greeted with open arms by the townsfolk. Of course there's always one undersexed exception and here it takes the form of pouty teenage ingénue Telena and her spiffy new Corvette. Telena is played with aplomb by Marin Kanter, an effective performer with a slim resume who first hit screens alongside Diane Lane in the cult favorite *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains*.

For most of its length, *The Loveless* is content with its own restrained and somewhat lethargic mood. It's not until the climax that we get to see some real action that fulfills the promises made by a trailer filled with roaring Harley's and leather jackets. The film ends on an unsurprisingly violent note with everyone getting some sort of final reel-worthy comeuppance with a bit of moral ambiguity thrown in for good measure.

Bigelow is suspiciously absent from the otherwise excellent and extensive supplemental material included in this release. The reclusive Robert Gordon sits down for a rare interview as does Willem Dafoe. The often intense Dafoe is affable, honest and wistful about his work on the film. Co-writer/director Monty Montgomery steps up to bat in Bigelow's absence with a commentary track moderated by the knowledgeable and reliable Elijah Drenner, an editor and director of the excellent documentary *That Guy Dick Miller*.

The transfer, looking stellar and crisp, was taken from the original negative and supervised by Montgomery. No small feat for an overlooked independent feature like this. Bigelow's own *Near Dark* suffered for years through numerous shoddy transfers culled from inferior video masters. The oft-cited rumor was that the original film elements were lost. (For the record, this oft-told tale was debunked in the booklet accompanying Anchor Bay's 2002 pristine *Near Dark* re-release.)

Kevin Dougherty