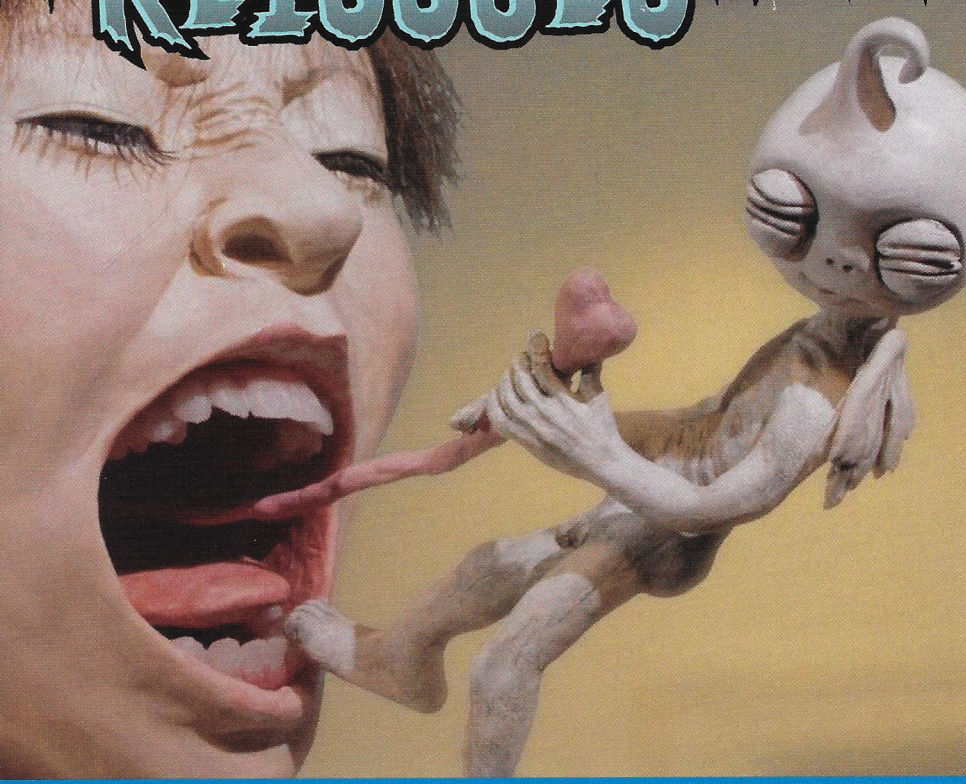


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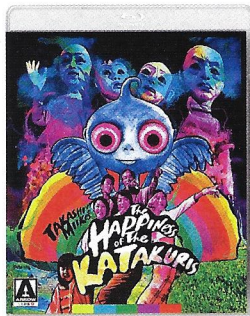


THE MIKE SHALL INHERIT THE BIRTH

THE HAPPINESS OF THE KATAKURIS (2001) Blu-ray

Starring Kenji Sawada, Keiko Matasuzaki and Shinji Takeda
Directed by Takashi Miike
Written by Kikumi Yamagishi and Takashi Miike
Arrow Video

In 2001, Takashi Miike racked up a jaw-dropping eight directing credits across a variety of genres, including several hyper-violent Yakuza gangster films, the horrifyingly perverse *Visitor Q*, and the notorious action-comedy gore classic *Ichii the Killer*. He also squeezed in *The Happiness of the Katakuris*, a remake of the Korean dark comedy *The Quiet Family* (1998), which was the first feature film by Jee-Woon Kim, who would go on to make *A Tale of Two Sisters* and *I Saw the Devil (RM#108)*. But the two filmmakers have vastly different sensibilities, so Miike's take on the story includes a messy suicide, a sumo-sized man and his tiny lover dying during sex, a musical number involving rotting corpses and a seemingly non-sequitur clayma-



tion opening sequence in which a winged creature tears out a woman's uvula after falling in love with it.

As strange as that all sounds, the plot of film is straightforward. Katakuris patriarch Masao (famed musician Kenji Sawada) takes his wife, their adult son and daughter, her young daughter and grandpa to the country, where he's sunk everything he owns into a quaint inn. Business is bad but they're determined, so when all the guests start dying in a series of comedic mishaps, they hide the bodies in a nearby toxic swamp and carry on. With outside suspicions and inner familial tensions rising, Masao must keep everyone together. Their Hitchcockian cover-ups prove entertaining as hell.

