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Thursday, October 13, 2005

## **Pretentiousness is Good for You**



In this day and age, "pretentious" has become an ugly word to most people, like "liberal." And yet, if one looks up this adjective in the dictionary, one finds it related to synonyms which are largely positive: *challenging, demanding, elaborate, energetic, exacting, formidable, grandiose, impressive, industrious, aspiring, visionary*. (We've become a much better society since "pretentious" and "liberal" became dirty words, haven't we?)

Billed as "The Mystery Film of the 1960s," Eclectic DVD Distribution's *THE COMMITTEE* (1968, \$24.95) is certainly pretentious -- but in a good way, and it's all those other affiliated adjectives, too. Though I approached the film openly, I must admit to finding it opaque... but I *am* intrigued by it, and will gladly give it another go in the near future. I'd never heard of this strange little British film before; it's literally little, less than an hour long, but it has several points of interest that snared my attention straight away. It stars Paul Jones, the Manfred Mann vocalist who had previously appeared in Peter Watkin's dark cult rockdrama *PRIVILEGE* (1967), and features music by The Crazy World of Arthur Brown (who perform onscreen, as pictured above) and The Pink Floyd, who contribute score. (This was done just after Syd Barrett bailed out, but before they

became, simply, Pink Floyd.) A further enticement is that it's directed by Peter Sykes, who went on from this to direct episodes of THE AVENGERS and such distinctive horror features as VENOM aka THE LEGEND OF SPIDER FOREST (1971) and Hammer's DEMONS OF THE MIND (1972).

It opens with Jones (as the protagonist named "Central Figure") hitching a ride from a compulsive talker and decapitating him as he puts his head under the bonnet to check the motor... and then it gets stranger from there. Much of the dialogue is non sequitur, like the action, but there is a discernible purpose underlying all the opacity, namely an assertion of individuality/originality/non-conformity in overbearing societies, local and national, that take the form of committees. As I say, it's not a lucid film, at least not on the first pass, but it's diverting and it speaks the language of cinema beautifully. I can see why AVENGERS producer Albert Fennell would screen this and, regardless of not understanding it, invite Sykes to come and work for him. The disc is handsomely produced and the film's standard ratio B&W photography (by Ian Wilson, who also shot CAPTAIN KRONOS VAMPIRE HUNTER and QUEEN KONG!) is most attractive. I'm glad to add this to my Peter Sykes collection.

The DVD compensates for the sub-feature length of the picture with an almost equally long and certainly equally entertaining "The Making of THE COMMITTEE" featurette. This is composed of interviews (conducted by SPITTING IMAGE producer Jon Blair) with Sykes and writer Max Steuer, a noted economist/hot air balloonist/bass player whose only film experience this was. The questions are intelligent and forthright, and both men speak engagingly and articulately about their influences (Sykes mentions Franju and Bergman) and their intentions with the picture, freely admitting that THE COMMITTEE is not easily grasped or even wholly successful. What struck me is that, although I didn't feel I had responded to the film particularly warmly, whenever the interviews were interrupted by an illustrative film clip, I found myself responding to them with

delight, pleased to be reminded of certain Pythonesque gags that were actually more amusing the second time around. Yes, it is a bit Pythonesque, but without all that eccentric mugging to underscore that "this is a gag" -- which, I suppose, would make it rather more Buñuelian. My response to the clips would seem to support Steuer's point that the film is most rewarding on subsequent viewings.

Sweetening the deal is a second disc (a CD) consisting of a new Paul Jones track called "The Committee" (not heard in the film itself, it recapitulates the story in song), where he is musically supported by the Homemade Orchestra. There are also two other unrelated songs performed by the Homemade Orchestra, "Bird" and a lovely cover of Peter Gabriel's "Here Comes the Flood." The CD runs just one second over 23 minutes, making it as shy of an album as the movie is shy of a feature.

Stimulating fun for those who are up to the challenge, certainly useful to those who need to fill that empty niche in their Pink Floyd collections -- and I'll kick in an extra point for generosity. My rating: B+

*Copyright by Tim Lucas. Posted at 2:52 AM*

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Wednesday, October 12, 2005

## **Tweak Tweak Tweak**

Since starting this blog, I have been reminded of something about myself. I am an obsessive rewriter. Thus, if you check this page early in the day, the text is bound to have been adjusted by later in the afternoon. Tweak, tweak, tweak -- that's me. Should you be of a mind to print off this blog for future reference or bathroom reading, be advised that early copy is a rough draft; final

copy should be in place by midnight. Or by the day after the original posting, certainly. By a week after its initial appearance, most assuredly.

