

# Video No. 179 WatchDOG<sup>®</sup>

25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue!



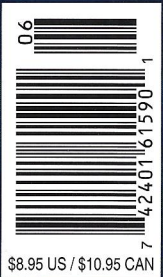
## PRICE & KARLOFF

*Battle on Blu-ray!*

## BOROWCZYK

## THE BABADOOK

## SOSKA SISTERS





# Arrow Films & Video Aiming for a Bullseye in America

By Neil Snowdon



**O**ver the last five years, Arrow Films & Video have built themselves from a solid label, putting out interesting films in flawed transfers, to one of the premiere DVD/BD labels in Europe. Whether restoring Lucio Fulci's **ZOMBIE FLESH EATERS** from the original camera negative, or rescuing the reputation of an unfairly maligned filmmaker with **CAMERA OBSCURA**, their Walerian Borowczyk box set [see p. 36], they have risen to the top of their field in a very short time through a combination of talent, passion, and a willingness to *listen* to their audience, taking heed of complaints.

For Director of Catalogue Distribution, Francesco Simeoni—the man with the five-year

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*Paloma Picasso in her only screen role, as the Countess Erzebet Bathory in IMMORAL TALES, one of many exciting Euro cult titles available from Arrow Films & Video.*

**“Arrow has been setting the standard** for catalog releases, especially in the genre area. For years, these movies were pretty much undervalued, but today I think everyone understands that the appeal of formerly marginal theatrical releases has increased a hundredfold. There are a lot of films released by marginal distributors for which there are no longer pristine materials from which to transfer. So it's basically a restoration issue, and Arrow has stepped up to the plate. I'm proud to be one of their titles.”

—Joe Dante, *THE 'BURBS*.

plan, who acquires almost everything for the label—it's a collaborative effort, between the Arrow team and their customers.

“We like to mix it up; a bit of horror with some Japanese stuff, some action and so on—but the sure-fire way to get more of what you want is to buy what's available. If you like Bava, buy it and we'll release more; if it's Corman, likewise, and so on. We monitor our numbers carefully, being a small



company with great ambitions. After all, the number of companies undertaking their own restorations, with as many extras as we do, can be counted on one hand with some fingers missing, as far as the UK goes. We do try to impress on people that support is important.”

And they've got it. Consumer support for Arrow product led directly to the crowning restoration achievement of 2014 with their Walerian Borowczyk box set.

“That was probably the riskiest project we've ever done,” says Simeoni. “Largely down to its scale—so many restorations, all at once, in a big box, by a filmmaker who was derided and completely misunderstood. We really went all in, and it was worrying at times, especially as the costs built up, but the Kickstarter [campaign] really helped, not just in terms of the funding but the awareness. I think that was a key thing. The icing on the cake, of course, was that the Kickstarter was a success and everything got restored rather than having a lame duck SD master, so that made the whole project that much sweeter.”

It's that same ground level support that has allowed Arrow to recently expand its operations into America, again via Kickstarter. If US labels have upped their game while this was in the pipeline, Simeoni still feels that Arrow has something extra to offer in Arrow's title selection, deluxe packaging (extensive booklets, or sometimes books) and, of course, the quality of their transfers and restoration work.

“When I attended film school, we still worked with film,” says Arrow's Head of Restoration and Technology Services, James White, chatting to VW about the need for an understanding of film history as well as production methods and technology when restoring a film for BD. “We shot, edited—and most importantly—*handled* film every day. We were able to have a physical, tangible relationship with the medium, to see what you could do with it, how you could damage it, how you could repair it. It sounds pretty simple, but it's not something that students generally get access to anymore. Digital technology is wonderful but it does take away that intimate, hands-on experience, so how is one supposed to learn about lab processing, printing, film stocks, except in an abstract way?”

“I guess the answer to that is to try to get work in a film archive. That's the path I took after I graduated from film school, at the George Eastman House in New York and it certainly opened up my mind to considering all these different aspects to film and film history I hadn't considered before. And I was

surrounded by the stuff! If one wanted to look at a film, you took the reels off the shelf and examined it on a bench. You compared different elements and learned the differences between negative and positive elements, as well as nitrate, acetate, polyester by the color, the feel, the smell. Most importantly you learned to respect the fragility of these elements and how easily they could be damaged if mis-handled, wound or stored incorrectly, left exposed to the trauma of humidity, temperature, etc. And from this you learned what an honor—what an absolute *privilege* it is—to have access to original film elements and how important it was to respect the artists who produced this work. And hopefully, this respect is what you bring along every time you're presiding over the restoration of a film today.”

Of Arrow's initial US releases, the one most likely to have VW readers licking their chops, is Mario Bava's **BLOOD AND BLACK LACE** [*Sei donne per l'assassino*, 1964]. VW editor/Bava biographer Tim Lucas was helpful in getting the lush, vibrant color scheme right, and White is overjoyed at the results.

“Lush is putting it mildly,” he beams. “Those colors really sing! Much as I love many of his other films, this feels like the culmination of so much of what Bava's cinema was about. The over-the-top color scheme is a true fever-dream, with deep reds and lurid purples contrasted with liquid blacks throughout. With the colors, the flowing camera-work, the music, the framing, the set design, the costumes, and the casting, you can feel that Bava was literally creating a new genre as he was making this picture.”