Like many a Miike movie, *Katakuris* is driven by a weird energy resulting in unexpectedly bizarre, morbid or hilarious moments (or all three when gruesome corpses rise from the swamp to sing and dance). To help get your head around it, Arrow has packed its Blu-ray release with extras. There are interviews with Miike and cast members, a lengthy new Miike interview in which he discusses both the film and his overall career, a new making-of

doc, a commentary from Miike and another one from Miike expert and occasional *Rue Morgue* contributor Tom Mes, and Mes' half-hour audio essay on Miike's career. Even if you don't like this particular film, the disc is worth grabbing for these last two features, as Mes, who also co-founded the Japanese cinema site *midnight-eye.com*, fills his commentary with so much insight into both Miike and the Japanese film industry in general that it's like a film course.

It comes packaged in a suitably bonkers reversible cover featuring art by Twins of Evil, so you too can experience the happiness of the *Happiness of the Katakuris*.

DAVE ALEXANDER

GREEN EGGS AND HAM

CONTAMINATION (1980) Blu-ray

Starring Ian McCulloch, Louise Marleau and Siegfried Rauch
Directed by Luigi Cozzi
Written by Luigi Cozzi and Erich Tomek
Arrow Films

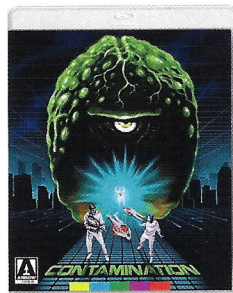
Just as Luigi Cozzi riffed heavily on *Star Wars* for his cult gem *Star Crash* (1978), his 1980 splatter flick *Contamination* purloined wholesale from *Alien*. The blatant cribbing is entirely befitting of Italian genre cinema, but Cozzi's gory adventure boasts a charmingly retro sci-fi serial vibe, as well. The scene in which scientist and heroine Colonel Stella Holmes (Louise Marleau) is deliberately trapped inside a room with a menacing critter actually pre-empts a similar moment of high tension in James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986). Did Big Jim catch the movie in some godforsaken grindhouse and take note?

Restored at 2K resolution from the original camera negative, *Contamination* is as good an illustration as any that Italian craftsmanship often transcended its low budgets. Even a mid-tier talent such as Cozzi could deliver thrills that, while derivative of a superior

product, always satisfied as genre pulp fiction and cult items.

Beginning much as *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (1979) does, in the harbour of New York after an opening montage of famous landmarks (something of an Italian staple), a ghost ship from the tropics has come ashore carrying deadly cargo. This time, it isn't the living dead, but a batch of green eggs from outer space. (Cozzi's dialogue supplied the ham...) The pulpy tone and race-against-time plot always keeps the movie engaging, even when it resorts to crackpot exposition to paper over narrative holes so wide they could accurately be described as gaping chasms.

Another noteworthy element is the score by Goblin (credited as "The Goblin"). It's very dif-



ferent from the group's famous work with Dario Argento and marked by extensive use of electronica and occasional jazz-inspired freak-outs. While nowhere near the electrifying quality of the legendary arrangements for *Deep Red* and *Suspiria*, it does give the movie added value.

Fans will certainly find much to enjoy in this new Blu-ray release - most of all, the beautiful HD transfer and eye-popping cover and interior art by *Rue Morgue's* Gary Pullin. Along with the ample bonus materials, *Contamination* has been afforded a level of admiration and respect that's genuinely heartwarming.

MARTYN CONTERIO

A MURDER OF 'CROWS

SCARECROWS (1988) Blu-ray

Starring Ted Vernon, Michael David Simms and Richard Vidan
Directed by William Wesley
Written by William Wesley, Richard Jefferies, Larry Stamper, et al.
Scream Factory

Anyone who remembers the horror movie scene back in 1988 will recall it as the Year of the Sequel. It seemed as though every studio was content with churning out franchise follow-ups rather than investing in new, original properties. But somewhere amidst *Friday the 13th Part VII: The New Blood*, *Halloween 4: The Return of Michael Myers*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master* and *Phantasm II*, *Scarecrows* appeared.