While I'm on the subject of tweaks, let me digress for a moment about pinches. My blog is connected to Site Meter, which allows me to see where visitors to this site found the links that brought them here. By using this, a lot of interesting websites all over the world have been brought to my attention, some of them in other languages. I very much appreciate that anyone, especially strangers in foreign lands, would promote *Video WatchBlog* on their site and provide an easy link to help their visitors find it. My thanks to you all.

But I was annoyed last night to find my entire BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE review posted on another site. For future reference (and this goes for certain British print media too), **please don't copy and post any of my material in its entirety in another forum.** I appreciate the publicity, but reproducing something of mine in its entirety defeats the purpose of your good will. Happily, the gentleman moderator of this other site was quick to respond to my request that he remove it, and I also received a personal apology from the poster, which shows me that he had acted in innocence and without malice.

For future reference, everyone has my permission to link to this site, to publicize specific posts or the blog in general -- my permission as well as my gratitude. In fact, I will go one step further and grant permission to anyone to reproduce the opening paragraph of any *Video WatchBlog* posting as a kind of teaser incentive to follow the link they provide and come here. But I'm afraid my open-handedness must end there.

There is a commercial purpose for this blog -- to draw more attention to *Video Watchdog* and to enable us to respond more immediately to current events in home video -- and I'm giving

generously of my time to provide this diversion. Whether or not it continues depends largely on the extent to which my rights as creator of this material are respected. Okay? Okay.

Our blog log shows that we had 920 visitors yesterday, some from as far away as Russia and New Zealand -- amazing!

*Copyright by Tim Lucas. Posted at 3:47 AM*

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Tuesday, October 11, 2005

## The Sexual Healing of Terry Stamp



Pier Paolo Pasolini's controversial TEOREMA (1968) first came to home video on the Connoisseur label back in 1993, cropped, with a \$79.95 price tag. Bear this in mind as you consider that Koch Lorber Films released it last week on DVD as a single disc priced at \$29.98. It's a little steep for a single disc, but we should not mind paying extra for the good things in life. The film's audience is so marginal, especially in modern day America, that it's worth the extra expense just to have it in a proper anamorphic presentation. When I first saw the film and reviewed it in *Video Watchdog* #18, page 26, it leaped immediately onto my list of favorite films, but I've never watched it a second time in all those years. I've preferred to savor the experience I had.

Watching the movie again, I find it still holds up, though I wasn't as shaken by it as I was the first time. It's best when you're ravished by it the first time. If you're unfamiliar with *TEOREMA*, it's about the wealthy family of a Milanese industrialist (Massimo Girotti, married here to Silvana Mangano), who receives an unsigned telegram stating "Arriving Tomorrow." Suddenly, a handsome and beatific Terence Stamp - identified only as "The Boy" - is among them, awakening feelings of passion in old and young alike. Everyone in the household is mysteriously touched and excited and fulfilled by his presence, even the maid (Laura Betti, who was kind of the Madonna of Italy in those days, won the Volpi Cup for Best Actress at the 1968 Venice Film Festival for her unglamorous performance). When he leaves, about halfway through the film, the maid returns to her hometown where she performs miracles and is found, at one point, levitating in rapture above a farmhouse. The fates awaiting the family she worked for are just as poignant and surprising.

*TEOREMA* was banned in Italy for being obscene, but there is no explicit frontal nudity or sex, and what innocuous nudity there is, is all male. I suppose the film was considered obscene because it is impossible to not see Stamp as a modern day Christ, and that the passions he excites are homosexual as well as heterosexual. Yet we never see this Holy Guest making love, only giving love - and the film's second half rather clinically documents the sometimes dark paths people's lives take when they feel deprived of, or energized by the grace of God. This theme of an outsider coming into a domestic situation and shaking it up, spiritually and sexually, occurs in a number of films by another of my favorite filmmakers, sexploitation director Joseph W. Sarno, reaching an apotheosis of sorts in his outstanding *CONFESSIONS OF A YOUNG AMERICAN HOUSEWIFE* (1976). I once asked Sarno about this, and he told me he'd never seen *TEOREMA*... in fact, the theme existed in Sarno's work long before the Pasolini film was made.

Koch Lorber's DVD is welcome, not least of all because it removes the time compression of the 94m 10s Connoisseur transfer and gives us the film at its correct 98m length and speed. On the negative side -- and this is considerable -- it suffers from overzealous digital noise reduction. Close-ups and less complicated medium shots look almost fully revitalized, but whenever the backgrounds introduce a lot of leafy trees, the haloing smears together into a vague and pasty mess; the narrow bars of a wrought iron gate or the pebbled path inside a courtyard yield all kinds of unwelcome moirés and rainbow effects. The average bit rate is 7.2, but it looks conspicuously worse on my 53" screen. I spot-checked the disc on my computer DVD drive and found that the smeary stuff looked merely soft-focused on a smaller monitor.

