


BRAIN DAMAGE





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CAST

RICK HERBST as Brian
GORDON MACDONALD as Mike
JENNIFER LOWRY as Barbara
THEO BARNES as Morris
LUCILLE SAINT-PETER as Martha

CREW

Written & Directed by **FRANK HENENLOTTER**
Produced by **EDGAR IEVINS**
Executive Producers **ANDRE BLAY** and **AL EICHER**
Director of Photography **BRUCE TORBET**
Music by **GUS RUSSO** and **CLUTCH REISER**
Special Make-Up Effects by **GABE BARTALOS**

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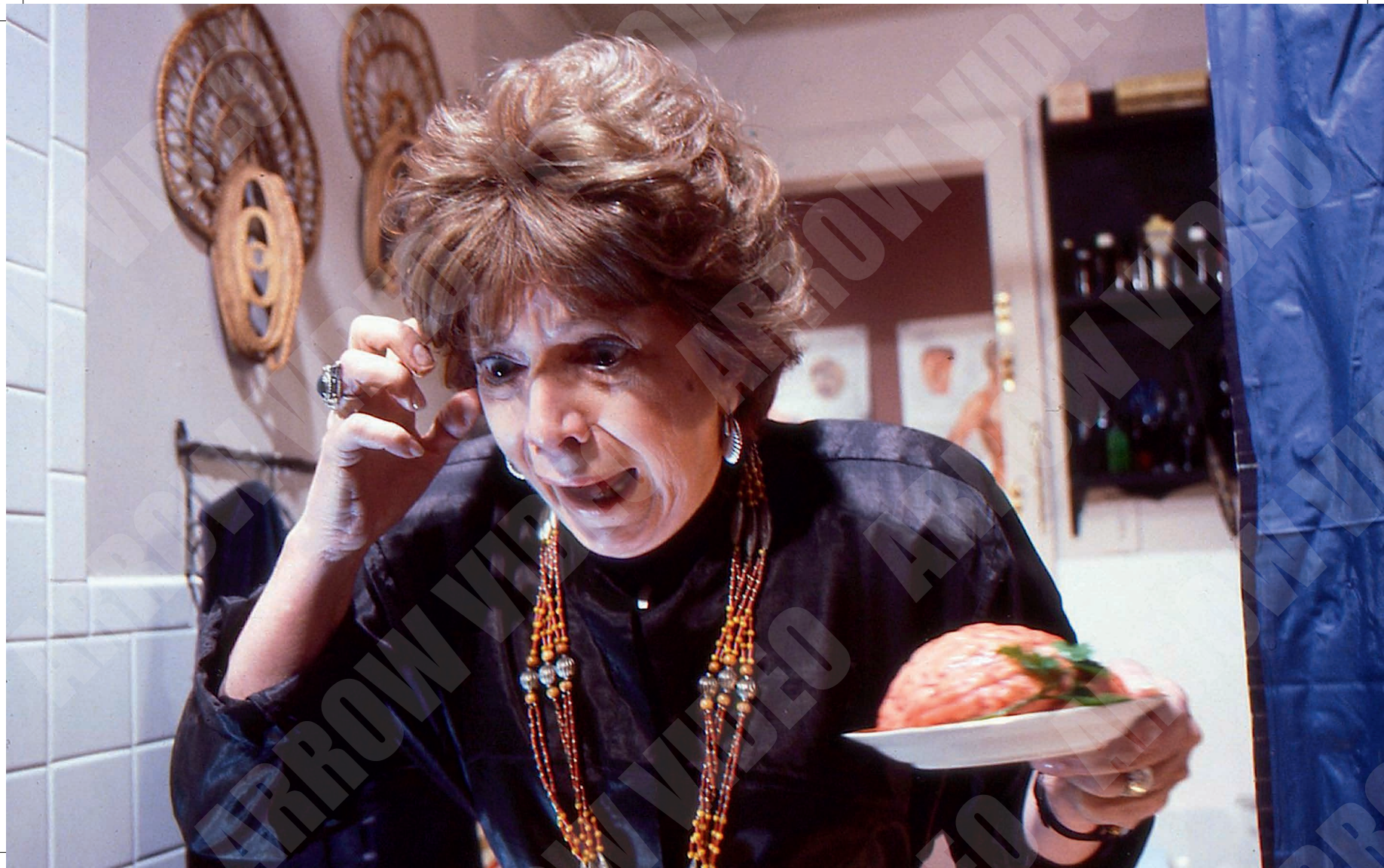
A MIND AND A TERRIBLE THING: THE STORY OF 'BRAIN DAMAGE'

