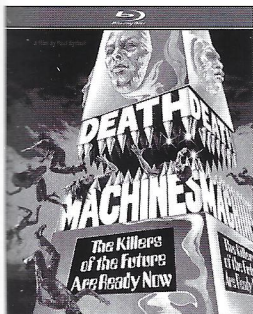


DEATH MACHINES

Directed by Paul Kyriazi

(1976) Vinegar Syndrome Blu-ray / DVD combo



In the thriving metropolis of Stockton, California, there's a new criminal force afoot. Stereotypical "Dragon lady" Madame Lee (Mari Honjo), sporting a massive hairstyle and an indecipherable accent that blends Pidgin English with gargling mouthwash has a veritable rainbow coalition of superhuman killers to challenge the local gangster underground. Consisting of a white guy (Ron Marchini, the film's producer), a black guy (Joshua

Johnson) and an oriental martial artist (Michael Chong), Lee's henchmen make quick work of lead mobster Gioretti's (Chuck Katzakian) hit squad to eliminate the competition. Gioretti reluctantly strikes a deal with Lee, as her "death machines" wipe out rival drug trafficker Ho Lung's (Eric Lee) martial arts academy. The massacre's sole survivor Frank (John Lowe) has his hand lopped off in the process, as he struggles to rebuild his life. After corrupt banker Nathan Adams (Gene Wisenor) is rubbed out in semi-comedic fashion, it becomes readily apparent that the trio of killers are becoming too hot to handle and Gioretti plots to renege on his agreement with Lee . . .

Vinegar Syndrome comes to the rescue again with *Death Machines*, a highly enjoyable title previously consigned to scores of substandard tape and DVD releases with a sparkling transfer and the expected extras. Anyone out for snarky laughs should pick this one up—long before *Miami Connection* (1987) was pulled from the dumpster for newfound millennial appreciation, *Death Machines* was the previous record holder for an excess amount of unintentional laughter in a martial arts flick. The audience knows it's in good hands in the opening scenes as Madame Lee is shown traipsing through a vaguely Oriental garden watching her henchmen at practice. Approached by an adversary, Caucasian Death Machine Marchini casually whips out a pistol and shoots him dead. A rude punch line to a bad-minded joke, no less than Steven Spielberg appropriated the same gag for his *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) years later.

Wild and all over the place, *Death Machines* at one point wants to turn audience sympathies towards its three killers. Cooling their jets at an isolated diner, the trio initially rebuffs the elderly owners' offer of salvation when a horde of hairy bikers comes rolling in. The gang initiates an altercation ("Look at his muscles!" one biker exclaims) and a huge bar fight breaks out. The Death Machines easily overwhelm with their three to a dozen, the elderly owners pressing religious tracts into their hands in a sign of gratitude. This scene surely had them spitting into their beers at the drive-ins.

The Vinegar Syndrome Blu-ray/DVD combo release features exact extras on both discs. Supplements include a commentary track with director Kyriazi, along with his brief introduction; an on-camera interview with stuntman/actor Michael Chong, who had the longest and most successful career of the three with later roles in William Friedkin's *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985), and, an audio interview with Joshua Johnson, who saw the film as a "time marker," and now regularly pulls the film from the cupboard to live up family gatherings. There are the expected sweepings off the cutting room floor to give audiences a look-see at scenes that were even too inept for the project at hand. There is the theatrical trailer, teaser trailer and reversible color artwork as well.

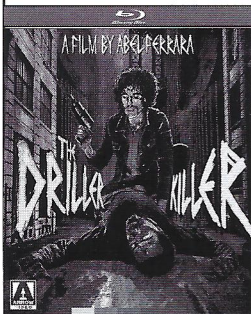
The most curious aspect of the production was a last-minute decision to insert science fiction elements into the feature following the success of *Logan's Run* (1976) and *Star Wars* (1977). This seems limited to the film's ad campaign using futuristic animated titles. There is a scene where Marchini is ruthlessly gunned down by police officers but seemingly repels their bullets, in the manner of TV's *Six Million Dollar Man*. The idea is raised—are the Death Machines in fact androids or superhuman aliens? This isn't resolved at the fadeout when the lethal trio are seen leaving to their next assignment—but everyone leaving the auditorium probably got their money's worth. Scanned and restored in 4k from 35mm Techniscope camera negative, *Death Machines* is top-flight rainy Saturday afternoon entertainment.

Greg Goodsell

THE DRILLER KILLER

Directed by Abel Ferrara

(1979) Arrow Films Blu-ray / DVD combo



When a film that has been readily available in other formats for years gets a Blu-ray (or DVD) release, there must be concrete reasons for buyers to upgrade. Perhaps this is a more complete version, or one that is far superior in a/v quality to all previous copies. A plethora of extras is also a selling point.