“This is the first Bava film we've done with no outside collaboration or reliance on someone else's master,” White continues. “It was an opportunity to really present Bava at his best. To do this right, there was really no substitute, we had to access the original negative. Of course, it's always a possibility that the negative will be in rough shape, even to the point of being unusable. But once we made the first set of scans I breathed a huge sigh of relief. The neg looked rich, vibrant, sharp and hadn't faded one bit. There was still plenty of work to do, but the foundation was sound.”

“Once we began grading we set our black levels and our highlights and started pushing our contrast and saturation levels, these gorgeously lurid reds and purples started popping into the images. The main thing was not to allow these colors to bleed into the blacks or the highlights, which should appear white. It's easy now to see the shortcomings of previous DVDs, and one of the things we immediately noticed when referencing some of these





Mary Arden is featured in this gorgeously restored frame grab from Arrow's Blu-ray of Mario Bava's *BLOOD AND BLACK LACE*.

is how much blue had been allowed to diminish these areas. The very specific color scheme Bava and his production team achieved by combination of lighting, gels and set design would be seriously compromised if you didn't allow for the blacks to be as rich as the reds.

"Tim's contribution was crucial here, he knows more about Bava and what his films should look like than pretty much anyone else walking the planet, so I wanted our presentation of B&BL to have his full approval. He responded to our first grading pass with a comprehensive set of notes and suggestions which proved incredibly valuable and ended up improving our grade in many ways."

Inevitably, there's still been some muttering on-line, with comparison to the German Anolis *Blutige Seide* DVD revealing slightly more image content on all four sides of the frame, but White is quick to nip those quibbles in the bud.

"The German transfer is actually incorrect as it clearly shows more image area than Bava intended and results in an overall unbalanced composition," he explains. "Basically, the German disc included the entire film image, including the bits you're not supposed to see. With regards to the 1.66:1 framing, I relied on Tim's technical listing in [MARIO BAVA] ALL THE COLORS OF THE DARK for this. We also discussed it when we worked on the grade

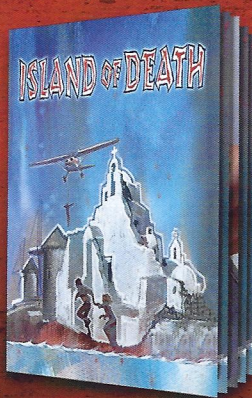
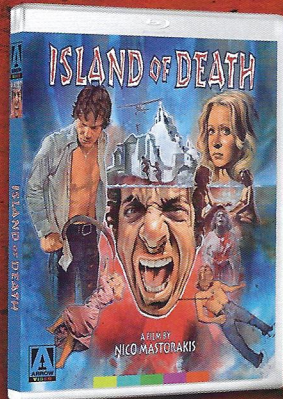
together. Even if I hadn't confirmed this with Tim, I would certainly have expected **BLOOD AND BLACK LACE** to be framed at 1.66:1, given its production date and its pan-European production origins. Like many films of the period, however, it's quite likely that prints may have been projected with both 1.66:1 and 1.85:1 mattes, depending on where they were being shown. But even a correct and balanced 1.85:1 framing would not include the dead space seen in the German DVD. 1.66:1 represents the original and correct framing for this title. Sure, we could have included the entire negative image with no framing/masking at all, but that wouldn't be historically accurate, nor fair to Bava, who clearly designed each elegant composition with such skill and craftsmanship."

**BLOOD AND BLACK LACE** was intended to be Arrow's second US/UK release and was encoded as a Region A/Region B disc. Though US release rights have evidently been challenged and thus postponed, the disc's standard and deluxe SteelBook editions are obtainable from UK outlets including Amazon.co.uk at very reasonable prices.

Now available on both sides of the Atlantic: Arrow's fully restored Blu-ray of Walerian Borowczyk's oft-censored **THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MISS OSBOURNE** (1981) with Udo Kier, Howard Vernon and Patrick Magee.



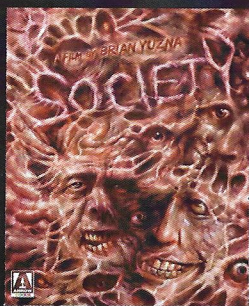
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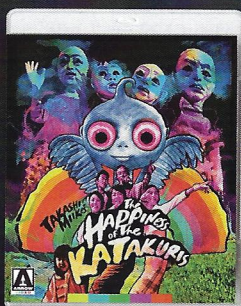
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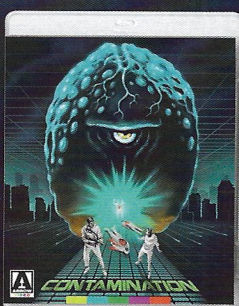
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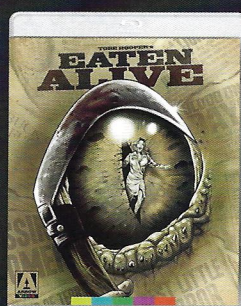
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