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CANNIBALISM

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AN AMBITIOUS BLEND OF 1980s CLASS CRITICISM AND OUTRAGEOUS PRE-CGI EFFECTS, BRIAN YUZNA'S NEWLY REISSUED **SOCIETY** FINALLY GETS ITS COMING-OUT PARTY

# THE DROOLING CLASSES

MICHAEL DOYLE

**A** H, THE 1980s – IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES. ARGUABLY THE WETTEST DECADE ON RECORD, THESE WERE THE EFFLORESCENT

days of bladder effects, change-o-heads and methylcellulose; when bodily distortions of every aspect and slimy secretions of every consistency were as endemic as the Jheri curl, Rubik's Cube and acid-washed jeans. In an age that gifted us classic body horror chunk-blowers like *The Beast Within*, *The Thing* and *The Fly*, this period would culminate with a stomach-churning spectacle of transgressive depravity equal to anything attempted before in pre-CGI FX. That movie is *Society* (out on region-free Blu-ray from Arrow on May 18), Brian Yuzna's 1989's paranoiac parable for the incorrigible greed and extravagance of the Reagan years.

Filed over seven weeks on a budget of under \$2 million at locations found in and around Los Angeles, *Society* marked Yuzna's directorial debut after producing *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond* for Stuart Gordon. A burlesque coming-of-age horror story, its first hour plays like a restrained parody of a

John Hughes movie – replete with stock teenagers all conceived to stereotype – before exploding with the infamous “shunting” sequence, an extended orgy of flesh, fluids and flatulence. Made at a time when genre films such as *They Live*, *Parents*, *Heathers* and *The 'Burbs* were challenging the quotidian coziness of Republican middle-class America, one could be forgiven for thinking that Yuzna was issuing an overwrought clarion call for the proletarian masses to revolt against the moneyed well-to-dos. Apparently not.

“I wasn't looking to deliver a Leftist commentary on America, as I was initially more drawn to the paranoid elements of Rick [Fry] and Woody [Keith's] script than its politics,” the 65-year-old filmmaker contends. “In fact, I'd previously worked for a year on a project that Dan O'Bannon was going to direct called *The Men*, which was about a woman who discovers that all men are aliens. I really responded to the way that story depicted the world as a place where something was happening right in front of your nose, but you just didn't see it. I loved the growing realization characters had when they discovered the truth of what was going on all around them. Sadly, *The Men* didn't get made but I'd gotten attached to the idea of doing a movie about things hiding under

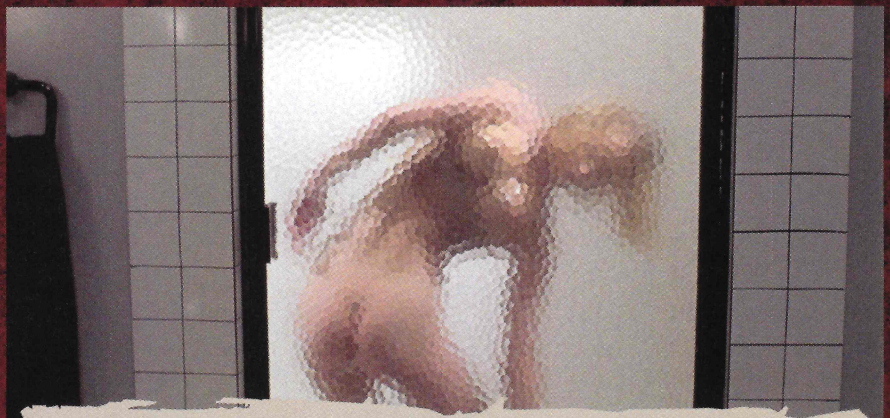
the surface. *Society* evoked those same feelings of paranoia and alienation, so it was very easy for me to jump right into doing the film.”

