

THE MANSTER

Directed by George Breakston and Kenneth G. Crane
(1962) Scream Factory Blu-ray



A cliché often associated with well-loved low-budget films is that these movies are “greater than the sum of their parts.” That has seldom been my experience. More often, it’s that these movies contain constituent parts—ideas, scenes, possibly even a single shot—so powerful that they overwhelm everything else, rendering the rest of the film (however good, bad, or indifferent) simply irrelevant. Those isolated moments, those images, carve themselves deeply into our memory and imagination, leaving an impact far more profound than the narrative that happened to contain them.

One such movie—or, rather, one such scene from one such movie—left an indelible impression on me as a young viewer. It’s the moment, about 45 minutes into the offbeat Japanese-American co-production *The Manster*, in which a third eye mysteriously appears on the protagonist’s shoulder. Michael J. Weldon’s *Psychotronic Video Guide* calls this scene “a high point of screen surrealism.” (Take that, Luis Bunuel!) For me, it was primitive example of what we today might think of as Cronenbergian body horror, and it haunted me as I entered that season of body horror known as puberty. Weight gain, acne, mood swings—what the hell was going on inside me? What was going to happen next? Like the character in the film, I felt like the unwitting subject of some bizarre medical experiment.

Not that the makers of *The Manster* had any of this in mind.

United Artists tossed off this low-rent shocker to fulfill contractual obligations, which required the company to co-produce a certain number of films in Japan. Producer/co-director George Breakston’s original story, upon which the script was based, was both distinctly American and noticeably creaky—the kind of hoary old mad doctor stuff Bela Lugosi might have starred in for Monogram 20 years earlier. Yet a certain Japanese-ness seems to have seeped into the picture. *The Manster* holds the same disregard to naturalism and commitment to the outlandish normally found only in Toho’s rubber suit monster extravaganzas.

During its first act, *The Manster* plays like a cross between *The Lost Weekend* and *Return of the Ape Man*. Foreign correspondent Larry Standford’s final assignment in Japan is a visit to the laboratory of the reclusive Dr. Suzuki (Satoshi Nakamura), who’s engaged in weird experiments aimed at creating new genetic mutations. The reporter (Peter Dyneley) can’t wait to wrap up the assignment and return home to his wife (Jan Hylton) after a lengthy separation. But Dr. Suzuki slips Standford a mickey and injects him with a mysterious enzyme. In order to monitor his clueless test subject, Suzuki befriends Standford and shows him the wilder side of Japan, beginning with its geisha bars. Suzuki then instructs his alluring young assistant (Terri Zimmern) to cozy up to Standford. The journalist’s demeanor and behavior change and he begins to undergo a physical transformation as well: one hand grows hairy and deformed. He suffers blackouts, during which he goes on homicidal rampages. Despite the best efforts of his editor and his wife, Standford spirals downward into drunkenness and despair (not to mention monsterism). Then the eyeball appears on Standford’s shoulder. It soon grows into a full second head. The murders continue. Finally the man and the monster split apart, through a sort of human mitosis. The two square off against each other for a climactic showdown. Although patently ridiculous, the story’s latter passages don’t lack for either imagination or action.

All this would play much better if not for some glaring weaknesses. Dyneley’s role called for an actor capable of delivering a performance with some degree of subtlety—or at least someone who could play drunk convincingly. Dyneley fails on all counts. Most of the rest of the cast prove equally inept, with the exceptions of the fetching Zimmern as the story’s temptress and the charismatic Nakamura as Dr. Suzuki. A few more roles like this and Nakamura might have become Japan’s answer to George Zucco. The technical merits of the movie are just as uneven, perhaps as a result of the film being co-directed by Breakston and Kenneth G. Crane. Most of the picture is indifferently shot, although the few scenes filmed with care—including the eyeball moment, one of the murder scenes, and some of the sequences in Dr. Suzuki’s lab—register an almost visceral impact. Although it runs only 73 minutes and builds momentum effectively during its final act, a few dialogue-heavy scenes in the picture’s midsection could have been tightened or even dropped. The hokey monster makeup and chintzy sets and costumes don’t help. (How do you say “Poverty Row” in Japanese?)

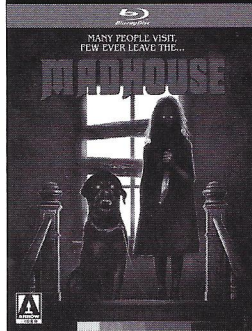
Fortunately, *The Manster*’s sheer audacity and scattered moments of brilliance, for the most part, overwhelm these flaws. For its initial U.S. release, *The Manster* was famously paired with *The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus*, a re-edited and retitled version of Georges Franju’s French masterpiece *Eyes without a Face*. This remains one of the best/worst/most peculiar double features ever issued.