by Michael Gingold

"You don't want to see it there. Somebody got shot there last week!" So said the publicist for the New York theatrical run of Frank Henenlotter's *Brain Damage*, when I inquired if I could get a press pass to catch it at the Lyric Theater on New York City's 42nd Street. After all, it seemed like the natural place to go, considering Henenlotter's roots as a habitu  of the Times Square area. As it turned out, she wasn't kidding: on April 8, 1988, an 18-year-old man was shot in the back and killed inside the Lyric during a double feature of *Bad Dreams* and the Robert Z'Dar-starring *The Night Stalker*. The motive? Apparently, the victim was making too much noise – which, considering the typical behavior at the Deuce's cinemas, would hardly seem to be grounds for murder. In any case, that publicist sent me a VHS screener of *Brain Damage*, which I watched with some friends in my college dorm and raved about in my Xeroxed 'zine *Scareaphanalia*.

The film made quite an impact on us, despite the fact that this theatrical cut of *Brain Damage* had been heavily edited to achieve an R rating, losing significant portions of a few of its nastier scenes. Even with the most explicit bits missing, the movie's mix of horror and black comedy lost none of its potency, and neither did its central metaphor. Appearing in the midst of the "Just Say No" anti-drug campaign initiated by First Lady Nancy Reagan, the portrait of a young man trying to kick a parasitical habit – not a monkey on his back, but a lower yet intelligent lifeform – was especially trenchant.

Having created a symbiotic yet grotesque relationship between a boy and his monster in *Basket Case*, Henenlotter decided to tackle a similar concept after he couldn't find backing for a script called *Insect City* (which would later land him a meeting with producer James Glickenhaus, leading to *Frankenhooker* and the *Basket Case* sequels). The notion of the protagonist being hooked on the diminutive creature was a case of necessity mothering invention. "I couldn't think of why else you would want a parasite living on you," Henenlotter says. "There are the science-fiction clich s where a parasite takes ahold of your body and you're not aware, and I didn't want that. I thought it would be great if the character welcomed this creature. And what possible reason would he have for that? Therefore, I thought of the drug-addiction thing. And that was also great because it made me realize I



had a Faust story here, where Elmer's the devil making an offer, and Brian, like Faust and all the others, thinks he's smarter than the devil and can get through a loophole. It just handed itself to me with that idea. Once I got that connection, the rest was easy to write."

The scenario Henenlotter came up with is compelling in its simplicity: Brian (Rick Herbst) makes the acquaintance of the slug-like, well-spoken Elmer, who plies him with doses of a hallucinatory "juice" injected directly into his grey matter. What Brian doesn't know at first is that while he's tripping on the lights fantastic the serum induces, Elmer is chowing down on the brains of unfortunate victims. After alienating his brother/roommate Mike (Gordon MacDonald) and girlfriend Barbara (Jennifer Lowry), Brian cottons on to what's going on and flees to a flophouse to detox on Elmer and his juice – which proves horrifically hard to do.

The first inkling I had of the project's existence was a notice in a mid-1980s issue of *Variety* containing a special section on filmmaking in New Jersey, reporting that a Henenlotter project called *Elmer the Parasite* would be lensing there. The writer/director recalls no specific plans to plant the production in the Garden State: "Maybe that was because the guy who was gonna come up with the money had a company in New Jersey called Rugged Films," which owned the distribution rights to *Basket Case* for a short time. "He never was able to [get the financing together], but at the time, the movie was called *Elmer the Parasite*. I didn't come up with the title *Brain Damage* until I was literally writing the last scenes. It seems obvious now, but it wasn't at the time."

