

THE BATTLE AGAINST GORE-NOGRAPHY

The American People vs. Herschell Gordon Lewis

Earlier this year I completed work on a lavish 92-page book about Herschell Gordon Lewis, which will appear in a Blu-ray box set of no less than *fourteen* Lewis movies from Arrow Films called "Shock and Gore: The Films of Herschell Gordon Lewis." (The standard edition—called "The Herschell Gordon Lewis Feast"—contains all of the films but not my book.)

In the course of researching Lewis' career, I have scoured American newspaper archives looking for contemporary press coverage, and in doing so I have unearthed an amazing selection of letters from outraged cinema-goers, complaining about the excesses of Lewis' first two gore shockers, *Blood Feast* and *Two Thousand Maniacs!* If this seems surprising, you must remember that when *Blood Feast* hit the drive-ins, in July 1963, no one had seen anything remotely like it before. A tongue ripped out of a girl's mouth! Legs cut off! Brains leaking out of smashed skulls! Bodies flayed and cooked! All happening right there in front of your very eyes. Audiences accustomed to minimal expressions of violence (a dime-sized bullet hole in a man's lapel, a trickle of blood from the corner of someone's mouth) were shocked to witness death scenes that played for twenty or thirty seconds of grisly onscreen detail.

For Lewis and his producers, gore was a commercial smash hit. In the years after *Blood Feast*, between 1963 and 1972, Lewis returned to his 'blood and guts' template time and time again: *The Gruesome Twosome* featured vivid and repulsive scalping scenes; *The Wizard of Gore* treated viewers to the sight of a woman having her stomach turned inside out by a mechanical punch-press; and, *The Gore Gore Girls* showed what a human face looks like when it's smashed to a pulp and then has its eyes poked out by a gloved maniac. All this and much, much more. Herschell rarely pulled his punches; he filled his horror movies with set pieces so hideously violent that they delighted horror fans eager for visceral imagery—whilst shocking everyone else to their stomachs.

Over the years we have learned a lot more about Herschell Gordon Lewis. The man behind the mayhem was witty and urbane, formidably smart, with a neat line in sardonic deprecation. We know that he never took himself too seriously. Nowadays, for those clued in to the wilder and weirder fringes of the horror genre, his movies are funny, absurd, bizarre and delightful. Show *Blood Feast* to a festival crowd and you'll hear laughter rolling through the cinema the like of which any stand-up comedian would slay his gag-writer to obtain. So how to tap in to the polar opposite? Can we access the feelings of outrage that made people write to their congressman, demanding for the films to be banned?

What follows is my attempt to get inside the mindset that saw Lewis' films not as expressions of grisly black humor but as harbingers of social collapse. Along the way I have quoted extensively from genuine letters and newspaper editorials from the 1960s. In the interests of this experiment, I ask you to put aside the knowledge that I'm implicated in the release of Lewis' films. Forget my book *Nightmare USA*, in which I celebrated Lewis and others of his kind. Instead, straighten your face, stop sniggering, and ask yourself soberly and very very seriously: Do violent gore films contribute to a social climate of violence and sexual malaise? Is our society going to hell down streets paved with guts? *And what are we going to do about it?*

Stephen Thrower

This is a tale of two Hollywoods: the dream palace and the slaughterhouse. It's a story of family values versus self-gratification and anarchy. It's a story of the sixties, but it reaches into our modern era. Were it not for a few brave souls who dared to speak out at the time, it would be a tale of the utmost despair.

In 1963, a cheap tawdry motion picture sparked a nationwide debate about the lengths to which some filmmakers will go to make money. A horror film of a new and repugnant sort, it offered nothing but butcher-shop obscenity: mutilation, bodily dismemberment, cannibalism, torture. Its name was *Blood Feast*. That it found an audience not only willing to watch, but eager for more of the same, is one of the tragedies of our modern age.