The Driller Killer has been released many times on VHS tape and DVD. The new Arrow Blu-ray/DVD combo makes the case for its essentiality in a number of ways. There are two different versions of the film included, the standard theatrical version (95:48, 1.85 :1 aspect ratio) and what is labeled a "pre-release" version (100:54, 1.37:1 aspect ratio). While the pre-release version is longer, there is little additional footage here that is significant—it's not a "lost director's cut" or anything of the sort (in fact, the theatrical version was Abel Ferrara's "cut"). Still, this is added value for buyers, and if one has seen the film before, the longer version may be what you want to watch this time.

Additionally, there are a number of interesting extra features. The trailer for the film is merely a 30-second spot, but the other added content is more substantial. Ferrara does an audio commentary for the theatrical version, with Brad Stevens (author of the book *Abel Ferrara: The Moral Vision*) as his partner. Ferrara's comments are sometimes entertaining but his delivery is rambling and he often goes off on unrelated tangents or simply mumbles that he doesn't remember details of the film's production (not surprising, given that 40 years has gone by). Stevens attempts to keep him on track by asking questions—"that's a good question," is Ferrara's frequent reply, although he doesn't often come up with an answer—but also tends to try and analyze the "meaning" of scenes and the film as a whole, sometimes to Ferrara's bemusement. On the whole, the director's commentary is interesting but not especially informative.

The Driller Killer extras also include "Laine & Abel," a 2016 interview with Ferrara. He discusses his early life and career, up through the shooting of *The Driller Killer*. This is rather more coherent than the audio commentary, since it's a compact 17:31 long. "Willing & Abel: Ferraraology 101" is a lengthy (34 minutes) "visual essay" narrated by Australian film critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas. This covers all of Ferrara's films, with brief comments and film clips: for those (like me) whose knowledge of Ferrara's career becomes very fuzzy after the early 1990s, this is a valuable look at his surprisingly substantial filmography. The final extra on the set is Ferrara's feature-length 2010 documentary "Mulberry St.," about the New York neighborhood he used in a number of his films, including *The Driller Killer*.

Although the title and advertising suggested *The Driller Killer* would be an early slasher film, perhaps akin to *The Toolbox Murders* (1978), Ferrara's film is actually a psychological study and blackly comedic slice-of-life tale about frustrated artist Reno (played by Ferrara himself under the pseudonym "Jimmy Laine") who is driven insane by his financial problems. Around the 25-minute mark of the director's commentary, Ferrara ironically says, "When are you gonna start drilling somebody? We're putting the 42nd Street audience to the test." The first murder doesn't occur until 37 minutes into the 95-minute movie; five more killings occur in about ten minutes (between the 50 and 60-minute mark), and three more are spread over the last 20 minutes (there is some question as to whether Reno also murders Pamela or not, after she finds the dead art gallery owner in their apartment, but this isn't shown).

There is no specific motivation for most of Reno's killing: all but the last two of his victims are street people, homeless men or alcoholics. This goes against typical slasher-film logic in a number of ways (although since the film was shot in 1977-78, the genre's rules were not really in place yet): the killer's victims are anonymous, they're not young or attractive, and no motive (revenge, psycho-sexual pathology, etc.) is given or even hinted at. While *The Driller Killer* does deliver on the specific murder method cited in the title (there's even a bit of foreshadowing, as Reno watches a television commercial for the "Porta-Pak" battery belt which shows a man using a drill, among other things), and the murders are appropriately graphic (the most notorious is the forehead-drilling scene at the 72-minute point), it's clear Ferrara wasn't especially interested in making just another slasher film.

In his commentary, Ferrara repeatedly deprecates his on-screen work as Reno, and while it is true that a more experienced actor might have given a deeper and more nuanced performance that would have revealed the protagonist's internal turmoil—Ferrara suggests the script would have included more expository dialogue if they'd had a better actor—the director is not unsatisfactory in the leading role. While the rest of the cast includes some professional (or at least semi-pro) actors (although few had any other film credits), Ferrara does not come off noticeably worse than the rest. Some of the other actors are acceptable (Carolyn Marz, Harry Schultz as the art gallery owner, D.A. Metrov as Tony Coca-Cola), while there are some whose performances are marginally adequate. However, *The Driller Killer* doesn't make serious dramatic demands on anyone, and is carried along mostly by the energy of its images, actions, and the ineffable 1970's New York *mise-en-scene*.

Arrow's disc is sourced from the original 16mm camera negative and probably looks and sounds just about as good as it ever would (in fact, possibly better than the original theatrical release, which was presumably a 35mm blow-up).

The Driller Killer Blu-ray/DVD combo certainly contains enough added value to justify another look at a film which has been readily available on home video for more than 30 years.

David Wilt