Henenlotter's *Brain Damage* script not only provided the skeleton for a meaty, visceral screen experience, it's also an extremely engaging, almost literary read in its own right. His descriptions perfectly evoke the emotions the scenes aim for, as in the early moments when the Ackermans – the elderly Elmer junkies whom the parasite abandons to latch onto Brian – desperately try to find the missing creature: "We can all relate to the fears a parent goes through when searching for a missing child but, obviously, it isn't a child they're searching for – and besides, MORRIS and MARTHA's fear is different. They're scared for themselves. It's as if their very lives are suddenly at stake and they're both rapidly running out of time..."

There's a great deal of winking humor in Henenlotter's passages too, as when he introduces us to the ill-fated night watchman: "...he's spent his whole life wanting to be Clint Eastwood. And now, wearing his brand new 'rent-a-cop' uniform – boldly labeled 'Security Guard' – he's the Dirty Harry of junkyards. You just know he spends his days off in front of a mirror practicing how to look mean." Or when the blonde who picks up Brian at the Hell nightclub gets a big surprise when she attempts to fellate him: "Well, imagine yourself

reaching into the clothes of the next person you want to have sex with and feeling a wet, slimy fish thrashing about. A bit unnerving, yes? Which is why ROXIE's face displays a series of complex expressions that all say the same thing: 'Oh Shit.'"

At times, Henenlotter completely breaks the fourth wall, as with this aside after poor Roxie meets her oral-Elmer fate: "...let's face it folks, you haven't seen this one in a film before." And then there's this, in the midst of the awkward sexual encounter between Mike and Barbara: "...what would be great is if we could engineer the shooting schedule so that this is the very first scene we film with the actor and actress playing BARBARA and MIKE. No warm up or build up; just a major sex scene first day on the set. That should really give this all a nice lethal edge."

There's certainly plenty of lethal edge to *Brain Damage* as a whole, and the screenplay attracted the attention of Andre Blay, the man who's been credited with inventing the home-video market when he licensed feature films from 20th Century Fox for release via his Magnetic Video company in the late 1970s. At the time he first took on *Brain Damage*, Blay was chairman and chief executive at Embassy Home Entertainment; after its parent company Embassy Communications was bought by the Coca-Cola Co. in 1985, negotiations for Blay to acquire the video division fell apart. He and veteran producer Elliott Kastner then teamed up to form Palisades Entertainment Group, and *Brain Damage* found a home there amongst a lineup that also included Donald Cammell's *White of the Eye* and Rowdy Herrington's James Spader-starrer *Jack's Back*.

With a budget of between \$1 and \$2 million, a huge leap from the \$35,000 *Basket Case*, Henenlotter and producer Edgar levins were able to afford a two-month shoot around New York City. The key filming site was a West Side building that had once housed belt-manufacturing and sign-painting businesses, with exteriors shot at a few picturesque locations (see featurette on this disc). The lead actors were all first-timers: Herbst, who would go on to a Daytime Emmy Award-winning career (under the name Rick Hearst) in soap operas, with over 600 episodes of *General Hospital* under his belt at this writing; MacDonald, who later had parts in *The Thin Red Line*, *The Brave One* and two *Law & Order* series; and Lowry, in her one and only film role.

The biggest name in *Brain Damage's* cast was one who would appear neither on screen nor in the credits. In the original script, Elmer speaks with a whispery voice inside Brian's head that's an echo of Brian's own, and outwardly makes only grunting and groaning sounds. Henenlotter then decided to have Elmer talk with "very sophisticated-sounding, articulate" tones, and called up a vocal agent who offered a list of appropriate names. One of them was John Zacherle, aka legendary horror host Zacherley, the Cool Ghoul, whom Henenlotter had



grown up watching on late-night TV. “I went, ‘Are you serious? Zacherley?’” Henenlotter recalls. “And he said, ‘Yeah.’ He told me how much the rate was, which was dirt-cheap, and I told him, ‘No, no, no, that’s no good, I’m going to double it,’ just because I thought it was a privilege to work with Zach.”