It should be mentioned that *TEOREMA*, like *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* (and hundreds of other Italian films of the 1960s), was scored by the great Ennio Morricone. I suspect that Morricone and Pasolini were at odds, as (except for an Ornette Coleman-like main theme for jazz combo) the music is mostly heard in tinny snippets overheard on unseen radios. This is a movie that could have done without music.

The disc is filled-out with "Pasolini and Death: A Purely Intellectual Thriller," a 53m interview with artist Giuseppe Zigaina, who worked as a technical consultant on *TEOREMA*. He doesn't discuss this collaboration; instead, Zigaina shares his theory - inspired by a complete rereading of Pasolini's *oeuvre* - that the director's violent 1975 murder was not unexpected but rather a work-for-hire that Pasolini felt was necessary to underscore his life's work with meaning. For some reason, Koch Lorber have opted to overdub Zigaina rather than subtitle his conversation, which is a bit distracting. It's a disturbing story nonetheless, and he presents a very convincing case. Engrossing material, but not the right chaser for *TEOREMA*.



So what *are* the right chasers for TEOREMA? Sitting under the stars, listening to jazz, running, cuddling, drinking, smoking, crying, praying, making love. All in all, a moving experience that not even an imperfect transfer can diminish. My rating: B

*Copyright by Tim Lucas. Posted at 7:33 PM*

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## **Black Tuesday**

I awoke this morning overhearing Donna, in her office in the next room, consoling a relative of one of our readers. As I lay there in bed, listening for some clue to the reader's identity -- "He was with us almost from the beginning," I heard Donna say -- I understood that the tragedy was not just a death, but a suicide. "Sometimes the depression gets to be so much, and if you combine that with physical pain..." Donna offered, and I began to think of those *VW* readers who I know suffer from physical ailments and disabilities.

I put on my robe and walked into Donna's office, where -- still on the phone -- she looked at me and wrote a name on a handy tablet: "Thomas Scofield." This was not one of the names I called to mind, and this is indeed tragic.

I first came into contact with Tom Scofield in the wake of *Video Watchdog's* 5th issue, the one devoted to Mario Bava's BLACK SABBATH. Tom sent me a wonderfully descriptive, long letter about his first encounters with Bava's films at drive-ins in the Midwest. I haven't read it since, but I prize it in memory as one of the best Bava-related letters I ever received. It made mention of the fact that Tom, while still in high school, had conducted a correspondence with the film's American composer Les Baxter that touched on his Bava assignments for AIP. Tom offered to share that information with me for my Bava book, but as it turned out, he never did. Tom's initial letter had informed me that Baxter had recorded and released "Katia's Theme" from BLACK SUNDAY as the

title theme of his exotica album *The Jewels of the Sea*, and he kindly loaned me his vinyl copy of this rare album for the year or so I misfiled it. When I found it again, I returned it to him with interest.

The next time I heard from Tom was quite some time later, circa 2000, when someone notified me by e-mail that I was the subject of some new controversy on the *Film Score Monthly* boards.

Evidently Tom had been upset about some statements I had made (all perfectly true) in my liner notes or audio commentary for Image Entertainment's BLACK SUNDAY DVD, concerning the extent to which "Katia's Theme" had been copied from Roberto Nicolosi's original score. There's no need for me to paraphrase all this, because Tom's correspondence (unintended for publication) and my response to it are still available for reading on the *FSM* site. That his anger is still available for discovery, though the matter was later resolved amicably, is one of the misfortunes of an unforgetful cyberspace, where everything that survives seems to do so in the present tense.

Suffice to say, a year or so after that exchange, Tom e-mailed an apology to me for his overreaction, explaining that he had been suffering from depression and a physical ailment, both of which sometimes blinded him to reason. I accepted his apology, assured him that Les Baxter would be favorably represented in the Bava book, and wished him well -- but never heard from him again. Tom remained a *VW* subscriber (as he had been since 1991) for the rest of his life, and his mother tells Donna that receiving a new issue was always good for raising his spirits for a couple of days. She blames the dark mood swing that ended in his death on a new medication he was taking for depression, coupled with being several days off the medication he was taking for his bad back.

Tom's mother, his only survivor, is now trying to notify Tom's friends of his death but is completely

out of her element with the computer he left behind. She would particularly like to find Tom's friend James Singer, for whom she doesn't have a current address. If anyone reading this blog knows of James Singer's present whereabouts (he used to live in Las Vegas), please write me by clicking the "Contact Tim" option to the right and I will forward the information to Mrs. Scofield. Likewise, if anyone who befriended Tom in cyberspace would like to forward their condolences, we will send those along as well.

