

## SCALPEL

Directed by John Grissmer  
(1977) Arrow Video Blu-ray

Southern Gothic is a subgenre of Gothic storytelling that addresses and explores elements that are unique to Southern culture. Brooding castles are replaced with Spanish Moss-draped trees and plantations. The quaint village becomes the isolated small town. But the madness, taboos and sinister secrets remain the same. The subgenre runs the gamut from some of Hollywood's most respected films (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1951; *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1962; *Deliverance*, 1972) to its cheapest and most exploitative (hello, Hershell Gordon Lewis). John Grissmer's *Scalpel* will certainly never find its place alongside *Cape Fear* (1962, 1991) or *Sling Blade* (1996), but it's nowhere near as tawdry as Harold Daniels's *Poor White Trash* (1957) or Lewis's *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964).

The film begins—in true “old dark house” fashion—with the reading of the Thorndike family patriarch's will. The assembled snipes and vultures are shocked to hear that everything has been left to Heather (Judith Chapman, whose television credits include *Buck Rogers in the 25<sup>th</sup> Century*, *General Hospital*, *B.J. and the Bear*, and many others), who hasn't been seen in over a year. While the family is clueless about Heather's motives, the viewer is not: Heather's father, the sullen and egotistical plastic surgeon Dr. Phillip Reynolds (Robert Lansing; *The 4D Man*, 1959; Gary Seven from the *Star Trek* episode “Assignment: Earth,” *The Nest*, 1988), killed her boyfriend. In flashback we discover he paddled his boat serenely around the lake as his wife drowned. Phillip doesn't tolerate rivals for his daughter's affections.

Not long after the reading of the will, Phillip discovers a young stripper who's been severely beaten (a scene that looks and feels like it was lifted out of a low budget roughie). Phillip takes “Jane Doe” (Judith Chapman) to his clinic to treat her injuries. However, his obsession with his daughter causes him to reconstruct Jane's face in Heather's image. At this point first-time director John Grissmer (*Blood Rage*, 1987) seems to be taking us into *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*, 1960) territory, but that is not the case. Instead, he molds a Southern Gothic version of George Bernard Shaw's “*Pygmalion*.” Phillip teaches the recuperating Jane every intimate detail about the Thorndike family so he can pass her off as Heather. They plan to split the inheritance as soon as Jane's identity as Heather is confirmed and she takes possession of the money.

But their plan begins to unravel. Uncle Bradley (Arlen Dean Snyder; *Prison*, 1987) grows suspicious, leading Phillip to add another homicide to his list. Phillip begins acting on his incestuous impulses with Jane/Heather; and as you've probably guessed by now, it isn't long before the real Heather shows up, setting up a *ménage-a-trois* of madness, manipulation and murder. Only one person gets to walk away with the inheritance, but will it be Phillip, Jane or Heather?

*Scalpel* (originally titled *False Face*) doesn't waste time developing and revealing character motivations. We know from the outset that Reynolds is a bastard and a murderer, Bradley is the family drunk, and the entirety of the Thorndike clan is riddled with jealousies, hypocrisy and cruelty. Instead, Grissmer invests his time with the machinations of Phillip/Jane/Heather, deftly giving the film a seedy-but-respectable veneer—not unlike the classic Southern Gothic *Hush* . . . *Hush*, *Sweet Charlotte* (1964).

Arrow Video offers two presentations of the film. The first is the Lachman version, named for Edward Lachman, the original director of photography, who was intimately involved in its creation. Lachman has reproduced his vision with a transfer that is heavy on greens and yellows, creating an entirely different tone to the film. The humid colors give a visual heaviness to the scorching Southern days, and imbue interior scenes with a discomforting, scuzzy aura. The second option (the Arrow version) is the standard “one light” approach (where everything is given the same tonal quality). Both versions are a pleasure to the eye and Arrow has arranged it so viewers can toggle between versions for comparison.

Film historian Richard Harland Smith is on hand for a solo audio commentary. Smith's prodigious research is evident as he draws out the most subtle nuances of setting and music, delves into the details of even the most minor supporting actors, provides historical and social context, shares a wealth of information on regional Atlanta-based performers of the time, and leaves no stone unturned in his quest to inform and enlighten. You'll come to the end of it with your brain feeling like it's been drinking from a fire hose! The only hitch is that the commentary sounds as if it were recorded in a tinny, enclosed area. However, the echo-y quality does become less distracting as the commentary proceeds. Smith's commentary accompanies the Arrow version of the film.