The writer/director remembers Zacherle requiring no direction when it came to delivering Elmer’s lines: “He got the joke right away. As soon as I told him, ‘I want you to say everything the way you’d do it; I don’t want Freddy Krueger, I want your voice,’ he got right into it. He loved the part. We recorded it very quickly, because there was no need to do anything again. The first take of ‘Elmer’s Tune,’ he nailed; he nailed everything!”

Then came the day when Henenlotter called Zacherle to ask whether the actor wanted to be billed with -le or -ley at the end of his name. “He said, ‘Well, my SAG card says Zacherle with ey...’ and I went, ‘SAG card? Oh shit, Zach, this is a non-SAG film! What are we going to do?’ He said, ‘Well, just don’t bill me,’ and I said, ‘But everybody’s going to know it’s your voice!’ He laughed and said, ‘Nah, just tell them it’s you, Frank; you do a great imitation of me!’” In fact, the filmmaker had dubbed a couple of Elmer’s lines and laughs during postproduction.

So Zacherle went uncredited, though a few critics at the time (including *Variety*’s Lawrence Cohn, writing as “Lor”) were able to place the voice, and Elmer’s aural identity became an open secret among horror fans. Some of them, Henenlotter laments, misinterpreted the reasons behind Zacherle (who died in October 2016) going unacknowledged. “A lot of shit has been thrown at Edgar and I over the years, thinking that we were somehow trying to take credit away from Zach. Of course not! If SAG had gotten wind that he had worked on a non-SAG film, they would have come after him – not only with a significant fine, a significant penalty, but they also could have thrown him out of the union. So we kept our mouths shut all those years so he wouldn’t get in trouble.”

The physical Elmer was created by Gabe Bartalos and David Kindlon, with Bartalos (beginning a long association with Henenlotter) handling the many and bloody other makeup effects as well. “There was not one Elmer that did everything; there were a bunch of Elmers, depending on what we needed him to do,” Henenlotter notes. “That’s the way to shoot effects, and that’s what was so great about Gabe. Even back then, he thought like a director (which Bartalos became with 2004’s *Skinned Deep* and the more recent *Saint Bernard*). He knew how to edit; he knew that a sequence was built – you have a close-up of a fake ear, then you have a shot of the actor with a fake ear, and you just put it all together. We always were constantly, not storyboarding – I never storyboard, because then I would only have one image in my head – but figuring out, ‘How can we do that?’ And of course,

having to change our minds when certain things didn’t work out. Even with all the planning you do, you can never plan special effects 100 percent.”

As noted above, Bartalos and Kindlon’s most extreme gags were heavily truncated for *Brain Damage*’s theatrical release in spring 1988. “Unfortunately,” as *Variety*’s Cohn wrote, “pic has been poorly promoted and instead of a careful launch it preemed at the sleaziest theater on 42nd Street in Manhattan.” He did praise the movie as “an overly ambitious but nonetheless rewarding low-budget horror film,” and *The Hollywood Reporter*’s Jeffrey Ressler went further, writing that “for fans of the macabre, this ultra low-budgeter may well be the most satisfying movie of 1988...a campy masterpiece of modern schlock-shock.” Not surprisingly, New York’s newspaper reviewers were more dismissive; the *New York Post*’s Martin Burden couldn’t even be bothered with any critical analysis, instead merely recounting the storyline and closing with a cheap wisecrack about the film’s title.

