



THE GORE MET

MENU: FEEDING THE BEASTS



After redefining the modern horror film in 1974 with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Tobe Hooper needed work. In 1976, independent producer Mardi Rustam approached him about filming a script he had co-written. Hooper and *Chainsaw* scribe Kim Henkel reworked it and *Eaten Alive* (1976) lurched to life.

The story is loosely based on the crimes of Joe Ball, the “Bluebeard” of Texas, a serial killer who reputedly fed women to the alligators in the custom-built pit behind his bar (there was no evidence he disposed of his victims this way). The film’s plot, such as it is, concerns the deranged owner (Neville Brand) of a rundown hotel in a Texas swamp who occasionally feeds guests to the “Nile crocodile” he keeps in a pit beside the building. After he feeds the animal a prostitute who comes to stay after being kicked out of a local brothel for refusing to have anal sex with a rowdy redneck (Robert Englund), her father (Mel Ferrer) and sister (Crystin Sinclair) come looking for her. A dysfunctional married couple (Marilyn Burns and William Finley) and their daughter add to the body count. Meanwhile, the local sheriff (Stuart Whitman) is investigating disappearances in the area. Yelling and scythe swinging ensues.

Hooper’s cotton candy-colored nightmare has never received much respect, but Arrow Video’s superb Blu-ray release should change that. More mental than coherent, *Eaten Alive* is down and dirty fun. Brand sweats and mumbles and cuts down his clientele with farm tools before feeding them to his mostly unseen rubber reptile, Buck (Englund) is rarin’ to fuck, and Marilyn Burns is put through the ringer even more than in Hooper’s previous film.

The selling point, though, is the new, superb high-def transfer, as most of the extras are ported over from the Dark Sky DVD.

Now, I’ve never shied away from the rape/revenge subgenre. *Last House on the Left* (1972), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), the 2010 remake, the

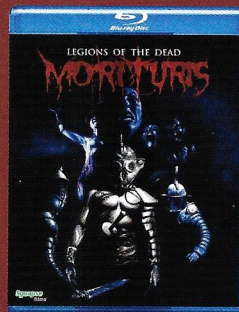


Morituris



2013 sequel to the remake, *Chaos* (2005) and, most recently, *Revenge is Her Middle Name* (2011), have all stained this page. They’re exploitive and visceral modern morality plays that appeal to our reptilian notion of vengeance. An innocent woman is sexually brutalized, recovers, and exacts violent retribution on her tormentors. The victim-turned-vigilante triumphantly hacking off penises or shoving shotguns up the rectums of the men who violated her is powerfully cathartic. But when you remove the revenge aspect from the formula, you end up with something like Raffaele Picchio’s *Morituris* (2011).

The opening prologue is shot Super 8mm-style. A young couple, their two children and the father’s brother hike into the ruins of a Roman temple for a picnic on an idyllic summer afternoon. The uncle leads his young niece into the woods to molest her and is struck down by a mysterious attacker. The whirring camera then pans over the rest of the family, who have been similarly slaughtered. An animated credit sequence shows five Roman gladiators escaping their chains and impaling babies on spears and raping women, before being buried alive in a pit sealed with a stone engraved with the warning *Hic sunt leones* (“Here be lions”).



For the bulk of the film, three seemingly charming Italian men invite a pair of Romanian women they’d met in a club the night before to a rave in the woods so they can viciously beat and rape them. They inadvertently arouse the attention of the doomed gladiators, to their peril.

Touted as a return to the gritty Italian exploitation films of the ’70s and ’80s, *Morituris* lacks the inherent moral compass displayed by films of that era. Even *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), arguably the most reprehensible example of Italian exploitation filmmaking of that time, had an underlying message. If there’s one in *Morituris*, it’s “never underestimate the nature of evil,” as related in a telephone conversation by the presumed offsite leader of this gang of rapists, who later shoves a tube in a vagina so a mouse can crawl into it.

The gore, by Italian FX maestro Sergio Stivaletti, comes with the monsters in the last third. There’s a decapitation, a gender-bending recreation of Christ’s last moments and a hammer-smashed face. The location is atmospheric and the lighting and cinematography suitably eerie.

The Synapse Blu-ray is superb, but only includes the theatrical trailer as an extra.

If anything, these two films demonstrate that humour and/or vengeance provide balance to the uglier cinematic deeds of monstrous men. ☠