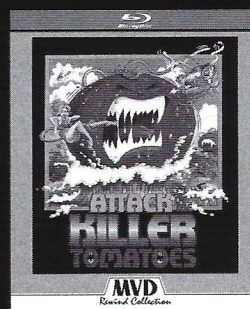
As is standard operating procedure for Arrow Video releases, *Scalpel* gets plenty of quality extra material. “The Cutting Edge” is a new 14-minute interview with Grissmer. He is likeable and engaging as he shares his memories of the production and how it came about. “Dead Ringer” is a 17 m., 20 s. interview with Judith Chapman. She is an animated bundle of fun who reminisces about her favorite scenes, and brings her own Southern heritage (she was born in South Carolina) out to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the film. “Southern Gothic,” a fifteen-and-a-half minutes interview with the aforementioned DP Edward Lachman, offers the technical perspective on the lighting and coloring of the film. Lachman reiterates the value of involving DPs and directors in the restoration of their films whenever possible. Rounding out the extras are a theatrical trailer, stills gallery, and reversible liner art. The first pressing of the package also includes a booklet with new essays on the film.

Given its Gothic trappings, madness, and sense of moldering doom, had *Scalpel* been made fifteen or twenty years earlier, it would've fit nicely onto a double-bill with one of Roger Corman's Poe films, or alongside Hammer's *Paranoid* (1963), which also took Josephine Tey's novel *Brat Farrar* as its source material.

J. Todd Kingree

## ATTACK OF THE KILLER TOMATOES

Directed by John DeBello  
(1978) MVD Rewind Collection Blu-ray



Take any Bert I. Gordon epic from the 1950s and substitute tomatoes for radiation charged grasshoppers, ants, leeches, hedgehogs or shrews and you have the narrative of *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*. We've seen this before, more times than needed. That said, filmmakers J. Stephen Peace, John DeBello and Costa Dillon deserve credit for following the essential plot line of the films they're making

fun of. From the opening scene of a woman being attacked by a tomato and later discovered by baffled police, “That's not blood, it's tomato juice!”, through the massing of troops and weapons to fight the climatic, salvation of the entire earth battle to the sudden realization of how to defeat the alien horde, *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* demonstrates that the creators did their homework.

It has been suggested by some film critics that *Airplane!*, which was released two years later was essentially *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* with a budget. While that assessment perhaps gives *Attack* too much credit for inventing a genre, there is some truth to the statement. Watching the movie now is something like listening to pre-Ringo era recordings of The Beatles. You can hear a lot of the elements that would become great, but everything wasn't quite in place, pieces were missing or not joined properly. *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* is based almost completely on the non-sequitur style of humor, silly sight gags, extremely dry humor, and double entendre rule the day. Some of the comedy is decidedly old fashioned, although for many of us of a certain age, calling a film released in 1978 “old fashioned” may be painful. When the military and scientists who are tasked with defeating the tomato menace first meet, the only available room is the size of a small closet similar to The Marx Brothers in *A Night At The Opera*, so they must crawl over top of the table and each other to find their seats. Yes, people crammed into a small space and constantly bumping into each other is still funny, although the shelf life for that kind of gag is a few minutes at most. A car chase scene results in one of the heroes being dragged down the street behind the automobile, a visual gag straight out of the Keystone Cops that, while it doesn't detract from the film, doesn't add much either. It could be argued that *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* was also on the forefront of the DIY movement that energized punk rock in the late 70s and early 80s. While there are a lot of albums, movies, zines, and books that utilized that spirit of independence to create something special without the interference of studio executives or editors, there's also plenty of material that could have benefited from a strong editorial hand trimming those scenes, songs, or chapters that seemed inspired at the moment, but have not survived the test of time.

The Blu-ray edition of the film provides a much cleaner picture than the previous Rhino DVD, but it is not without flaws—the nighttime battle scenes are grainy and the stop motion scenes are somewhat erratic. Then again, we're talking about a *Killer Tomatoes* film, not a Cecil B. DeMille production. The extras on the MVD Rewind edition are excellent, informative and entertaining.

*Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* helped pave the way for many extremely silly films to come. Its popularity spawned a TV series *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* on the Fox Kids network (1991-92), sequels *Return of the Killer Tomatoes!* (1988), *Killer Tomatoes Strike Back!* (1991), and, *Killer Tomatoes Eat France!* (1992). All films in the *Tomatoes* series were directed by John DeBello).

Kevin Slick