Those who wanted further reading on *Brain Damage* had a better option: prior to the movie’s release, Henenlotter got in touch with former *Fangoria* editor Robert “Uncle Bob” Martin, who had been a major booster of *Basket Case*, asking him to write a novelization. Martin accepted, with the one proviso that he be allowed to publish it himself, which he did as a limited-edition – 1,000 signed and numbered copies – hardcover under the Broslin Press imprint. (It is currently available to read on Amazon’s Kindle.) Written with genuine flair and cleverness, the book is dedicated “To Frank and Edgar for ending my early retirement,” and indeed, he was later tapped to work on the scripts of the duo’s *Frankenhooker* and *Basket Case 3*.

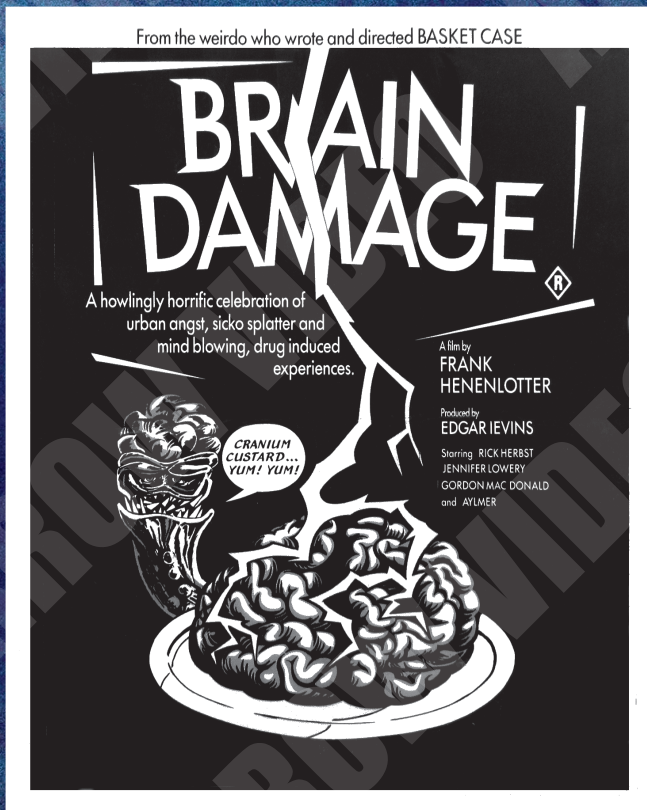
While it never had the chance to achieve any kind of theatrical box-office success, *Brain Damage* began winning an appreciative audience even in its R-rated VHS release, and more so once it eventually surfaced in uncut form on DVD via Synapse Films in 2003. It is now widely viewed as one of the best films in both Henenlotter’s filmography and the pantheon of ‘80s horror in general, and Elmer remains among the most singular and personable little critters in all of moviedom. So sit back, look into the light, and let Elmer own you once again...

Michael Gingold is an editor and/or writer for Rue Morgue, Scream, Birth.Movies.Death, Delirium, IndieWire.com and Blumhouse.com, and spent 28 years with Fangoria magazine and its website. He attended 42nd Street’s grindhouses several times during the ‘80s, but never saw anyone get shot.