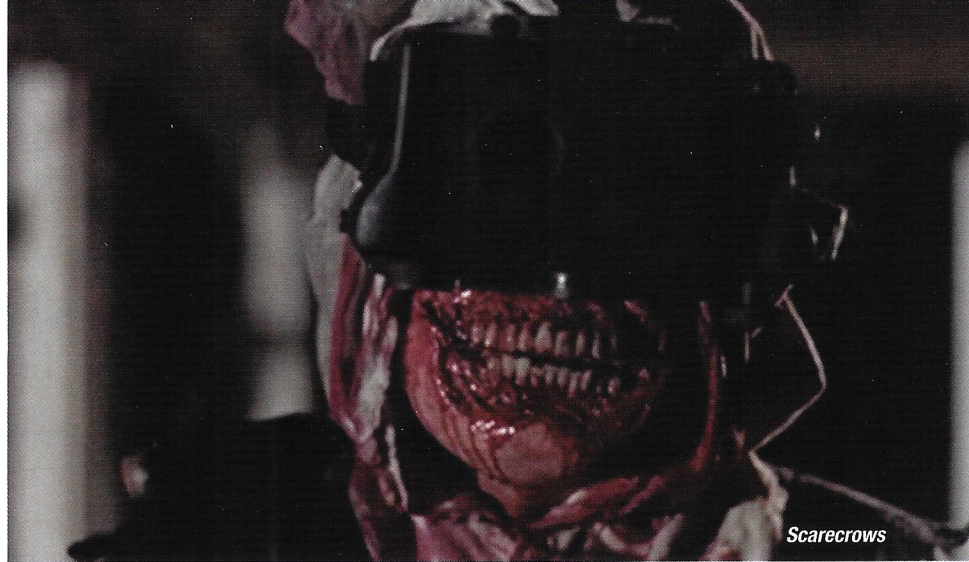
The action picks up right after a group of criminals have robbed the payroll of a US army base and hijacked a plane. Along the way, one of them betrays the others and parachutes out of the aircraft with all the loot. But his cronies manage to land the plane near what they think is an abandoned farm and go looking for him. The farm turns out to be not so abandoned though,

and soon the crooks discover that they're being hunted by dozens of scarecrows, which have come to life and are out for blood.

It's a very simple premise for a movie filmed on a shoestring budget by a bunch of teenagers who really

had no idea what they were getting themselves into. They did however make a particularly great choice in hiring eighteen-year-old Norman Cabrera to handle the special effects and design the iconic look of the killer scarecrows, whose menacing visages are the highlight of the film.

Once again, Scream Factory has put together a great package of extras, including interviews with Cabrera and actor Ted Vernon, who fondly reminisce about the many budgetary difficulties they had to overcome. And interviewer extraordi-



Scarecrows

naire Mike Felsher ties everything together with some great audio-commentary interviews with the DP, composer and one of the screenwriters.

Though *Scarecrows* suffers from some wooden acting and corny dialogue, it's still got great creature effects and lots of squishy kills, and is definitely a film for anyone who wants his scarecrows to be frightening and sadistic rather than frolicking on yellow brick roads.

LAST CHANCE LANCE

TWO CRAZY SUMMERS

SLEEPAWAY CAMP II: UNHAPPY CAMPERS (1988) Blu-ray

Starring Pamela Springsteen, Renée Estevez and Tony Higgins

SLEEPAWAY CAMP III: TEENAGE WASTELAND (1989)

Starring Pamela Springsteen, Tracy Griffith and Michael J. Pollard
Directed by Michael A. Simpson
Written by Fritz Gordon and Robert Hiltzik
Scream Factory

For a supposedly simple slasher, 1983's *Sleepaway Camp* is genuinely weird. A riff (some might say rip-off) of the *Friday the 13th* films, it sees staff and campers at Camp Arawak knocked off one by one. It's a serious-minded thriller with perverse sexual overtones, from the threat of pedophilic rape to that shock ending - spoiler alert - where the killer Angela (Felissa Rose) is revealed to be a boy (portrayed by a male actor in a terrifying mask of Rose's face), and the filmmakers show his penis to prove it.

Original writer/director Robert Hiltzik was commissioned to write a sequel, but his script proved too dark for producers wanting to replace weirdness with tits, blood and jokes. Enter director Michael A. Simpson and screenwriter Fritz Gordon, with newcomer

Pamela Springsteen (yes, Bruce's sister) stepping into Angela's bloodsoaked Tretorns.

Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers (1988) and *Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland* (1989) were filmed back to back in Georgia over six weeks, with *III* being written while *II* was shooting. Not surprisingly, given those conditions, the returns diminish, even as the body count increases.

Unhappy Campers finds Angela working as a counsellor at Camp Rolling Hills. She has had a sex change since we last saw her and has been paroled for her crimes, but she is still crazy and wasting kids left and right for promiscuity, drug use or just pissing her off.

Teenage Wasteland takes place a year later, with Angela killing and stealing the identity of a camper at New Horizons, which has sprung up on Rolling Hills' bloodied grounds. Here, rich snobs are paired with poor city kids in a social experiment in "togetherness." But Angela does not discriminate, picking off the rich and poor alike.

Sleepaway Camp is not a great film, but it is creepy. The sequels, however, traffic in lowest common denominator humour, gratuitous nudity and varying standards of gore. The sequel is superior in that regard, indulging in some crazy kills (drowning in faeces and leeches? Yuck), while *III* was hacked apart by the MPAA. It also looks like it was put together over a weekend - which it very nearly was. In its favour, Springsteen, while no great actress, delivers Angela's high camp lines with a positivity that borders on insane.

Once again Scream Factory has polished a turd to a high gloss, giving each film a writer/director commentary and fun retrospective featurettes. Too bad neither film warrants the treatment.

SEAN PLUMMER