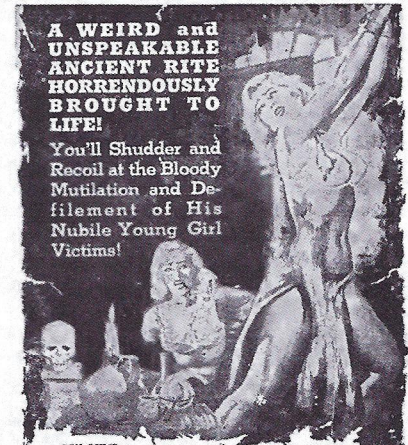
In the early 1960s, Hollywood still retained at least some of the glamour of its heyday. Audiences flocked to the movie-houses in search of fun, adventure, and the dream of a better world. Films like *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *That Touch of Mink*, *The Guns of Navarone* were the hits of the early 1960s, while Doris Day, Princess Grace of Monaco and John Wayne were movie stars of which America could be proud. But a blight was creeping onto the silver screen. In 1960, Alfred Hitchcock indulged his perverted taste for sex and violence with *Psycho*, a film which outraged audiences with its peeping-tom transvestite and the slaying of a naked woman in a shower cubicle. Viewers emerged from the cinema shocked and trembling. Little did they know that compared to the filth that would follow, *Psycho* would seem like a Walt Disney fantasy . . .

To tell the whole story of Herschell G. Lewis, the former soft-pornographer who directed *Blood Feast*, or his depraved business partner David Friedman, would be to dignify two of the most reprehensible careers in cinema: Suffice to say that in 1963, after growing bored of filming nudity, these 'filmmakers' turned to violence as their preferred 'artistic' subject. In a gloating, shameless interview for *The Chicago Tribune* in 1972, Lewis explained how he came to create *Blood Feast*: "*The question became, which type of product wouldn't be in competition with the major film companies? The answer, I felt, was in the area of gore. No one had ever made such a picture. There had been horror films, but people always died with their eyes closed, people were shot and never had a stain of blood, and the most that could be expected was a very neat bullet hole thru the forehead.*" Co-scripter and special effects designer Allison Louise Downe (yes, a woman) then detailed how the gory 'highlights' were created. Explaining that realism was the order of the day, she declared, "*If we yank out the tongue, it's going to be a real one. A sheep's tongue does beautifully . . . I've constructed fingers by using a regular medical manual and covering chicken bones with chicken skin. We also use whole sides of beef for mutilation sequences and mortician's wax for wounds and junk like that . . . In Blood Feast there was a particularly gory scene in which we had to roast a person's dismembered leg. We were shooting in a large Syrian bakery in Miami, and had stuffed a mannequin's limb with beef joints and put it in the oven. It was gorgeous—all charred (we had precooked it)—but we forgot to take it out of the oven at the end of the day. So at 4:30 in the morning the bakers came in, opened the oven, took one look, and took off. One of them landed in the hospital with heart palpitations.*"

Perhaps the last word on these people, and their 'artistic motivation,' is the so-called 'showmanship catalogue' which they produced to promote *Blood Feast*, offering the following incitement to potential film exhibitors: "*The Victims and the Customers will Shriek and Faint. Many will Have Horrendous Nightmares. You'll be up all night too . . . COUNTING!*"

Blood Feast received its screen premiere in July 1963, at a drive-in theatre in Peoria, Illinois. Yes, a drive-in. Far from the glitz and glamour of Tinseltown, *Blood Feast* was first presented to the public at a tawdry drive-in theatre, the sort of venue where movies like "I Was a Teenage Sex-Offender" or "Bride of the Crabs" played to undemanding lower-class audiences. However, we must not be too quick to judge. Drive-ins provided cheap entertainment for struggling low-income families, and many came looking for innocent fare, like westerns or war films. Being poor doesn't *have* to mean a lack of standards; morality is affordable even to the warehouseman and the street sweeper. And what of the wives in the audience, whose only sin was to marry a man of low ambition? Was it their fault they were not safely seated in a proper cinema? No: not even the poor deserved what *Blood Feast* was about to inflict. A cinema ticket is a contract; you trust the filmmakers to enlighten, educate and entertain. On that fateful day in July 1963, this contract was broken by *Blood Feast*, a film designed to do one thing only—make you sick.

HAVE YOU BOOKED IT?



BOX OFFICE
SPECTACULARS, INC.
Presents

An Admonition:
IF YOU ARE THE
PARENT OR THE
GUARDIAN OF AN
IMPRESSIONABLE
ADOLESCENT —
DO NOT BRING
HIM OR PERMIT
HIM TO SEE THIS
MOTION-PICTURE

BLOOD FEAST

MORE GRISLY THAN EVER IN BLOOD COLOR

Produced by David F. Friedman • Directed by Herschell G. Lewis

**UNIQUE! NO PICTURE EVER PRODUCED
CAN MATCH ITS PURE HORROR!**

NATIONAL CIRCUITS PLAYING IT: * United Paramount—Florida State
* Paramount—Gulf * United California * Syfy Enterprises
* Stanley-Warner * Malco * Consolidated Theatres * Wametro
* Central States * Marsch * Many, Many More

ASK ANY EXHIBITOR WHO'S PLAYED IT WHAT THE FANTASTIC GROSSSES WERE!