ARTWORK GALLERY



Australian one sheet



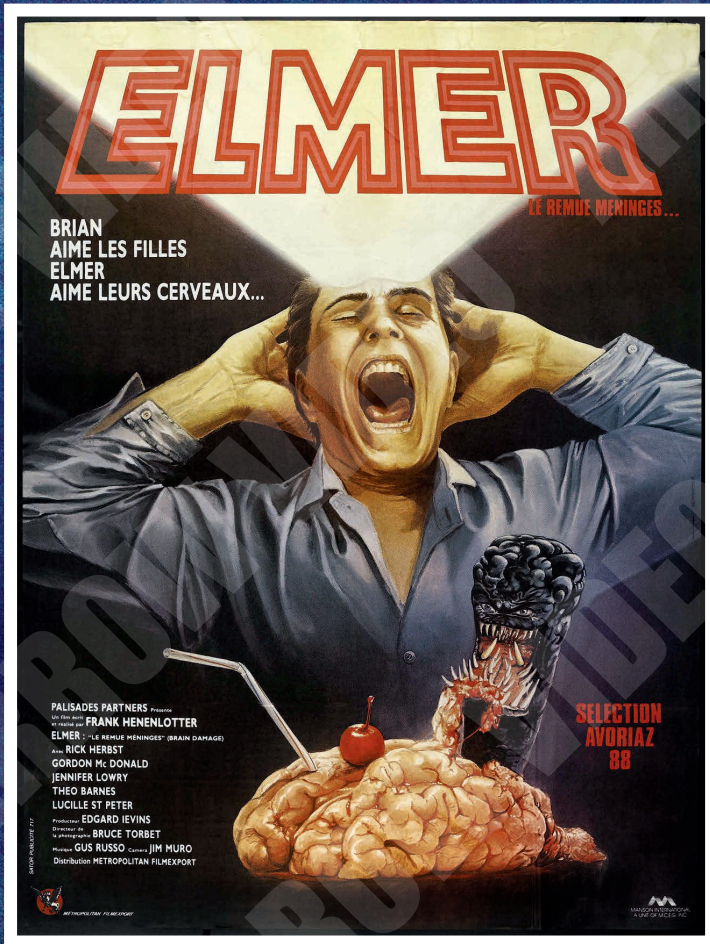
Manson International one sheet



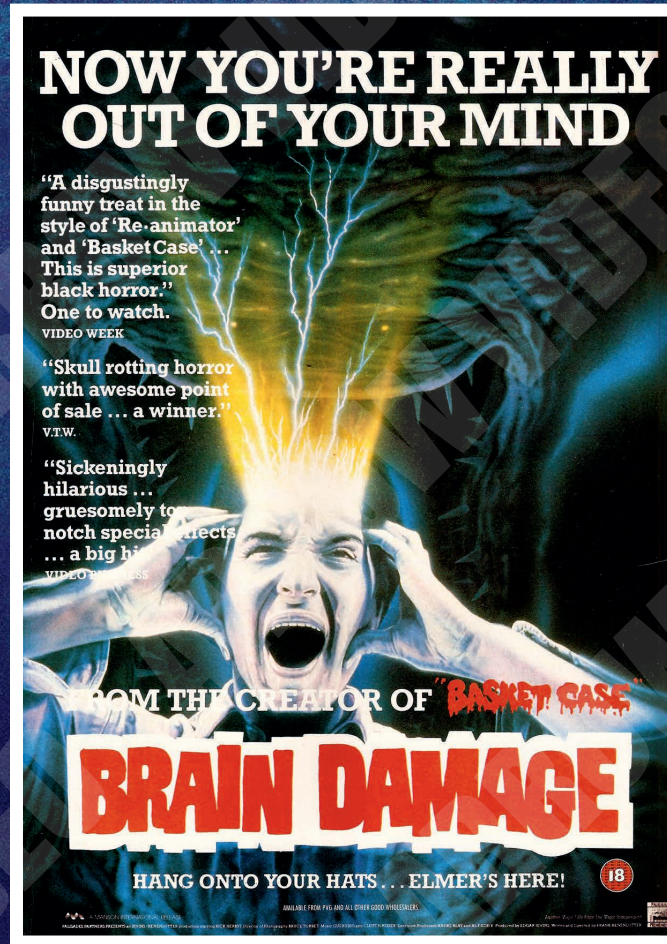
US one sheet



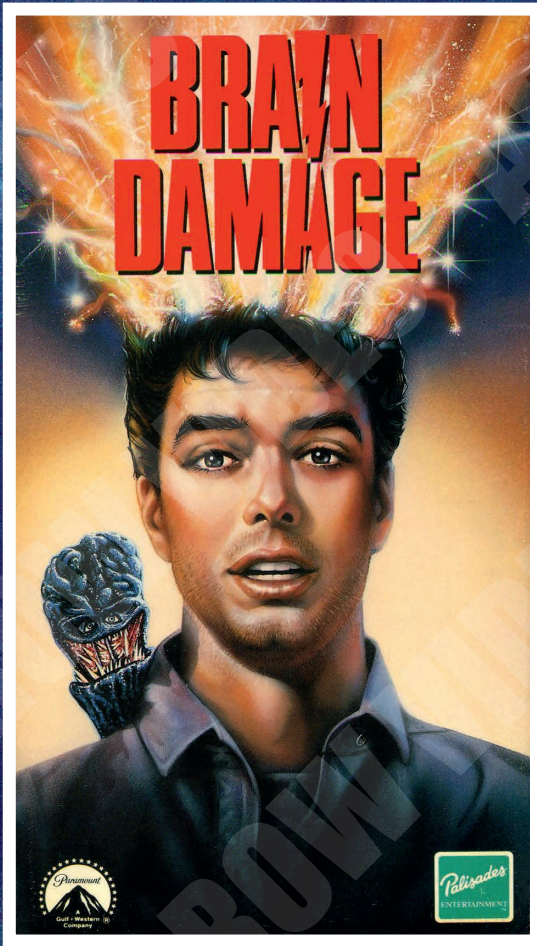
