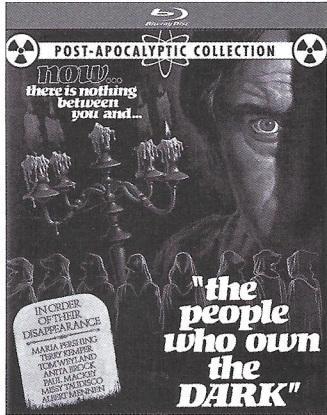


THE PEOPLE WHO OWN THE DARK

Directed by León Klimovsky
(1976) Code Red Blu-ray



There's no better way to totally ruin a de Sadian sex party than with a well-timed atomic war. A group of elite debutantes and professionals gather at a Spanish villa for a weekend of uninhibited debauchery, only to be interrupted by an (off screen) explosion as festivities begin. They emerge from their basement playground to find the house servants blinded from the explosion. One of the revelers, Professor Fulton (Alberto de Mendoza, "Father Pujardov" from *Horror Express*, 1972), knows what's happened. As a high-ranking government official he received a warning about potential nuclear conflict in the beginning of the film.

The cast dispassionately accepts the end-of-the-world scenario and sets about stockpiling food and water. Despite the threat of radiation they venture into the nearby village for supplies. Everyone there is also blind from the explosion and have all gathered in the local monastery. Unable to do anything to aid the sightless villagers—and given the attitudes and personalities we've been introduced to we're pretty sure they wouldn't do anything even if they could—the men return to the house with their provisions. Two other partygoers drive into the village for help and are promptly set upon and killed by the locals. Later, as the guests try to make us feel something for their characters, the night is shattered by more violence.

In an obvious commentary on the ills of a class-based system, the blind villagers storm the villa, chucking rocks through windows (they're remarkably accurate shots, these unseeing commoners) and laying siege to the ruling elite within. Of course, it's only a matter of time before the blind break in and a game of cat-and-mouse ensues. The villagers are not dissimilar to the eyeless Templar zombies of Amando de Ossorio's *Tombs of the Blind Dead* (1971), locating their prey by sound. The partygoers dodge, weave, and hide from the grasping hands and searching canes on their way to the cellar. However, once confined below the paper-thin relationships between the elites disintegrate in a fury of bullets and fire as they squabble over a way to escape. Eventually, two survivors get away and make it to the main highway. They're picked up by hazmat-suited men in a motor coach and delivered to their final destination.

The People Who Own the Dark owes a great deal to John Wyndham's 1951 novel "The Day of the Triffids" and its subsequent film (society blinded by unusual explosions). Influences are also drawn from the Ubaldo Ragona/Sidney Salkow apocalyptic film *The Last Man on Earth* (1964; hordes of transformed humans outside the house, burial pits), as well as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968; survivors trapped in a barricaded building, the cellar as the safest and last location).

The blinded villagers begin as shocked and scattered victims (the scene in the monastery shows them stumbling and colliding with one another like ants in a stirred up hill), but as the film progresses they become a more cohesive and dangerous unit. By the end they easily bring to mind the abused blind men from "Blind Alleys," the final segment of Amicus' 1972 anthology *Tales From the Crypt*.

The People Who Own the Dark serves up a recognizable Euro-horror cast. Spanish horror icon Paul Naschy is on hand as Borne, a hard drinking, gun happy partier who isn't given much to do in the plot—although his mere presence is enough to keep the viewer alert to any and all possibilities whenever he enters the scene. This was one of several films that Naschy made with director León Klimovsky, including *La Noche de la Walpurgis* (US: *The Werewolf vs. The Vampire Woman*, 1971) and *Orgia Nocturna de los Vampiros* (US: *The Vampires' Night Orgy*, 1973).

Also on hand is Sophia Loren-lookalike Nadiuska (who would go on to play young Conan's mother in 1982's *Conan the Barbarian*) as leading lady Clara. Emiliano Redondo is Dr. Messier, whose depth of medical knowledge and skill amounts to listening to see if a body has a heartbeat. Teresa Gimpera (*The Spirit of the Beehive*, 1973) is on hand as Berta. And Maria Perschy (*el Buque maldito*, 1974 [US: *Horror of the Zombies*]; *Blue Eyes of the Broken Doll*, 1974) is Lily, the hostess and lady of the manor. Ricardo Palacios (the sheriff in Claudio Fragasso's 1984 *Monster Dog*) is Dr. Robertson, who gets to play at being a dog, reverting to animalistic behavior and crawling around naked on all fours.