LOCAL DISTRIBUTOR:

New York:
PROMINENT FILMS

Buffalo-Albany:
M. A. BROWN ASSOCIATES

Philadelphia-Pittsburgh:
FANFARE FILMS, INC.

AND FOLLOWING IN ITS BLOODY FOOTSTEPS—

'TWO THOUSAND MANIACS'
(Release: February, 1964)

BOX OFFICE SPECTACULARS, INC.
1322 SOUTH WABASH AVENUE CHICAGO 5, ILLINOIS

To be clear—the word “sick” is meant quite literally. Audiences were not only revolted by the low artistic standards and amateurish performances of *Blood Feast*, they were sickened to *their stomachs* by sights and sounds of carnage beyond anything they could have imagined.

It is here that our story grows even darker. After that first screening, did *Blood Feast* disappear? Was it booted off the screen? Did the theatre owner tear up the celluloid and throw it in the trash can? No. In the weeks that followed, like maggots sniffing rotten flesh, an audience emerged that was not repulsed but instead *turned on* by the film’s sickening violence. Like a powerful drug, the stench of screen gore attracted hordes of the twisted or misguided. Deviants, the mentally ill, disrespectful teenagers, pot-smoking louts and their foul-mouthed girlfriends, all turned up at the cinema to worship at this shrine to Satan. Why would a young man take his girl to a film like this? To see her vomit a half-digested hot dog into her purse? Such was the ‘entertainment’ which *Blood Feast* offered to grossly irresponsible teenage boys. Were the girls themselves blameless? Probably not. *Blood Feast* was tailor-made for hellcats from broken homes, flick-knives in their pockets, bubblegum popping from their lips, the kind who love to laugh at the suffering of others. As for any older men skulking in the darkness, we can only speculate as to their reason for attending—perhaps to offer that special ‘guiding hand’ to disoriented youths, as they leaped out of their cars to be sick in the bushes?

No upstanding society worthy of the name can stand aside as its values are trampled in the dirt. And so a fightback began, when a few brave souls stood up for family values and common decency by writing to their local newspapers. A school PTA group, writing to the *Salt Lake Tribune* on November 17th 1963, set the tone admirably . . .

“As parents and Parent-Teacher Association members we are writing to voice our disapproval of the type of movies being presented at some of our theaters. We are making specific reference to such horror movies as “Blood Feast” . . . Any parent would be horrified to have their children of any age see such a spectacle. Is this what they mean by ‘Movies are better than ever’? Is this the result of outstanding talent in movie-making? We have many nice modern theaters in this area where it is a pleasure for our families and young people to attend. These movies that could be

considered ‘cheap trash’ are unworthy to be shown in our community. As parents and Americans we would like to see an effort made to bring wholesome, worthwhile and enjoyable movies to this area.”

East and West, North and South, city and country, *Blood Feast* was everywhere, a cinematic slug leaving a trail of filth nationwide. In far-flung Washington State, in the pretty little town of Leavenworth, a horrified mother wrote to the *Leavenworth Times* (October 6th 1964) . . .

“Saturday evening my husband and I took our family to a local drive-in, fully expecting to have a very enjoyable evening . . . The first preview was bad enough—a horror movie all about murder. The last preview was too gruesome to even believe. I never knew there were such movies around—and to expose young children to such terrible pictures is a sin. We have two young girls of seven and four and I took them out of the car as fast as I could but they still saw way too much. I can’t believe any movie house in town would show such a film to anyone—let alone small children and young teenagers . . . This particular film is called ‘Blood Feast’ and it is all the title suggests. The film is in beautiful color which shows every gory detail of a man cutting a woman’s throat and what she looks like after the deed is done, this same man cutting her head open and blood and brains all over the floor, a woman with a knife in her heart, a scene which shows a woman bathing—the next scene shows the man holding her leg which he has just cut off. I couldn’t watch any more. It was just too terrible. Such a movie should be banned. With all the outbreak of molesting, prowlers, rape, robbery and other crimes here in town—what can we expect as mature adults if we allow such filth to be shown to our young people? We are supposed to be the guiding hand for our children and with God’s help they will grow into decent adults and responsible leaders of the world, but what kind of leaders will we have if all they see is sex, murder, mutilation and horror?”