Thomas Merritt Scofield was 50.

9:15 PM postscript: Donna tells me that Tom took his life last July, though we only heard about it today. His mother decided to contact us after receiving his subscription copy of *VW* #122 in the mail.

*Copyright by Tim Lucas. Posted at 3:52 PM*

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Monday, October 10, 2005

## Building a Better Bird



Rules are made to be broken, and I'm going to give you a full-length review after all. Not the same

review you'll later be enjoying in *Video Watchdog*, but a meaty one all the same. What's the point in doing a blog, if I can't occasionally surprise you... or myself?

In my VW 108:68 review of Medusa Home Entertainment's Italian import disc of Dario Argento's directorial debut, *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* (*L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo*, 1970), I wrote, after encapsulating the movie's long history of mishandling on home video, that "Medusa's new Italian DVD release is as near to perfection is as likely to occur, wedding the perfect visual presentation - wider 2.34:1 image with more picture information, warmer color and richer detailing - to fine English and Italian mono tracks... and also a brand new Dolby 5.1 mix [only on the Italian soundtrack] that adds a scary new spaciousness to Ennio Morricone's stalk-and-sigh score."

On October 25, Blue Underground will make me eat those words by releasing a spectacular two-disc "Special Edition" of the film that eclipses the Medusa disc in every single way. The disc's executive producer William Lustig credits *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* with being the movie that initially inspired him to become a filmmaker. "I can remember going to see it when it first played at the Embassy 46th Street Theater in New York," he enthuses. "I can remember sitting in the balcony and feel my hands break out in a sweat during the scene of the girl crossing the park. I had never experienced that kind of visceral suspense from a movie before."

Lustig has repaid his debt to Argento in full by giving *BIRD* "the full Criterion-style treatment."

Blue Underground's DVD marks the first time any company has utilized the film's original two-perf Chromoscope camera negative in the creation of its master, and in this case, it's also the first-ever high definition master of this title. [FYI, "two-perf" refers to a camera system devised by Techniscope which enabled special cameras to film scope in 35mm without the use of anamorphic

lenses. This was achieved by cutting the height of the four-perforation frame literally in half, which effectively doubled the width of the image.] The disc has an impressively high bit rate (it almost never dips below 9.2!) and looks remarkably vivid, yielding an extraordinarily enhanced perception of depth and detail, which Lustig credits in part to cinematographer Vittorio Storaro's use of spherical lenses.

"The classic widescreen images we tend to associate with the Italian cinema come from the early films of Sergio Leone and Dario Argento, and they were all shot two-perf with spherical lenses, which resulted in this amazing sense of scope and depth," Lustig notes.

"I don't know how much you know about two-perf scope," Lustig told me, "but, because there is a certain amount of image degradation involved in the process, filmmakers would often compensate by going a bit brighter and bolder in their lighting on set, so when you go back to the original negative as we did, it's like stripping away a dingy layer you've been used to seeing all these years."

Compared to the Medusa disc, the transfer is slightly darker, resulting in warmer, more naturalistic skin tones and colors that pop more brightly. Compare the frame below (from the Blue Underground disc) to the same frame as it appears on the Medusa disc, which appears on page 69 of *Video Watchdog* # 108:



(Just click on the image to enlarge it.)

Of course, grain is more apparent in BU's razor-sharp BIRD transfer than it was in earlier releases, which were all taken from diminished positive print sources. The presence of grain indicates that a scene was either filmed on location with insufficient natural light, or it can tip-off the presence of an optical effect like a dissolve or an optical zoom. But grain is even more noticeable in films of two-perf origin, because each frame is printed on the film strip at half the normal size and is later blown-up to full size in projection.

By going back to the original negative, BU also ensured that their BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE would be as complete as it can be. This has not been too much of a problem with earlier European releases, but the film was trimmed for America, notably in the "panties ripping" scene (which has been restored for some time) and the elevator murder scene (which here makes its US debut wholly intact, with the addition or extension of a couple of shots). Disc producer David Gregory tells me that some recent domestic issues of the film on disc have also eliminated the line "Bring in the perverts!" from the police lineup scene, but it has once again been restored to its rightful place.

BU's deluxe disc also improves on Medusa's Italian disc sonically. Whereas Medusa offered only a mono English track, BU offers *four* English tracks (*five* if you count a fun, spirited audio commentary by *Profondo Argento* author Alan Jones and *VW*'s own Kim Newman) and another three in Italian.

Here's the run-down:

English: DTS 6.1 EX, DD 5.1 EX, DD 2.0 Surround and DD 2.0 mono.

Italian: DD 5.1 EX, DD 2.0 Surround and DD 2.0 mono.