Scream Factory’s Blu-ray presentation *The Manster* isn’t ideal either but, hey, it’s *The Manster* on Blu-ray. Who thought that would ever happen? This release represents a drastic improvement over the mealy-looking Alpha Video DVD and sundry other public domain editions that have proliferated over the years. Scream Factory offers *The Manster* in its correct 1.66:1 widescreen aspect ratio and 1080p hi def, both for the first time. Scratches, speckles, and other minor print damage crop up intermittently throughout, and image definition is a shade soft, though still acceptable. Blacks are firm and gray scale is rich; several early scenes featuring steam and smoke are rendered beautifully. The mono audio is adequate but no better, with a sporadically recurring buzz that seems to occur during reel changes. The only supplement included is a two-minute-long stills gallery.

Mark Clark

MADHOUSE

Directed by Ovidio G. Assonitis
(1981) Arrow Video Blu-ray/DVD combo



Do not confuse 1981’s *Madhouse* (originally titled *There Was A Little Girl*) with the far superior 1974 Vincent Price and Peter Cushing namesake. With the look of a lackluster late 1970’s T.V. movie, this *Madhouse* has few redeeming qualities, least of which is its wearisome attempt to utilize the timeworn “evil twin” plot as a slasher film premise. Even though the film opens with a shockingly gory title scene of a little girl bashing and mutilating another young girl’s face,

the film then sputters along, never really achieving any sort of suspense or fright factor. Over halfway through the film there is a bit of twist that finally starts the ball rolling, but it comes far too late, and even the most uninitiated viewer will probably see it coming.

Head writer/director Oliver Hellman’s (aka Ovidio G. Assonitis, *Tentacles*, *Pirhanna II: The Spawning*, *Beyond the Door*) attempt to deliver a slasher film here falls way short of the mark; the violent, blood-filled kills are just not scary and rarely shocking. The menacing canine responsible for most of the mayhem looks to be a rip-off of the apostate nanny’s canine in *The Omen*; same breed, same snarl. This is not an astonishing fact as Assonitis/Hellman is well known for absconding with the plots of more famous films like *The Exorcist* and *Jaws*, and then capitalizing on them with inferior imitations.

The *Madhouse* plot follows Julia Sullivan (Trish Everly, in her single film credit according to IMDb), a teacher at a school for hearing impaired children. After a seven year lapse in visits, Julia is summoned to see her mentally disturbed and malignant twin sister Mary (Allison Biggers) in the hospital. Here she is greeted by her uncle, Fr. James (Dennis Robertson), and he informs Julia that her sister is afflicted with a disfiguring disease; when Julia encounters her sister, the unrecognizable Mary curses her and vows revenge.

After Mary scares the bejesus out of Julia in the hospital, Julia laboriously relates how her deranged twin tortured her as a child, both with her vicious dog and by poking her with the tips of just extinguished matches. However, her doctor boyfriend (Michael Macrae) appears to only have a passing interest in these revelations and Julia’s priest-uncle dismisses them as Julia’s fanciful “stories”.

Then faster than you can say Michael Myers and Smith’s Grove Sanatorium, Mary escapes from the hospital. Even after learning this, Julia has no problem staying alone in her apartment in a ramshackle old building with only one other occupant, the flighty landlady (Edith Ivey) who lives on the upper floor. The rest of the building seems abandoned, with boarded-up windows and decay at every turn. There is a maintenance man who is charged with fixing up the place, but soon after he is introduced, he meets a violent end at the hands of *someone* lurking in the building’s decrepit basement.

The film dawdles along with a couple more uninspiring murders, talk of Julia’s birthday, and an off screen death by dog which seems to barely register with Julia, despite her closeness to the victim. Eventually, the big twist occurs and the film picks up pace a bit, but even then it still has a tendency to plod along. The acting throughout is mediocre at best, with the exception of Dennis Robertson as Fr. James who is allowed the chance to shine a bit in the last act of the film.

There is one scene that true horror fans will recognize as decently atmospheric and creepy, even if it is a popular fright film trope and doesn’t register as much of a shock; at the very least it is sinister and menacing in its design. But for the most part Assonitis/Hellman and the three others credited with writing the script have churned out one of the most humdrum slasher efforts of the 80’s, a decade replete with bad slasher movies, but at least where some of the worst graphic horror efforts are more entertaining than this madhouse.

David A. Krzysnik