*Society* revolves around mullet-headed rich kid Bill Whitney (Billy Warlock), who suspects that something is terribly wrong with his idyllic Beverly Hills family. His unease is exacerbated when his sister’s ex-boyfriend, Blanchard (Tim Bartell), plays him a covert tape recording of his relatives discussing a sordid, incestuous cotillion ball. Bill gives the tape to his psychiatrist, but when the shrink later plays it back to him he hears only harmless domestic prattle. Blanchard is then killed in an accident, leading Bill to believe that a conspiracy exists involving his parents and their wealthy social circle. Warned away by local bad girl Clarissa (Devin DeVasquez), Bill returns home to confront his family but is captured by the waiting gentry. After learning that the high class clique are in fact shape-shifting monsters who prey on the underclasses, Bill realizes his entire life has been an elaborate ruse to ensure that his body is exhausted of its nutrients and essence in a grotesque ritual known as “the shunt.”

“The original script for *Society* was that same story but it didn’t contain the fantastical elements,” reveals Yuzna. “It dealt with an elitist blood cult that was killing non-society members in some weird ceremony. Since I’m a fan of surrealistic and expressionistic cinema, I did not want to make a film about people simply getting murdered. I wanted to do something wildly imaginative, [featuring] makeup FX nobody had ever seen before. I then began working with the writers to develop a more fantastical version of the story and we came up with this image of flesh melding together. From that came the biological concept of ‘shunting’ and the idea that the members of society – the bluebloods, the aristocrats – were an entirely different species from humanity that were literally feasting on the poor.”

Just as *They Live* submitted that the affluent are inhuman, Yuzna offers an intriguing theory as to the origins of his predatory elite: back “in the age of the caveman,” instead of a monolith manifesting to impart wisdom to our ancestors – as in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, – a prehistoric parasite emerges from underground. This organism infects some of the troglodytes, allowing the parasite’s host to dominate and manipulate the other members of the tribe. This effectively results in the infected becoming the chiefs and leaders of these primitive peoples, eventually inter-marrying with them in order to create “a literal blueblood.” These contaminations occur in Africa, Europe and Asia, so that every trace of humanity has its own version of society that presides over the human race.

Ironically, despite his film detailing this secret class warfare, Yuzna declares that, in reality, many Americans don’t believe that a class system exists in their country (in direct contrast to the UK and other parts of Europe where *Society* was a critical hit and social stratification is openly acknowledged). The director feels his compatriots prefer



**Body Melt:** *Society* member Jenny (Patrice Jennings) contorts to get at those hard-to-reach places, and (top) Ferguson (Ben Meyerson) loses face during his fight with Bill.

“THERE WAS SOMETHING WONDERFUL ABOUT SEEING NAKED 60-YEAR-OLDS COVERED IN SLIME AND RUBBER, EATING SPAGHETTI AND SLIDING AROUND”

– BRIAN YUZNA

to embrace the myth of the American Dream and the freedom it supposedly offers than accept “the fact that our entire economy was built upon genocide and slavery.” Although he agrees that hard work furnishes every citizen with an opportunity to make money, Yuzna asserts that any societal advancement occurs within certain restrictive boundaries as commoners are only permitted to climb *so far*.

“This is why the world of *Society* isn’t just about money, it’s about power and class,” he argues. “When somebody makes a ton of money, that doesn’t suddenly elevate them into the ruling class – because you can’t buy class! Acquiring great wealth merely exposes your poor taste and judgement more clearly. You are now *nouveau riche* as it takes many, many generations to become a part of the governing elite. In reality, a billionaire doesn’t actually wield a lot of power as those individuals with the real power – you don’t know their names and you don’t read about them in the newspapers. A lot of Americans don’t realize that the true division that separates us is

class. This is made clear in the movie when Bill’s psychiatrist tells him that it’s always a case of ‘good breeding’ as class is considered even more of a distinction than species!”

This discrepancy is never more apparent than during the slippery shunting sequence which registers as an unholy union of sodomy and cannibalism that is fatal to humans. Describing *Society* as a “one-joke sucker punch movie,” Yuzna agrees that the film pivots alarmingly at the sight of Beverly Hills nobility disrobing and devolving into a polymorphous pile of molten flesh (courtesy of some extraordinary FX by Screaming Mad George: *Predator*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4*, *Bride of Re-Animator*). Shot at the GMT Studios in Culver City, California during the bell-lap of an exhausting schedule, this undulating conglomeration of twisted forms required twelve people to operate and was inspired by the surrealist paintings of Salvador Dalí.

