

Considerably more disciplined than its predecessor, the trilogy's second film, *Rainy Dog*, pits its antihero, a freelance hitman named Yuuji (Show Aikawa), against the unexpected responsibilities of fatherhood, as he reluctantly steps into a paternal role upon discovering that one of his forgotten one-night stands accidentally produced a son years ago. Again, nihilism—this time, manifested in the reckless abandon of Yuuji's promiscuity— informs the world of Miike's characters, though here the fabric stitched together by family prevents it from going unchecked.

The trilogy's final entry, *Ley Lines*, might be considered a blueprint for the off-beat jokiness that would abound Miike's work for years to come, and serving as a counterpoint of levity to the cold and bleak conditions of his filmic world. Turning its attention to the lives of three ethnically Chinese children struggling to assimilate in Japan, the film, like *Rainy Dog*, juxtaposes youthful innocence with the ugly, jaded figures of the criminal underworld to sharply contrast the dimensions of humanity inherent in each side of this proverbial yin and yang.

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Arrow's 1080 high-def transfer suits the trilogy's rather soft lighting effects—which give one the impression of gazing at one's own reflection on wet pavement, or peering through a wet and foggy storefront window lit up by streetlights at nightfall—quite well, leaving little with which to find fault. The package's LPCM 2.0 stereo sound mix, too, reinforces the films' deft use of formal elements, which punctuate the aural dimensions of Miike's atmosphere with piercing gunfire and guttural violence that's staged and shot for impact.

The remarkable and, admittedly, perplexing thing about a director like Takashi Miike is that the frequency with which he makes new films raises slews of questions about what goes into his process that may never be answered—simply because someone who works this hard and this often likely does not allow himself the time to think step outside of himself and look at such activity with clinical detachment. However, this is precisely what makes Miike's work pulsate with energy and urgency, and *Black Society Trilogy* brilliantly crystallizes this fascinating paradox. Arrow Video has curated a collection of feature and supplemental material that admirably resists the opportunity to indulge in the trappings of Miike's over-the-top style and instead focuses on the director's substantive contributions to the many avenues of genre and representation that these three films traverse. The result is a worthwhile addition to your collection that hits its intended target without overstaying its welcome.

Max Weinstein

THE INITIATION

Directed by Larry Stewart
(1984) Arrow Films Blu-ray / DVD combo



In hindsight, it almost seems hard to believe that jocks, cheerleaders and the like had a monopoly on cool in the movies. Today a lack of sensitivity, casual misogyny and anti-geek attitudes are considered anathema to mainstream popularity more than they ever were (though there's still a long way to go.) But in 1984, campus Greek life was still such a one-way ticket to big-screen glory that *Revenge of the Nerds* was propping up its rituals as social misfits' sole shot at "redemption" from their miserable, pointless existence.

On the other hand, pledging a fraternity or a sorority in a horror film, even during an era in which people un-ironically took fashion cues from *The Official Preppy Handbook*, has always been a riskier proposition—one not without its pleasures but also one that might not promise a happy ending. Enter *The Initiation*.

Made four years after *Terror Train* and one year after *The House on Sorority Row*, director Larry Stewart's entry in the canon of '80s "sex = death" slashers announces its send-up of so-called "sisterhood for life" with the tongue-in-cheek incantation: "*Delta Rho Chi, never will die.*" (Of course, nearly every aspiring ΔPX

introduced here will die—hard—but not before they repeat this chant so much that you'll have no choice but to say it out loud yourself, becoming the good little tool that the film's marketers hoped you be.) Centered on college student Kelly Fairchild's (Daphne Zuniga) bouts with a recurring nightmare and the pressures of her soon-to-be sorority's "Hell Week," *The Initiation* finds itself in that no-man's land between cult, camp and crock—a story so insipid and yet so mean-spirited toward its even more insipid characters that the line between satire and celebration of its one-two punch of humping and hazing could only be made less blurry if audiences wear beer goggles as they watch.

Still, curiously enough, *The Initiation* has a little more than a little in common with another '84 "dead teenager" flick about the terror of bad dreams. Read it and weep: This movie and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* have a *lot* in common—so much in common that you couldn't be blamed for wondering if one outright stole from the other's narrative playbook. (They were only released a month apart!) Like Nancy Thompson in Wes Craven's metaphysical masterpiece, Kelly's persistent nightmare features a very badly burned man who lurks around her childhood stomping grounds. Kelly's mother is a lot like Nancy's—unbalanced and always on edge, working hard to hide a long-kept secret from her increasingly troubled daughter. And, like the pseudoscientific pretense of *Nightmare*, *The Initiation* involves a belabored subplot in which Peter, (James Read) the graduate assistant in Kelly's psychology course, monitors her brain activity during REM sleep, spewing more Freudian clichés than a Woody Allen film in his quest to solve the analytical Rubik's cube of her puzzling dream.

Now with a full restorative treatment courtesy of Arrow Video on Blu-ray, *The Initiation's* newly polished, candy-coated color scheme compensates somewhat for its misfires, and the disc's extras provide some context on this slice of sleaze that might otherwise be doomed to vanish into the '80s ether. Along with one minute of extended footage that lengthens the film's already-pretty-damn-long party sequence, 54 minutes of interviews with screenwriter Charles Pratt, Jr. and actors Christopher Bradley and Joy Jones round out as definitive a conversation as you're likely to ever get on this nearly forgotten film. Pratt, whose father produced the original *Willard* in 1971, is eloquent and animated throughout his chat, and unabashedly reveals just how many things that *could* have gone wrong *did* go wrong during the shoot of the film—from a stalled shooting schedule, to an abrupt change of directors, to a lowered morale among the cast and crew and more. Bradley and Jones' discussions stress just how important the simple act of "showing up" was to being cast in their roles, underscoring the charming yet undeniably amateurish approach to filmmaking that's felt in nearly every frame of the film.

Though Arrow was unable to lock down any of the film's participating cast/crew members for a feature commentary track, the co-hosts of *The Hysteria Continues* podcast step up to do the honors. The unbridled enthusiasm for *The Initiation* they express throughout, coupled with a commendable attention to detail, is a reminder of one of the best qualities of cult cinephilia—an unwavering love of something subject to (and in this case, arguably worthy of) derision that takes precedent over the film itself and instead invites us to share in the spirit of its community of supporters.

Presented in an 1.85:1 aspect ratio on Arrow's dual-layer Blu-ray disc, *The Initiation's* visuals can't be accused, here, of looking chintzy. For all its flaws, this isn't the product of someone who doesn't know how to light a film, and some moments even evoke the cinematographic palette of Sergio Martino in his early years. The film's uncompressed, 16-bit monaural soundtrack is perfectly serviceable (a sufficient mix for a film not remotely interested in using sound to evoke mood, suspense or dread.)

The same thing that discourages an endorsement of *The Initiation* as an example of any of the many things it's trying to be can also be used to mount an impassioned case in favor of it. In a sense, whatever wonky allure it does possess is derived from the fact that, despite its themes about the lengths young adults will go to "fit in," the film doesn't quite fit in anywhere on any end of spectrum of any genre, movement or time period—either as a dark sex comedy, a sorority-bound slasher, a psychological thriller or something in some other cinematic territory it clumsily flirts with. For some fans, that disjointedness and lack of identity will be a turn-off, but for others, *The Initiation's* failure to find a home might encourage them to embrace it as the aberration that it is.

Max Weinstein