If you're set up to enjoy DD 5.1 or DTS 6.1 EX sound, I think you'll agree the audio enhancement is unbelievable, not least of all because it has one of Ennio Morricone's most intoxicating thriller scores to work with. As Alan and Kim note during their commentary, *BIRD* is one of the few *Argento* films that has sustained a contemporary look and feel over the decades, but the new sound mix (which Lustig approved at an additional cost of over \$30,000) brings it even more up-to-date. Watching the scene of Tony Musante ambling home in the fog, prior to his being nearly decapitated by a machete, the 6.1 track lowers a shimmering curtain of ambient sound around your head from your rear speakers, with the descending electric bass notes of the Ennio Morricone score seeming to actually step toward you, as other instrumentation and sound effects phase spookily from left to right.

Now I'm a purist when it comes to these things, too, but if sonic re-landscaping can enhance what's already there without upstaging it, and somehow underline a picture's suspense or its ability to frighten - as also happened with Warner Home Video's extraordinary stereo remix of Kubrick's *THE SHINING* - then I'm all for it. The degree to which *BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* has been revitalized is truly amazing, and remember - BU is providing its audience with an experience of this film (indeed, several experiences of this film) they can have only on DVD.

The mono track is always there if you want it, as is the original Italian soundtrack with an English subtitle option. The English subtitles appear to offer a genuine translation of the Italian dialogue rather than a dubbing transcription, and it's yet another interesting way to watch the movie by listening to the English dub with the subtitles activated.

The second disc is pure gravy, providing four interviews with cast and crew members, averaging 11 to 18 minutes apiece. Assembled here are writer-director Dario Argento, composer Ennio Morricone (who reminded me of Bela Lugosi's great phrase from *THE RAVEN*, "a god... with the taint of human emotions"), cinematographer Vittorio Storaro (who obscures his reflections on Argento and the film with a cerebral monologue, then dismisses us), and German actress Eva Renzi. Interviewed last January by BU correspondent Uwe Huber, *Frau* Renzi died of lung cancer last August, but she's feisty as hell here.

The running time of Disc 2 is sure to excite comment from online reviewers about whether this material should/could have been crammed onto Disc 1, in an effort to keep the overall cost of the set down. Yes, such a move would have cheapened the set... in more ways than one. If you're watching this disc on your home computer or a portable TV you bought at Sears, then yes, you're not likely to appreciate the brilliance of what's been delivered here. But for those of us with widescreen sets and HD capability, the high bit rate is much appreciated and not to be degraded. The two-disc presentation was absolutely the right choice.

Additional kudos to Blue Underground for the classiest packaging an Argento picture has ever had on video. This disc might actually be bought by some people who don't go to bed in "Fulci Lives" T-shirts, and it deserves to be. My rating: A+

PS: The Jones/Newman commentary doesn't indulge too much in the way of pointing out character



actors like Fulvio Mingozzi (the taxi driver in *SUSPIRIA*, seen here as a secondary detective) or the great Umberto "Humi" Raho, veteran of such Italian horror classics as *THE GHOST* and *BARON BLOOD*. I always notice *Signore* Raho when he pops up in a movie, and I've seen *BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* numerous times, but not until this viewing did I notice how much he resembles Anthony Perkins in later life... during his *WINTER KILLS* phase, for example. What do you think?



*Copyright by Tim Lucas. Posted at 5:13 PM*

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## **Why Kurt Won't Be Visiting**

"Electronic communities build nothing. You wind up with nothing. We are dancing animals. How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something. We are here on Earth to fart around. Don't let anybody tell you any different." -- Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*

And he's right, you know.

*Copyright by Tim Lucas. Posted at 2:15 PM*

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## Thank Columbus for Contests!

Happy Thanksgiving to my Canadian brothers and sisters, and Columbus Day greetings to my fellow statesiders, though this is one of the US holidays I gripe about. With all due respect to Christopher Columbus, I'd much rather receive my Monday mail. I can't help but wonder how much longer Columbus Day will linger on the American calendar; the supposed discovery of America is a bit far back to look for a country that's starting to remake movies that were made in the 1970s.

In one of the stranger episodes of my on-again/off-again novel-writing career, my publisher Simon and Schuster has seen fit to make me the subject of a contest. If you search my name on their SimonSays.com website, you will be taken to a page that includes, among other things, the giddy proposition "Win A Phone Call with Tim Lucas!" (The Official Rules page stresses that this prize has no monetary value, but I say that depends on who's paying for the call.)

