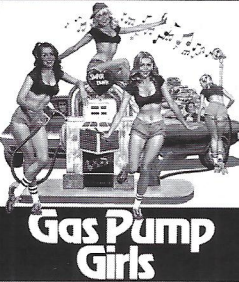


You'll love the service they give...



GAS PUMP GIRLS

Directed by David A. Davies
(1979) Scorpion Releasing Blu-ray

As raunchy as the title sounds, *Gas Pump Girls* is a fairly fluffy comedy that just barely earns its 'R' rating with a few instances of nudity, but not much in the way of softcore, or any-core, sex. Still, the title is an attention grabber and looked pretty enticing on drive-in marquees. An independent production picked up and released by Cannon in 1979, the picture was still playing on outdoor screens nearly a decade later and seems to have been a moneymaker. It may also be of interest to classic film buffs due to a few interesting

casting choices, as well as to fans of Seventies "cheerleader"-type teen sexploitation pictures, as long as they don't demand too much sex in their plottation.

The plot centers around the plight of hapless Uncle Joe, played by Huntz Hall of the Bowery Boys/ East Side Kids/ Dead End Kids/ etc. It's nice to see a late-career performance from Hall, who seems to be in good spirits here and not particularly sad or decrepit at the age of only 58. He had acted sporadically since the Bowery Boys series ended in the late fifties, scoring a decent part in Ken Russell's *Valentino* (1977), but otherwise appearing mainly in a string of one-off television appearances that continued until he called it a day in the early nineties. Unfortunately, the script of *Gas Pump Girls* doesn't give him a lot to do, or even much in the way of a personality for his character. Uncle Joe basically exists to set the plot in motion. It seems his run-down old service station is being squeezed out of business by the big, corporate gas plaza across the street. When a heart attack (or something) confines him to bed, apparently sealing the fate of his station, his niece June (Kirsten Baker) and her free-spirited high school friends decide to give the place a Hooters-like makeover and run it themselves, attracting customers by wearing skimpy clothing, bending over a lot, and tossing around every double entendre you can think of that involves pumping gas.

After unexpectedly belting out a song in the middle of a non-musical film, June gathers her gal pals, some boyfriends, and a totally out-of-place leather-jacketed, doo-wop singing greaser gang (I think someone saw the box office returns from *Grease* in *Variety* during pre-production) and turns the gas station into party central. They start making serious bank, until the inevitable pushback from their corporate competitor commences. Some of the interference comes in the form of two more interesting casting choices: Mike Mazurki and Joe E. Ross as a couple of old school hoodlums who show up to push the kids around. A welcome presence in any picture, Mazurki was a former pro-wrestler who parlayed his tough guy persona and trademark deadpan delivery into a long, rich acting career. He had significant roles in a number of indispensable *noir* classics like *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Nightmare Alley* (1947), and *Night and the City* (1950) and usually played either dead-eyed, soulless killers or loveable lunks. He also made into both *Dick Tracy* (1945) and *Dick Tracy* (1990). Joe E. Ross was that guy who always said, "Ooh . . . Ooh . . ."

Gas Pump Girls was produced by first-time producer David A. Davies and directed by first-time director Joel Bender, who started out on the project as just a scriptwriter and spent most of his subsequent career as a writer and film editor. They did manage to rope in a fairly experienced cinematographer, Nicholas Josef Von Sternberg. Yes, son of that Von Sternberg. Von Sternberg the Younger was an exploitation shooting machine, with *Dolemite* (1975) and *Petey Wheatstraw* (1977) under his belt. The same year he shot *Gas Pump Girls*, he also worked on *Tourist Trap* and *Mistress of the Apes*. I hope his dad was proud. Honestly, I can't say there's anything distinctive about the cinematography here. It's professional, competent, and the camera is always in the right place. While it has plenty of California gloss, the picture was shot in Sacramento, depriving it of the atmospheric and enjoyable SoCal beach-and-boulevard scenery found in similar pictures made by New World and Crown International.

It is colorful and upbeat, however. Bender notes on the commentary track that he wanted the whole thing to have the feel of an *Archie* comic, except, you know, with breasts. Other notable cast members include Cheech's then-wife, Rikki Marin and former *Welcome Back, Kotter* sweatog and *Van Nuys Boulevard* (1979) cruiser, Dennis Bowen, who had in fact played Archie Andrews in a couple of TV specials.

