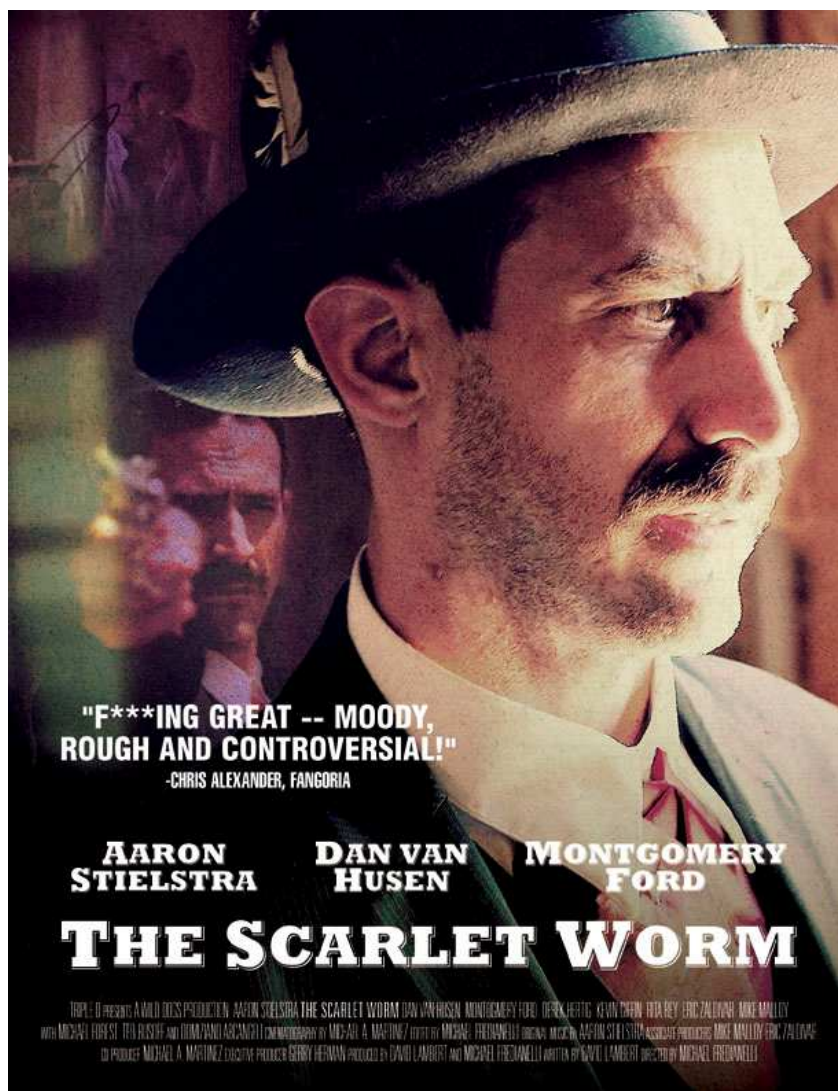




THE SCARLET WORM: WORKIN' ON THE POETRY

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THE SCARLET WORM: WORKIN' ON THE POETRY

An Interview with Eric Zaldivar

By Ariel Esteban Cayer

Don't let its title fool you. *The Scarlet Worm*, despite its micro-budget, is anything but small and nothing short of ambitious. Billed as 'the first abortion western' (fans of TV show *Deadwood* will disagree), the film, penned by oater historian David Lambert - and as a result rife with elements for Western enthusiasts to dig into - stars Aaron Stielstra as the verbose and philosophically-inclined hired gun Print, for whom killing is an art the likes of a Monet painting. Tasked with the assassination of ruthless brothel owner Heinrich Kley (portrayed by eurotrash vet Dan van Husen of *Cutthroats Nine* and *A Bullet for Sandoval*) who takes sadistic pleasure in giving gruesome abortions to his prostitutes, he is determined to paint his last

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masterpiece - in blood, of course - while training an apprentice in the process. Textually rich and carried by an unexpected voice-over, the film's writing is smart and economic and its main actor (Stielstra) is gripping and charming enough to carry a monologue throughout. *The Scarlet Worm* is a surprising accomplishment, an inspiration to filmmakers seeking to create with very little money. Spectacular Optical interviews Western historian and actor/producer Eric Zaldivar, who portrays Kley's assistant and right-hand man Gus in *The Scarlet Worm*.



Dan van Husen (L) and Eric Zaldivar (R)

AEC: *The Scarlet Worm* is a film you star in, produced and served as second unit director for. Before getting to it, though, I have to ask: what is it about westerns that have captivated you so much? I hear you are quite the specialist.