Another concerned citizen wrote to the *Montana Standard-Post* on November 16th 1963:

“Dear Sir: Is there no limit on how far our movie houses can go? After being subjected to the first few scenes of ‘Blood Feast for a Killer’ we left, sick to the core. For the benefit of those who were lucky enough not to see this horror, it showed in glowing technicolor every detail of a maniac ripping out the eyes, brains, liver and hearts of young girls. Are we, the people of this community, so bogged down in the mire of apathy that we allow this kind of tripe to be shown in our town?”

“Pull yourself together! It’s only a movie!” is perhaps what some of you are thinking. But those affected were not just feeble nancy boys, or nervous maiden aunts, as the following letter to the *Long Beach Independent* (June 16th 1964) demonstrates:

“Last Saturday night we took our three tiny children to a drive-in movie for an evening of fun and relaxation. The movies were excellent, in good taste and, at times, quite humorous. We all were enjoying ourselves. After intermission, however, the manager of the theater appeared on the screen—making a statement to the effect that if you were a small child or had a bad heart, you should leave the movie. For the next few minutes the screen was filled with the most disgusting, nauseating and violent scenes we had ever seen—a preview of the coming attraction, ‘Blood Feast.’ In the few minutes of the preview a maniac wielding a long dagger mercilessly murdered at least five people—the scenes were most vivid, and about as gory and horrendous as any movie could get. Both my husband (who is a big husky man) and I were absolutely sick. The scenes have bothered us ever since. Thank God our boys were sleeping. But what did other parents do—knock the kids out or shove them under the seats? To think people are allowed to make movies of this caliber. Who allows this trash to be put on the screen—perhaps to influence someone to violence? It would take just one sick mind to witness this movie and then go out and perform an act of violence. The responsibility, it appears, rests with all of us. What are we going to do about it?”

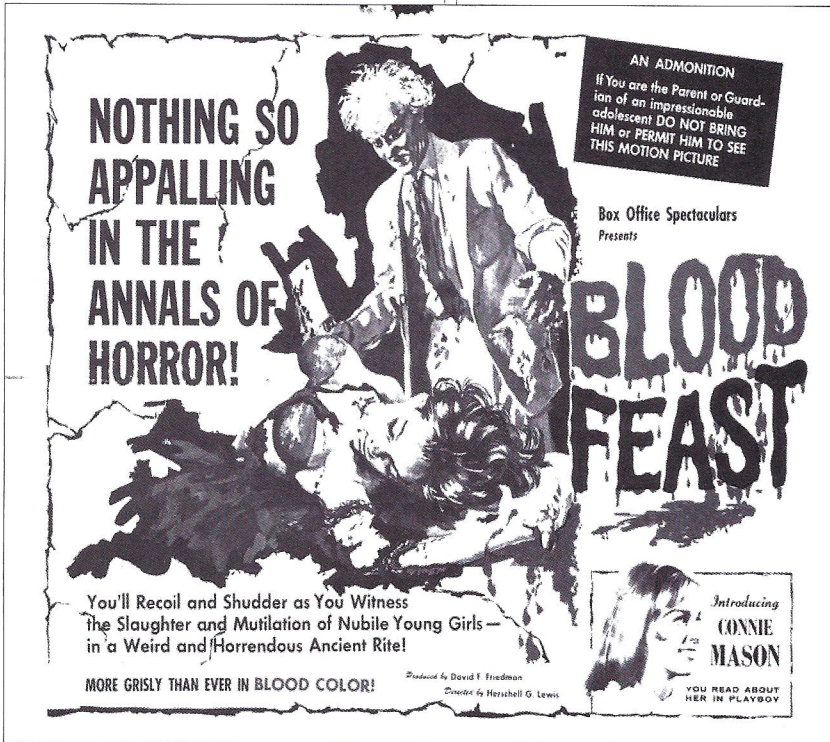
Mrs. Van Cleve from Croydon, Pennsylvania also drew attention to the links between screen violence and real violence, in this harrowing account in the *Bristol Daily Courier* (April 24th 1964) . . .