Promo by Frank Henenlotter



French poster

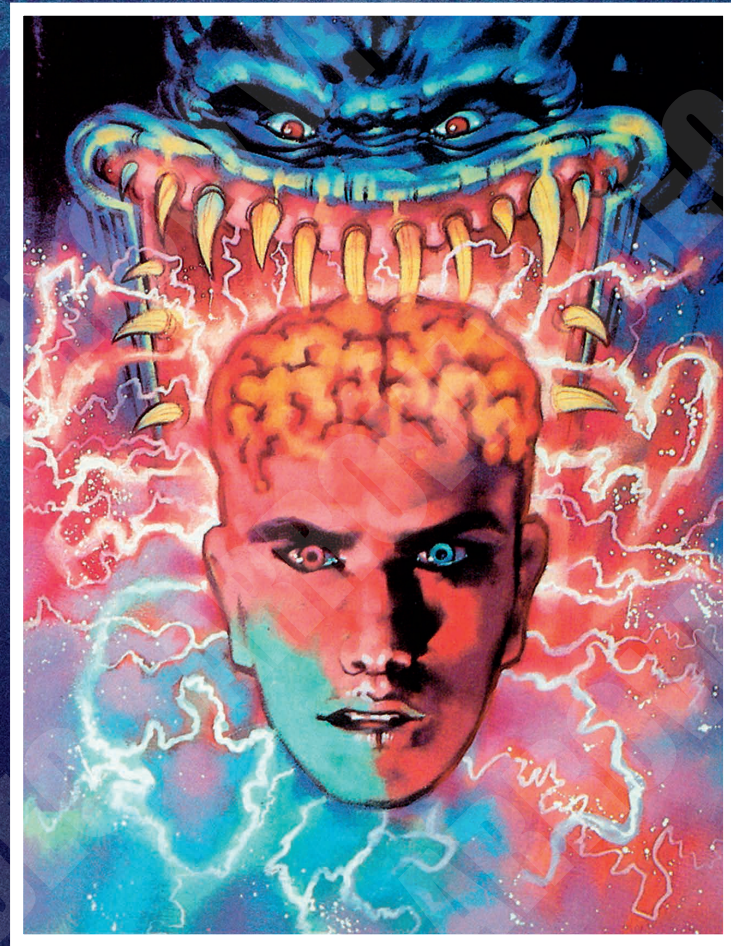


UK video ad slick



US VHS

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UK VHS artwork by Graham Humphreys