The idea is that Book Club members should go to the description page for my novel *The Book of Renfield* and answer a trivia question on the entry form posted there. But, for the life of me, I can't find any questions (apart from those of the book's Reading Guide) nor any entry forms. What with all this obfuscation, and no mention of the contest on the "Simon Says" main page, I'll be very surprised if anyone enters, much less wins, this competition. But here's the link, in case any of you dare to brave the labyrinth:

[http://www.simonsays.com/content/destination.cfm?sid=33&pid=364950&qid=1&app=poll\\_quiz](http://www.simonsays.com/content/destination.cfm?sid=33&pid=364950&qid=1&app=poll_quiz)

[1:48 PM Update: Upon checking out how this blog link was working, I found a button installed under the "Official Rules" link. It is labelled "Start." This is what you push to gain access to the *Renfield* question. But be warned: it's a real brain-teaser!]

Check back later in the day because I plan to post some thoughts on Blue Underground's forthcoming deluxe disc of THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE... but I'd like to confirm a thing or two with the folks at BU first.

This blog received over 300 hits in its first 24 hours - an extraordinary debut! Please tell your friends and I'll keep spinning the plates.

*Copyright by Tim Lucas. Posted at 1:36 PM*

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Sunday, October 09, 2005

## **An Open Letter to Susan Sennett**



Dear Susan:

My name is Tim Lucas, and I'm a novelist and film critic; I edit and publish a monthly magazine called *Video Watchdog* and also write a monthly column for the British magazine *Sight and Sound*. I also write occasional liner notes for *Subversive Cinema*, and I asked Norm Hill if he could put me in touch with you. When I told him why I wanted to contact you, he told me that he would appreciate it personally if I sent this letter, and he thought you might appreciate it too -- which makes it all the more worth doing.

I watched Subversive's disc of THE CANDY SNATCHERS (1973) a couple of nights ago. While the disc looks great, I was frankly not much impressed with the movie, and I was wondering how I was going to express my disappointment to Norm -- until I watched the "Women of the Candy Snatchers" featurette and listened to the audio commentary. It rarely but occasionally happens that a DVD supplement will actually redeem the main feature, and I believe this is one of those extraordinary occasions. On the strength of what you, primarily, contributed to the disc I've decided to make THE CANDY SNATCHERS the subject of my next *Sight and Sound* column. It will appear in print sometime next month. I only wish I could have gone on a bit longer, and I may well expand the piece for my own magazine.

I thought it essential to reach out and thank you, for overcoming some serious personal ghosts in order to bring these documents into being. The stories of your personal experience on the picture were heartbreaking in such a matter-of-fact, non-self-serving way -- even managing to be humorous at times -- that I think they will make a world of difference to how this movie is perceived. I understand there are some "gore fans" out there who are ragging on the disc because you don't tow the usual PR line with the picture in your commentary, but I think the positive response will come in greater numbers.

It is so difficult in today's rigorously controlled media environment to hear candid accounts of the difficulties involved in becoming a working actor that stories such as yours are a breath of fresh air. I have always thought well of you -- I've liked you and your work for a long time (I remember you from OZZIE'S GIRLS, well before BIG BAD MAMA)... but after hearing about how you walked out of your THREE'S COMPANY audition and your refusal to play a victimized woman for no reason in that television commercial, not to mention the tragic stories of how you soldiered on through the

making of CANDY SNATCHERS -- I now think of you as a heroic woman.

To be honest, though I'm sure she's very nice, I can't send a similar letter to Tiffany Bolling because she came to the disc from a completely different angle. I got the sense from her input that, though she's not presently a working actor, she'd like to be and is hoping to use her participation here as a calling card. Because she didn't suffer through the movie as you did, she has more positive feelings about it and there was a palpable sense of her hope that this old skeleton in the closet might somehow be her ticket to renewed cult recognition as "Queen of the B's." Things may well work out that way, and godspeed to her, but I found her contribution interesting mostly for the way her reactions to the picture and her memories stood in contrast to yours, which I found so touching and vulnerable and sensible.

For the record, even though I didn't care much for the film (the attempts to blend comedy and tragedy just don't work, I feel), I found much to admire in your performance specifically, if you don't mind your natural responses to your predicament being called a "performance." You remind me very much of a French actress I admire, Édith Scob -- she often worked with a director named Georges Franju, and if you ever see a film called JUDEX, you'll know what I mean. She had an angelic face that made tragedies all the more tragic, yet she gave what is arguably her finest performance while forced to wear a mask throughout most of a movie called EYES WITHOUT A FACE. I thought of how she made the most of that obstacle while watching you give your performance mostly blindfolded and gagged, unable to use your voice or your eyes for much of the running time, yet somehow imbuing Candy with all the information the viewer needs to care about her and her fate. What you gave to the film -- and I use that "gave" advisedly -- is one of the few things it can be unreservedly proud of.