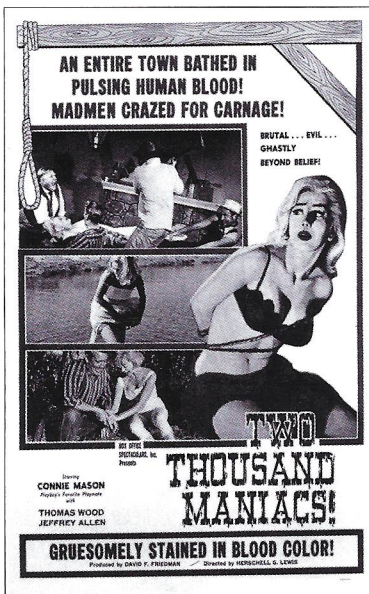
“I read with shock and dismay the article in the April 10th Courier-Times pertaining to the sadistic torture of the Worthington’s dog in Edgely. I imagine everyone reading the article

formed the same question in their mind as I, as to how anyone could perform such a heinous act. Just eleven pages later I read what I believe to be part of the solution to the question. For there advertised in the same paper were two movies showing at a nearby drive-in theatre, that I believe could incite an abnormal person to commit such a crime. The two films were titled ‘The Sadist’ and ‘Psychomania’ . . . Just recently action was taken by officials in Philadelphia who recognize the need to ban movies of this type. ‘The Blood Feast’ was taken from the Philadelphia theaters due to the sadistic nature of the story. And so it should be; for the connection between the tortured animal and these terrible films is readily perceivable.”

Raising the analysis to the international level, and zooming in on the bigger picture, Mr. Spence of San Bernardino saw all too clearly where the trend towards violent horror films was leading (from the *San Bernardino County Sun*, May 2nd 1964):

“Life in these United States often presents many ‘ups and downs,’ pinnacles of achievement and depths of ignorance. In our town now we have an example of the lowest form of ignominy, surely a blot on our record of creativity in a supposedly technologically advancing period in our history. At a local theater is the movie ‘Blood Feast.’ We decry the carnage and holocaust that would result in a nuclear exchange with Russia but we freely display the same things as a public attraction. The theater owner graciously warns parents not to bring impressionable children to view this hideous result of some warped mind. However, the rising crime rate in this country, and particularly in this area, indicates that so-called ‘adults’ are not impervious to being impressed by this tripe. Therefore, if there cannot be a national or regional censor for such diabolical movies, why will the public continue to support these people who insist on promulgating ideas and impressions the churches, schools and law-enforcement agencies are trying so desperately to combat?”





When the director and producer of *Blood Feast* launched a follow-up, a catalogue of obscenity they called *Two Thousand Maniacs!*, even newspaper editors started to take notice. One such film could be classed an aberration. Two films were a direct attack on American values. Sensing the fury of their readers, campaigning local newspapers brought civic authority to bear. In North Carolina, on August 20th 1964, *The Gastonia Gazette* made a special effort to alert their readers . . .

"Every God-fearing resident of Gaston County ought to drop his plans for tonight and go out to the Sunset Drive-In Theater and see the double feature that currently is being shown. These movies ought to be shown in every church to the adults. They ought to be shown to every PTA association to the adults. They

need to be shown to civic clubs and fraternal organizations. And it ought to be required of every member of these groups to sit through both movies from start to finish. Then, and only then, would there be any possibility of awaking the American public to the dangers of such films as 'Two Thousand Maniacs' and 'Blood Feast.'"

Gastonia's local sheriff found the films utterly shocking. He sat through one with difficulty but couldn't stomach them both. Said the sheriff, *"I have never seen anything like this in all my years of law enforcement, and I have seen some pretty bloody knifings and wreck victims. This is nothing but depravity."* *The Gazette's* same editorial then described what this traumatized officer had seen . . .

"In 'Two Thousand Maniacs' a man chops off a woman's arm at the shoulder with an ax. Right before your eyes. Four horses are hitched to a man's arms and legs and each of them pull in opposite directions. He comes apart. Right before your eyes [...] There is more, much more. In 'Blood Feast' you see a maniac stalk woman after woman and kill them in the most depraved fashion. He uses a machete to slash open one girl's head and then reaches in to scratch out the brains—while the camera records in fullest color and detail, almost in slow motion, his actions. You see him then corner a girl in her bedroom and pull her tongue up by the roots . . . and then the camera rolls over to the pretty face now almost totally encased in blood, eyes open, mouth open, blood oozing from the opening. Right before your eyes.

"At present these offerings probably are the worst offenders. But unless an aroused public demands that such offerings cease and desist, tomorrow we shall be viewing films that make these two look like pansies."