Despite the talent and experience available, performances fail to register much energy or enthusiasm. Even Naschy, who never minded a good bit of scenery chewing, is restrained throughout. The onset of nuclear war comes across as a "Ho-hum, how's-this-going-to-ruin-our-plans?" annoyance. The script never bothers to make anything useful out of the end of the world, which serves as a flimsy excuse to blind everyone. (Fernando Meirelles's 2008 film *Blindness* accomplished the same thing without the need for nuclear annihilation).

Code Red's 2012 DVD release was pulled from a ratty 35mm print as well as a 1" VHS tape. The print was the better looking of the two but it suffered from a lot of damage, including some missing scenes. The tape version was more complete in terms of full scenes. So enthusiasts were left with a mixed bag: the missing scenes were restored (via the tape) but the damaged materials compromised the overall image.

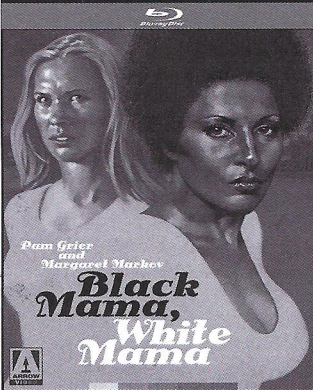
The Blu-ray upgrade has been taken from a new print. While this print is complete and is brighter in places (revealing more detail in the shadows and occasionally more accurate flesh tones), most of the original damage remains. Red and yellow scratches, speckles, and cigarette burns at reel changes consistently plague the image. Colors run the gamut from acceptable (given the quality and age of what Code Red had to work with) to grindhouse washout. Unless a pristine negative miraculously shows up, however, this is probably as good as *TPWOTD* is likely to look. The sound is likewise acceptable with only the occasional dubbed word spliced into oblivion at reel changes, or the hiss and pop of the fatigued source material.

The only extra is a discolored theatrical trailer also sourced from the original VHS release.

J. Todd Kingree

BLACK MAMA, WHITE MAMA

Directed by Eddie Romero
(1973) Arrow Films Blu-ray / DVD combo



A fast-paced women-in-prison potboiler hand-cuffing knockouts Pam Grier and Margaret Markov to one another in an obvious *The Defiant Ones* riff, *Black Mama White Mama* debuts on Blu simultaneously (and identically) in North America and the UK via Arrow.

Lee Daniels (Grier) is a loud-and-proud, tough-as-nails prostitute who comes to a tenable arrangement with Karen Brent (Markov, *Pretty Maids All in a Row*), an affluent young blonde woman who has taken up the socio-political cause with a band of revolutionaries in an unnamed South American country. They've been secured in a maximum-security prison, unjustly tortured via the use of a hot box (aka: a sweatbox), and spied on in a *Porky's*-like fashion by a randy prison guard,

Matron Densmore (Lynn Borden, *Walking Tall*).

Their fortunes are about to take a turn for the even worse when a ruling's been made to take them off-site for harsher torture sessions, but only until a rescue attempt is made by the aforementioned revolutionaries attacking the prison bus. Karen and Lee then must fend for themselves in the heady tropical climate flecked with rapacious, horny men. Also figuring into the scenario are a gunrunning operation, a swarthy overweight pimp played by fun character actor Vic Diaz (*Cover Girl Models*), and, most amusingly, a cowboy bounty hunter played with relish by Sid Haig.

Black Mama White Mama has its cake and eats it too in terms of hypocritically issuing any kind of political statement. Grier and Markov are strong and independent, but they remain—in true *Defiant Ones* fashion—distrustful of one another throughout. Grier doesn't buy into Markov's cause, either. And as this is a Philippines-shot exploitation film from the early seventies, there are quite a few nude or suggestive scenes, most crucially, the extended introductory shower sequence that comes within the first fifteen minutes. (Even after breaking free, Grier and Markov find time to grapple in the brush with very revealing panties.)

So, it's a wickedly feminist-positive work that revels in its exploitation-ness—a tradition that continues today in comic-book form via "Bitch Planet". (No surprise that Jonathan Demme is credited with half of the story.)

Arrow US's two-disc release (one Blu-ray, one DVD) is about as comprehensive a package as you could expect. First, there's an engaging commentary track with doc filmmaker Andrew Leavold (*Machete Maidens Unleashed*, *The Search for Weng Weng*), with both of his docs making him a suitable expert.

"White Mama Unchained" (14 minutes) features Markov in September 2015, exclusively shot for Arrow. She charts the rest of her career (including *Pretty Maids* and the directing style of Roger Vadim). "Sid Haig's Filipino Adventures" (15 minutes) really delves into the Jack Hill works and *Black Mama* (with a sidebar to reflect on his reunion with Grier in Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*). Last but not least is "The Mad Director of Blood Island," an older interview with the since departed Eddie Romero, giving us a succinct overview of one of the major directors of Filipino exploitation cinema of the 60s and 70s.

Aaron Graham