I wish you had continued in films long enough to have found your own Georges Franju, a director who could have built some really important films around you, even better cult movies, but it sounds like your life in Hawaii has worked out for the best. I'm very happy for you, and also glad for me -- that I was able to make your better acquaintance on this DVD.

In admiration,

Tim Lucas

*Copyright by Tim Lucas. Posted at 12:40 PM*

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Saturday, October 08, 2005

## It Was Twenty Years Ago Today...

... well, twenty years ago *this month*, anyway, that "Video Watchdog" was first introduced to the world. What better excuse to launch Video WatchBlog?

Before there was a *Video Watchdog* magazine, or a "Video Watchdog" column in *GoreZone*, or the "Video Watchdog" segment of Pacific Arts Corporation's *Overview* VHS magazine, the concept was first unveiled on the last page of *Video Times*' October 1985 issue. *Video Times* was the newly renamed incarnation of *Video Movies*, a glossy monthly publication where I found safe haven after leaving my previous roost of ten or so years, *Cinefantastique*.

The idea was born during a telephone conversation with my editor Matthew White (a nice man with whom I've sadly lost touch), when I told him that the tape of *HERCULES* which I'd been sent for review not only featured a different main titles sequence than the copy I'd taped off WOR-TV, but had different dubbing voices and dialogue, as well. Matt was intrigued and I told him that perhaps the magazine should introduce a column that told our readers about such anomalies as

altered content, bad panning&scanning, and what-not.

"Kind of a Video Watchdog," Matt mused.

"*The Video Watchdog!*" I corrected... and that eureka placed me in charge of compiling it. Every month.

Coming up with material to feed and fuel the column came surprisingly easily, and it ran for ten issues... which is as long as *Video Times* itself lasted.

After that, the column moved from one home to another, surviving like a bear cub jumping from one ice floe to another... In November 1986, I made my first trip to Los Angeles in order to write, star in and narrate a "Video Watchdog" segment for *Overview*, an experimental magazine-on-videotape produced by ex-Monkee Michael Nesmith; it was enthusiastically reviewed when it was released in a limited number of cities the following January, but the cost of producing a monthly program, even one periodically interrupted with paid advertising, exceeded the project's likely revenue, so there was never a second volume or a wider release.

Though not specified as a "Video Watchdog" project, I wrote an article called "The Butchering of Dario Argento" for the August 1987 issue of *Fangoria* that was, nevertheless, in the VW mold. I wrote that article on the occasion of New Line Cinema's release of *CREEPERS*, a greatly (or should I say "poorly") abbreviated version of Argento's then-latest film, *PHENOMENA*, whose fate I realised was par-for-the-course with the Maestro's American releases. When the names of the Argento experts are mentioned, my name usually isn't, but that article was arguably the Ground Zero of Argento research and appreciation here in the States. (An earlier, superb pair of articles, by David Soren and Luigi Cozzi, were published in *Photon* in 1975 but didn't lead to further discussion. I think that's because Argento's films, in their bastardized reductions, didn't inspire much

enthusiasm, but once US horror fans realised they were being deprived of full-strength Argento, they became excited to seek it out. The forbidden fruit syndrome.) The sudden interest in Argento led to his films being released here in America in their uncut forms for the first time, and finally available as they were meant to be seen and enjoyed, people like Maitland McDonagh were inspired to write about them. You can find "The Butchering of Dario Argento" in *The Video Watchdog Book* (still available from [www.videowatchdog.com](http://www.videowatchdog.com)); the information it contains may be no longer relevant, but it's an interesting index to how times have changed.

My Argento article led to a new, all-horror "Video Watchdog" column being picked up by *Fangoria's* spin-off magazine *GoreZone*, which was introduced in May 1988. It remained a popular fixture of that magazine for its first 21 issues, even after *Video Watchdog* had been launched as a magazine in its own right in June 1990. I liked writing for *GoreZone* and its friendly editor Tony Timpone, but the divided workload was difficult (in those early days, I was writing most of *VW's* content myself), and parent company Starlog Enterprises drew a line in the sand when they starting asking me to sign work-for-hire contracts that would give them ownership of all my future work for them, which wasn't something I cared to sign. So it was a very good thing that Donna and I started our own spin-off when we did.

Today, 15 years further on, *Video Watchdog* is a monthly, full-color, no-paid-ads publication... so why a blog? Isn't producing a monthly mag hard enough? You bet it is, but my reasons are several.

