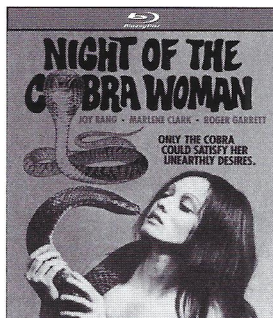


## NIGHT OF THE COBRA WOMAN

Directed by Andrew Meyer  
(1972) Scorpion Releasing Blu-ray



Following the July 1970 shoot of *Von Richthofen and Brown* in Ireland, Roger Corman abruptly quit directing. It was a calculated effort to reestablish himself as a producer—first of original content and, soon after, as distributor of the latest European offerings from auteurs like Francois Truffaut, Federico Fellini and Ingmar Bergman. New World Pictures would become Corman's imprimatur for the next thirteen years, and add a considerable chapter to his filmmaking legacy. It's a captivating and rich period—even the worst of the in-house New World product can be considered of historical interest in 2017 for the way

it documents a specific time and place in exploitation cinema. And that's where *Night of the Cobra Woman* comes in.

In New World's early days, and partly due to the success of Jack Hill's women-in-prison pictures, shooting in the Philippines was *de rigueur*—the locales offered cheap labor, a casual disregard for animal handling procedures, brazen opportunities for riskier stunt work, and other notable bangs-for-your-buck. There were no unions to worry about, so getting away with more for less became routine. *Cobra Woman* uses all of these slack standards to its questionable advantage.

The film stars Marlene Clark (*Ganja and Hess*) as Lena, an attractive and formidable snake-worshipping goddess pilfering the essence of youth from her male lovers.

In a brief origins story opening set in World War II, we're introduced to Lena and her fellow nurse Francisca (Rosemarie Gri), at the entrance of a tropical island cave (filmed in Manila). Francisca fails at fending off a rape-attack from a Japanese soldier (ubiquitous Filipino actor Vic Diaz, in the first of two roles) while Lena finds her way inside to the powerful idol Movini, a supernatural snake that bequeaths her eternal youth and healing powers.

Lena immediately saves the life of Francisca—who then devotes her life as a caretaker and live-in maid. Francisca's also given birth to (one must surmise) the offspring of the soldier in the way of a deformed son named Lopé (a drooling, childlike Diaz).

But before we meet up twenty-seven years later with Lena and her questionable home life, we're introduced to our heroine in the form of scholastic Unicef-affiliated researcher Joanna (Joy Bang, *Messiah of Evil*). She's in Manila to create a venom vaccine, and hears of Lena and the rare breed of snake she's maintaining. Joanne steals away to the secluded homestead, but is stonewalled by Francisca, as Lena is supposedly meditating.

Joanna's boyfriend—the rail-thin Stan (Roger Garrett, from Henry Jaglom's *A Safe Place*), he who embroiders his name on his jean jacket—visits Joanna on the island, and, curious one bright afternoon, soon finds himself a slave at the feet of a frequently nude (and sometimes shedding) Lena. He'll eventually become something of an ersatz pimp, securing men for Lena to siphon off their life force. Stan manages to keep his double life a secret, even as it manifests in a pasty white layer on his rapidly aging flesh.

The finale is anticlimactic, pleased to end on the handed-down truths of an unearned parable. Running just 76 minutes, and despite rumors of a longer edit, *Cobra Woman* has only ever existed in this form—from initial theatrical release (on a double-bill with *Lady Frankenstein*) to mid-80s Embassy VHS, and Scorpion Releasing's initial 2014 DVD. (This recent Blu-ray is an upgrade.)

Director Meyer was more of an experimentally minded filmmaker prior to this (*An Early Clue to the New Direction*), with Joy Bang being a frequent collaborator. I suspect Corman's preferred methods of working didn't exactly jibe with Meyer's. As Corman says in J. Philip Di Franco's *The Movie World of Roger Corman* (1979): "We were doing a number of scenes spontaneously at that time, and in my final meeting with him [Meyer] before going to Manila, I pointed this out to him and said that upon his arrival on location, he must have this straightened out, that he must solve these problems logistically. But he did not."

As it stands, *Cobra Woman* is an oddity, a one-shot, an early delve into horror and the Philippines for New World. But the film's leisurely pace and anemic narrative make it less than compelling.

Meyer would retreat back to the post-production rooms of New World following its release, only ever getting the chance to direct again when called upon to shoot some brief scenes (with Lorne Greene) in 1973's *Tidal Wave*.