“Shooting the shunt was just a gas,” chuckles Yuzna. “I mean, to get all those extras to act like *that* was a lot of fun. There was something won-



**Stretch Marks:** (left to right) The Beverly Hills elite engage in the orgasmic delights of shunting, Bill's father morphs into a literal butthead, and (below) Dr. Cleveland makes a point by transforming his head into a giant hand.

derful about seeing naked 60-year-olds covered in slime and rubber, eating spaghetti and sliding around. In some ways I'm sure it was a liberating experience for them, because people love to get crazy like that. I think that delirious feeling is something I've tried to inject into a lot of my movies – probably to a fault. My own personal tastes are certainly not mainstream, so I loved the complete madness and excess of that sequence. I always thought the shunting provided a great ending for the film, but when you get to the point where people have lost all their inhibitions like that – it's fantastic!"

This veritable Dalicatessen of pliable people climaxes with Bill ramming his fist up the rectum of his obnoxious nemesis, Ferguson (Ben Meyerson), and seizing his skull by the eye sockets before literally pulling him inside out. Yet, preview audiences were more disgusted by the kiss Billy Warlock and Ryerson share during their climactic confrontation than the severity of the anal trauma imagery.

"What can I say?" says Yuzna. "The 1980s was a different era in terms of our attitude and tolerance. I'm sure that kiss did upset some people and was interpreted as being a homosexual act, but it wasn't intended that way. It just seemed the right thing to do at that particular moment. Certain critics also focussed on the moment Bill shoves his fist up Ferguson's

asshole, but that was not consciously constructed to be a gay thing either. I was simply thinking, 'What can I do here that'll take this sequence even further? How can I end this fight in a uniquely dramatic and visceral way?' Unfortunately, some of the reviews – such as the one in *Variety* – dismissed *Society* as 'rough trade gay porno,' while in France they labelled the movie 'sodomy gore.'"

Another extraordinary rectal moment occurs when Bill notices his father's sweaty face protruding from his anus and calmly exclaiming, "You're right, son, I am a butthead!" For Yuzna, the gag was just too good to pass up.

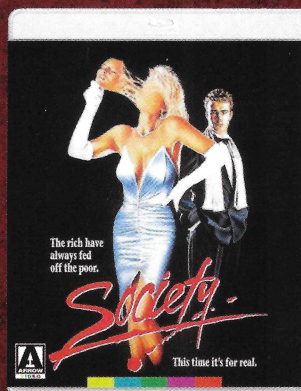
"Screaming Mad George and I invented the term 'psycho-fiction' to describe what we were doing in *Society*," he explains. "In effect, this approach involved making the unreal appear real, and the butthead is a perfect illustration of that.

The concept of shunting gave us enormous freedom to realize any crazy idea we had – like the psychiatrist suddenly appearing with a big hand on his shoulders instead of a head. The butthead was an outrageous image, but it captured the disgust and fear that Bill feels about his family. We originally had even more weird stuff in that sequence where the butthead started singing, 'Where have you been, darlin' Billy! Dum-da-da-dum, da-da-dum!' I wish I could find that footage and put it [on

the Blu-ray] as an extra."

A queasy meditation on the "greed is good" philosophy that transcends its soapy veneer, *Society* could have borrowed its title from Paul Bartel's *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Beverly Hills* (also released in 1989). As a horror film, it's

hard for any cineaste worth his or her weight in food stamps not to warm to a picture that embraces the themes of incest (which Yuzna considers to be "the fundamental root of all horror stories"), alienation and sexual perversity with such unadulterated fervency. Currently toiling on a sequel to *Society* (that he jokingly calls *The Revenge of the One Percent*), Yuzna hopes the second instalment will be an equally potent blend of heavy-handed



satire and sticky surrealism.

"*Society* is an unusual film," he concludes with astonishing understatement. "When it first came out, I thought, 'Oh, this movie is going to be so popular! People are going to love it!' Unfortunately, that wasn't the case, as it was a big failure in the US. All of my friends were suddenly acting like I had contracted some disease – I mean, we just didn't talk about what happened – but over the years, *Society* seems to have been rediscovered by American audiences. That gives me tremendous pleasure as this movie is very dear to my heart. It seems to have legs whereas a lot of the movies I made afterwards – that were better received and made more money – simply don't. They have almost been forgotten, but it appears that *Society* is here to stay." 🤪