1. First of all, this blog can perform the commercial function of helping *Video Watchdog* to reclaim its primacy as THE source of information about new fantastic film releases on DVD. *VW* is a monthly magazine, but information is unavoidably delayed by being printed. This WatchBlog will enable me to get the word out faster about new releases. In the past few years, the Internet has



become a hotbed of mis-information and dis-information about DVDs, because most of the people writing about them are churning out fast food, with all the nutritional shortcomings of fast food. For every exemplar of the craft like DVD Savant Glenn Erickson, there's a dozen or more others who seem to be as clueless about the English language as they are one-dimensional (or one-generic) in their experience of film... and they all seem to use *Video Watchdog* as their template, whether intentionally or by imitating our imitators.

A case in point about my reference to "the English language": VW contributor Tom Weaver e-mailed me today that his audio commentary for *BEDLAM* was criticized somewhere online as being "too academic... so academic as to be almost impossible to listen to." Tom is a well-informed guy, intelligent... but hardly academic, so he wrote the reviewer and asked what he meant. He was told "I guess I phrased it badly. What I was trying to convey was that you talk too fast, and it's exhausting to listen to. I'll change it." So here we have one of the more brilliant horror films produced by Hollywood and the particulars of its presentation on DVD being appraised by somebody who doesn't know the difference between "academic" and "loquacious"!

2. There are so many online DVD reviewers that it has become harder for *VW* to obtain screening copies from some companies. *VW*'s monthly circulation figure is approximately 10,000 copies -- which is very healthy for a serious print journal devoted to movies that most people don't take very seriously. (If any of our competitors publish more, it's because they need to pump up their numbers to attract advertisers and don't mind scrapping close to half their print run.) It's also a huge annual cash commitment on our part, in contrast to the negligible costs of publishing something on the Internet. For its efforts, *VW* has won the Rondo Award for "Best Magazine" every year that award has been presented, but we don't reach 100,000 or more people like many websites, so we can't score screeners from some companies -- like Universal, whose product we

have nevertheless featured on four of our last five covers. (In all fairness, Universal has been providing us with selective product -- for example, we were sent THE BELA LUGOSI COLLECTION... but not THE HAMMER HORROR SERIES, an important title for us, which I had to buy with my own money so that VW could have the privilege of promoting it.) Thus, another important reason for this blog to exist is to extend VW's territory, the range of our available readership.

3. In addition to editing and co-publishing *Video Watchdog*, I have experience of working within the DVD industry. I've written liner notes for 50+ releases (tape, laserdisc and DVD), have recorded several audio commentaries, and I know many of the people behind the companies, which ought to give this blog more of an "inside track" than other web pages you may frequent.

I was speaking yesterday to a DVD producer who was lamenting to me about the harsh realities that are coming into play as a result of Internet reviewers. He was predicting that we will likely see the end of "special edition" DVDs from middle to smaller companies within the next couple of years. The reason? The professionals are getting fed up, starting to cut back. It costs in the neighborhood of \$20,000 to produce a single DVD; those are production costs that don't include the additional costs of acquiring the material, making sure that it's complete, tracking down participants and flying them into town to record audio commentaries, et cetera. After devoting sometimes a year or more of your blood, sweat and tears to a single project, it's possible to find all your hard work thwarted before it even streets, with Internet reviewers gossiping that a day-for-night scene on their advance screener isn't properly tinted, that a brief cutaway shot of someone is missing, or that something is too dark or too bright... and, before you know it, someone inevitably pipes in with the dreaded word "Boycott!" With the medium to smaller labels releasing such marginal cult product, often generously loaded with extras, is it any wonder that the prime movers behind such titles might be feeling a bit discouraged?

Of course, it's important to know about such shortcomings, but it's also important to know the reason for them, and whether such complaints are truly legitimate or not -- and I will use my access to the players in this industry to inform what I say here, before I say it.

4. Lastly, I've been wanting to resume the journal-keeping that was my daily practice prior to starting VW, but I have found myself persistently hesitant to write in a blank book. E-mailing has made me a dyed-in-the-wool typist. Therefore, I am also initiating this blog as a discipline and as a means of forcing myself to be more attentive to things at play in my daily life.

You won't find any in-depth reviews here; that will remain the province of *Video Watchdog* magazine. But I will post here daily, or as often as I can, about the releases and other subjects that presently interest me. I'm calling this page "Video WatchBlog" for obvious reasons, but I also intend to write about daily life, what I'm reading or listening to, or whatever other blips happen to cross my radar. The author of this blog will be Tim Lucas the film critic, but also TL the novelist, the screenwriter, the reader, the music-lover, the DVD-R burner, the reluctant traveler, the guy who loves sushi and Morningstar Farms spicy black bean burgers, and all my other guises too.

And don't worry if you're on a tight schedule, future entries won't always be this long. I'm just getting started.

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Links

Contact Tim

- [Video Watchdog](#)

- [The Book of Renfield](#)
  - [Steve Bisette's MYRANT](#)
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