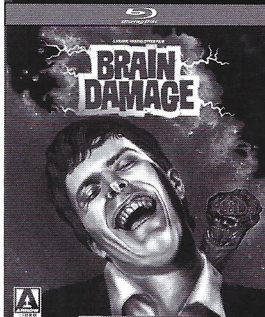
There are too few films sympathetic to the charisma of Joy Bang—someone usually given ditz supporting player roles in the early seventies—but even with a good friend like Meyer behind the camera, Bang seems loopy, uneven, and distracted.

In the way of extras, there's a six-minute conversation with Corman focused exclusively on *Cobra Woman*, and a more wide-ranging 22-minute discussion with Marlene Clark.

Aaron Graham

## BRAIN DAMAGE

Directed by Frank Henenlotter  
(1988) Arrow Video Blu-ray/DVD combo



In the mid- to late-1980s, a group of energetic film school students and talented independent directors and special effects artists created a thriving horror scene in New York that generated some of the wildest, goriest films of the era—*Street Trash* (1987), *Slime City* (1988), *Spookies* (1987), *I Was a Teenage Zombie* (1987), *Igor and the Lunatics* (1985), and *Plutonium Baby* (1987) among others.

Director Frank Henenlotter was a pioneer in the region, releasing the cult hit *Basket Case* (1982), which served as something of a template for the goofy, gory films to come. *Brain*

*Damage* was his follow-up feature, and benefits greatly from the presence of crew members from most of the above-mentioned film, including *Street Trash* director Jim Muro, special effects artist Gabriel Bartalos (*Spookies*, *Basket Case 2*), visual effects artist Al Magliochetti, camera operator Peter Clark (*Plutonium Baby*, *Slime City*), and *Slime City* director Greg Lamberson.

With *Brain Damage*, Henenlotter may have topped them all. It's one of the most inventive and funny movies to emerge during that period, a mash-up of addiction, comedy, and over-the-top death sequences that still packs a punch.

The film is about Aylmer (pronounced "Elmer"), a parasitic slug who provides his human hosts with shots of a highly-addictive hallucinogenic drug (delivered via an injection into the base of their skulls from his toothy mouth). In return, they help him obtain his favorite food—human brains, typically sucked out of his victim's skulls or mouths.

After escaping from an elderly couple who'd kept him weak on animal brains, Aylmer takes up residence with Brian (soap star Rick Hearst), who quickly gives up his job, girlfriend, and most other human contact in exchange for his fix of Aylmer's "juice."

Hearst does a fantastic job here, turning in a credible performance whether he's giggling through a hallucinogenic trip or convulsing in the throes of withdrawal. But it's Aylmer who really steals the film. In part that's because of the design of the creature (which appears as both a puppet and in stop motion)—Aylmer was made to look like a cross between a turd and a black dildo (apparently because Henenlotter felt that was the most offensive thing he could put on screen). That makes the attack sequences comically horrible, as victims attempt to wrestle what appears to be a ravenous sex toy off their heads.

But Aylmer is really brought to life as a character by uncredited voice actor John Zachere, the legendary TV horror host whose smooth diction gives the monster's taunts and quips an added edge. He even sings (wonderfully) while perched in a filthy hotel sink as a vomit-stained Hearst begs for a fix.

Henenlotter also pulled out all the stops for the gore set pieces, the highlights of which include Hearst hallucinating that he is pulling his brains out through his ear, a lengthy toilet attack, and a sequence in which Hearst picks up a girl at a punk club for a back-alley tryst that ends in one of the most offensively absurd death scenes ever filmed. And it all still works, even though the film is nearly 30 years old; there are still scenes in *Brain Damage* that can make me squirm and wince, even after multiple viewings.

As an added treat, *Basket Case* star Kevin Van Hentenryck even makes a funny cameo (basket in tow) on the subway.

Last released by Synapse on DVD, Arrow Video presents *Brain Damage* in a Blu-ray/DVD combo presented at 1.85:1 using the Synapse master created in 2006. The film looks incredibly sharp, with all the gore well presented, even in night scenes.

The disc includes a new commentary with Henenlotter and Mike Hunchback, as well as a nearly hour-long featurette called "Listen to the Light," that details the film's production history with interviews with producer Edgar Levins, Bartalos, Lamberson, Magliochetti, and Hearst. Bartalos and Magliochetti each get their own separate video interviews to discuss the effects. There is another short interview with assistant editor/script supervisor Karen Ogle, and a tour of filming locations with Henenlotter and former *Fangoria* editor Michael Gingold. There's also a 10-minute interview with *Brain Damage* fan Adam Skinner (who shows off his large collection of memorabilia), music videos, an image gallery, theatrical trailer, footage of a Henenlotter appearance at the Belgian Offscreen Film Festival, and a short Harry Chaskin film that was Zachere's last voice appearance. The first limited pressing also included a 32-page booklet with Michael Gingold-penned liner notes.

Brian Allright