The Gastonia Gazette resumed their campaign against the moral cesspool erupting in our cinemas, on February 20th 1965:

"There is enough depravity running around loose in daily life without portraying it in technicolor on the movie screen. There are laws which work to restrict the actions of depraved individuals, and there ought to be a hard-bound law which restricts the showing of movies which are filmed simply for the sake of depravity. There is no justification for such a movie. There is no value in them. If movie house operators heed not the call of responsibility and insist on showing such offerings as 'Two Thousand Maniacs' and 'Blood Feast,' then the only wise and prudent thing to do is to force them by law not to show these movies . . . Anyone who has had the misfortune to see either of the two movies mentioned above can readily understand what this bill is trying to do. There is no reason for any producer to show people getting their legs and arms pulled off by horses, people having huge rocks dropped on them from above, people having their tongues gouged out by maniacs. This is sinister . . . Our society is built on morality. Instill in young minds that it is fun to maim and cripple and tear out people's eyes and tongues, and that to kill is just another notch on the wooden handle of life, tear down these basic foundations one by one, little by little, and that life which we have come to cherish as 'The American Way of Life' will disappear forever."

Demands for censorship greeted *Two Thousand Maniacs!* elsewhere in the U.S., but sadly they met with little success. The bible of Hollywood's Temple of Sodom, a trade publication called *Variety*, reported in March 1965 that a bill "to ban movies depicting extreme acts of mayhem" was put that month to the North Carolina legislature's General Assembly by State Representative Steve Dolley. Mr. Dolley described vividly the horrors he'd been forced to endure: *"A man being killed by dropping a huge boulder on him. When it hit, his eyes popped out of his head. The next scene showed a half-dressed woman being slashed with butcher knives. There was no plot or story. It was just violence and mayhem for their own sake."* Surely this account ought to have been enough to prevent the film from being screened, anywhere on God's earth? But no—the underlying permissive rot of the 1960s won the day.

Why, when the danger was so clear, did nothing happen? In Owosso, Michigan, Mr. Rowden of *Corunna* put his finger on the very nub of the problem; apathy in the face of evil (from the *Ossowo Argus-Press*, September 20th 1967).

"I wonder how many people noticed the ad on page 26 of September 20th's Argus-Press, in regard to the movie 'Blood Feast.' I think I'd be accurate in saying that the overwhelming majority of citizens are absolutely and unquestionably opposed to this raw, licentious and fiendish example of theatre entertainment, while being uninterested in its moral and social content. Decay breeds decay, unadulterated violence, torture and terror on the screen can only breed corruption of the mind. We ask ourselves why such sadistic examples are allowed in our community. Are we so complacent we merely overlook this example of evil? It appears to me that we are so preoccupied with self and our own pleasures that we give very little attention to the sinister and vile time-consuming entertainment that is offered to the public today."

The letters and editorials I have quoted in this essay echo down along the corridor of time, but their meaning is even more urgent today . . . Can anyone put their hand on their heart and say that these citizens were wrong? Are we not now mired in the cinema of ghastliness?

From the bottom of my heart I urge you NOT to watch *Blood Feast*—one of the world's most wicked movies. You may be tempted to buy it on Digital Versatile Disc or Blu-ray. Perhaps out of morbid curiosity. Perhaps under peer pressure. Or perhaps you've been misled by gushing reviews penned by morally bankrupt critics, some of them not just wicked but British. I hope that this essay will alert you to the truth: to the warnings that have rung out across the generations. Can you still ignore them? Perhaps you already own this evil film. In the name of all that is wholesome we implore you: Destroy it. Burn it. Throw it in the garbage where it truly belongs. Because it won't just make you sick to your stomach. You won't just be sick in the privacy of your head. *At stake is your very soul.*

Arrow Films offer you the chance to become depraved and corrupted by the films of Herschell Gordon Lewis with their forthcoming box set, available from all reputable stores. The films on offer are: *Blood Feast* (1963), *Scum of the Earth* (1963), *Two Thousand Maniacs!* (1964), *Color Me Blood Red* (1964), *Moonshine Mountain* (1964), *Something Weird* (1966), *The Gruesome Twosome* (1966), *A Taste of Blood* (1967), *She-Devils on Wheels* (1967), *Just for the Hell of It* (1967), *How to Make a Doll* (1967), *The Wizard of Gore* (1970), *This Stuff'll Kill Ya!* (1972) and *The Gore Gore Girls* (1972). Visit the Arrow Films website at arrowfilms.co.uk/the-hg-feast/ for more details.