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ABOUT THE TRANSFER

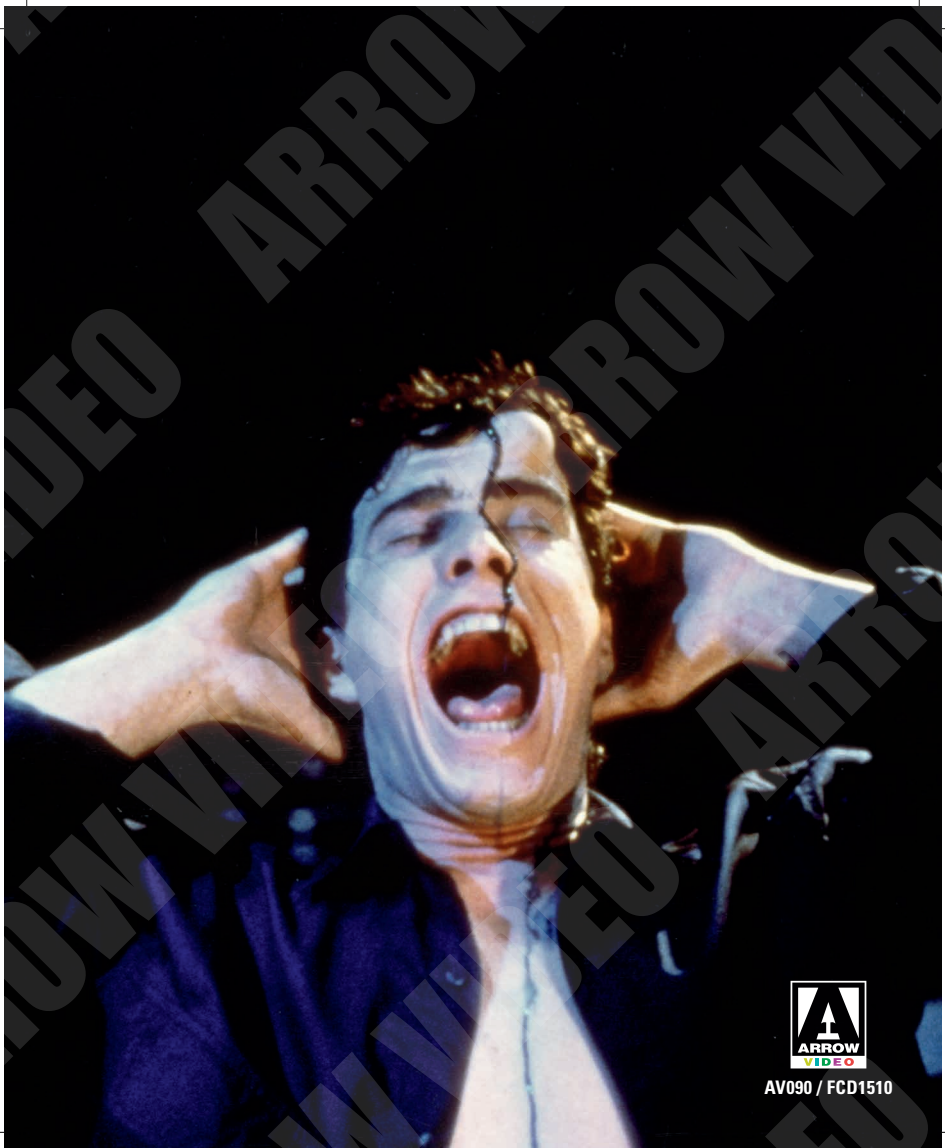
Brain Damage is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono sound. The High Definition master was supplied for this release by Mark Holdom/Mackinac. Additional picture restoration was completed by Deluxe, London.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **Ewan Cant**
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**
Technical Producer **James White**
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**
Blu-ray/DVD Mastering **David Mackenzie**
Subtitling **Engine House Media**
Artist **Sara Deck**
Design **Obviously Creative**

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Gabe Bartalos, Andre Blay, Harry Chaskin, Elijah Drenner, Dan Frye, Michael Gingold, Frank Henenlotter, Rick Herbst, Mark Holdom, Edgar levins, James Kwei, Gregory Lamberson, Al Magliochetti, Karen Ogle, Adam Skinner and Paul White.



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