EZ: I love cinema. Particularly genre cinema. And I believe the most cinematic of all the genres is the Western. The grandiose landscapes and the heroes, and villains, that seem to tower over them make for great viewing experiences. I've become quite the Western historian the past few years. Introducing films at arthouse cinemas and writing reviews on various instalments of the genre. I even began writing a reference book a few years back. It's almost finished now but unfortunately the climate of journalism is pretty dreary so I'm worried about publishers not being interested. We'll see.

AEC: *The film has quite the interesting cast as well, including, most notably, veteran actors Dan van Husen and Brett Halsey. Where you a fan initially? If so, did it ever get intimidating?*

EZ: [I] was a fan of both for different reasons. Dan van Husen is one of those Spaghetti Western mugs that crop up every few movies or so in that genre (Others off the top of my head are Mario Brega, Luigi Pistilli, Piero Lulli, Federico Boido) and his presence, even if brief, seemed to raise the level of enjoyment for even the poorest of vehicles. Halsey is more of a leading man and while he didn't pick the slickest of titles, he certainly proved to be above the material and was always likable. Needless to say I was intimidated by both on set. I've watched them for hours on end, there was no way I was going to be calm in their presence.

We had Halsey on set for one day and although I got a good Lee Van Cleef anecdote out of him we didn't have enough time to really get to know each other. van Husen, on the other hand, I got to work with for three days straight so by the end of the final day there was a kinship of sorts.

AEC: *What was the the Lee Van Cleef anecdote?*

EZ: The anecdote wasn't particularly flattering. I think most Van Cleefphiles know about him being a booze hound? Well, on the set of *The Commander* (1988), Van Cleef was bragging to Halsey's wife that he had quit drinking while gulping down some beer. Clearly, to Van Cleef, the only thing that qualified as "drinking" was hard liquor.

AEC: *Did you have any inspiration or did any specific character inform your portrayal of Gus?*

EZ: Gus is the Chief Villain's offspring who is unsure of his father's actions, which is a bit of a stock character in Westerns (think Dennis Hopper in *Sons of Katie Elder* [1965] for

and Adam Abouaccar!

DEATH RIDES A HORSE - 16mm screening! Free Spaghetti!



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example) and cinema in general.

My portrayal wasn't inspired by fiction but I did call forth some real life insecurities I have of my own father. I think everybody has daddy or parent issues of some kind.

AEC: *One of the most striking things about The Scarlet Worm is the layered and economically condensed universe it manages to convey through character interactions and its use of voice-over. Can you talk about the various elements - such as Pat Garrett making an appearance - that could be lost on the Western neophyte?*

EZ: We've sort of been pegged as a "spaghetti homage", probably due to the participation of our big "pasta" stars (van Husen, Halsey), but we're more modeled after the American revisionist Westerns that were being released in the late 60's through the early 70's (*The Wild Bunch*, *Pat Garret and Billy the Kid*, *The Hired Hand*). *The Scarlet Worm* aims for realism, whereas the Italian Western is mostly steeped in surrealism and exudes a fantastic or loopy atmosphere.

The gimmick of voice-over is something you rarely see in an oater so we decided to try it out. Thankfully it worked very well! I believe it was the screenwriter (David Lambert) who referred to the various narrated montages as "*Goodfellas go west*" or "*Casino in the west*". Pat Garret's death was included merely to give some historical context as to when the film was set. Another producer and I believed it was not enough information for a general audience to decipher that *Scarlet* is a late period western so we chickened out and insisted on having the "1909" title card during the opening of the picture. Maybe it was a mistake. I'm not a fan of beating stuff over the viewer's head.

AEC: *Do you have future plans for your acting career, or else?*

EZ: Acting is a fun way to make a living but it's hard to find any artistic value in it. Though I don't compare myself to Brando, I believe it was he who said "acting is the easiest job in the world". I happen to agree with that. I like a challenge. You can find such artistic demands behind the camera, not in front of it. At least, I feel that way.

I will act again if it's economically feasible for a project I'm producing or directing, or if an interesting role rears its head, but I would rather focus my attention in other aspects of filmmaking.

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Look out for The Scarlet Worm, released on Blu-ray and DVD in May from Unearthed Films. Below, find the trailer for a short spaghetti homage Zaldivar directed, followed by the trailer for The Scarlet Worm:



January 15th marks the 65th anniversary of one of the most infamous crimes in US history, and the public's lingering fascination with Elizabeth Short - the woman who came to be known as 'The Black Dahlia'.

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