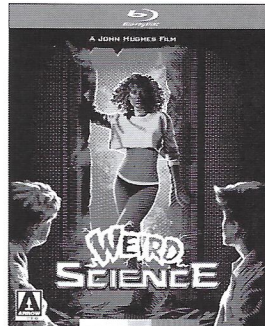
After sparring a few rounds with the rival station, the girls and guys decide to take their case directly to the head of the massive conglomerate that owns it, infiltrating the tight security in its monolithic headquarters by dressing up as Arabs. It likely doesn't come as a surprise to learn that everything turns out OK. *Gas Pump Girls* is about as light as a sex comedy can get and can probably be safely bypassed by most viewers unless any of the various elements described above sound appealing. Almost none of the comedy is actually funny and the film is a little too competently made and conventional to have much "bad movie" appeal. Undoubtedly, some will still enjoy it for what it is.

For those who do decide to join the party, Scorpion Releasing's Blu-ray presents the film in a bright, clean transfer that keeps skin tones natural and pulls out a fairly colorful picture. The DTS-HD 2.0 Mono soundtrack gives plenty of body to the generic seventies pop/disco soundtrack. Extras include a director's commentary with Bender amiably recounting the film's production and a short video featurette in which he also appears. A few trailers for this and some other features from the same era complete the disc. It's difficult to imagine this picture getting, or deserving, a better release.

Chris Herzog

WEIRD SCIENCE

Directed by John Hughes
(1985) Arrow Video Blu-ray



The third film to be directed by John Hughes after he established himself with the sweetly but broad teen comedy *Sixteen Candles* (1984), and more sobering *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Weird Science* (borrowing its copyrighted title from comic book publisher William Gaines) plunges deep

into its conceit: a horny fantasy for two teenage boys.

Anthony Michael Hall plays Gary while Ilan Mitchell-Smith is Wyatt, two Chicago suburban nerds - who all too easily—create the perfect female (in mind, in body) from their computer one boring weekend night following a screening of *The Bride of Frankenstein*. None of it makes sense scientifically, but with a montage set to the Oingo Boingo track, some bizarre imagery, the audience learns not to question it. Especially when cover girl model Kelly LeBrock emerges bathed in pink light and a skimpy outfit (the iconic midriff top and bikini briefs), asking our two protagonists what they'd like to do first. Lisa is her name, and in true *I Dream of Jeannie* fashion, she's there to do their bidding. Only with a PG-13 rating, the content can be much more suggestive.

The concept is incredibly sexist and offensive in today's more conscientious world, especially its casual deployment of some homophobic slang and racist caricatures depicted by two characters we're supposed to like. Somehow *Weird Science* has remained one of those films that gets a pass—maybe due to its constant cable airings in the late 80s and 90s? A great question, but one I'm not prepared to answer here.

As far as complications go for Gary and Wyatt, there are two high school bullies (Robert Downey Jr and Robert Rusler) making their life hell at the local mall and Wyatt's brother Chet (Bill Paxton, the definition of scene-chewing), an eager army type who thinks nothing of extorting his sibling. It's all small stakes - nothing life or death—but Hughes couches even the ultimate sexual fantasy into something more conservative: Lisa is there to teach our boys a lesson in humanity and self-respect and, chiefly, earn girlfriends (Suzanne Snyder, Judie Aronson) much more their speed.

John Hughes was no doubt on a hot streak in 1985, an auteur for the suburban mall teenager writing characters any type could relate to. In *Weird Science*, he's having some fun—the picture is all id, and doesn't over think itself.

Arrow's 2019 Blu-ray comes in two forms, including a Steelbook with original theatrical poster art. It's an exclusive transfer in 4K from original elements, so you can be sure the film has never looked as good as it does here. Technically, there are three versions of the film: Theatrical (94 min), Extended (97 min) and the TV-safe version (94 min), with minor dialogue edits to keep everything suitable for home viewing.

"It's Alive! Resurrecting *Weird Science*" is an archival piece from about a decade ago, produced by Universal for their DVD. It contains an interview with Michael Hall as well as the writer-of-the-moment Diablo Cody (fresh off *Juno*).

As far as debut extras, there's a number of new interviews: "Casting *Weird Science*," with Jackie Burch (audio only), "Dino The Greek," with John Kapelos (a minor role as the swanky Greek lounge lizard in the bar-hopping scene), "Chet Happens," with special makeup creator Craig Reardon, "Fantasy and Microchips," with editor Chris Lebenzon, and, "Ira Newborn Makes The Score"—with Newborn, the film's composer. Theatrical trailers, radio and TV and a PDF of the shooting script round out the bonus features.

Arrow's first pressing contains two welcome essays by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas and Amanda Reyes. It's terrific to have the female perspective on what could be a troubling work to consider in 2019.

John Hughes would continue to write for the teen market—*Pretty in Pink* (1986), *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987)—but after *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), he would set his sights on more adult comedy riffs, like *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987). *Weird Science* is the oddest of the bunch, but with its quick pace and one more role for Anthony Michael Hall's rogues gallery of teenage misfits, it's a welcome if problematic addition.

Aaron Graham