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The Genre Issue

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Crazed killers. Vicious monsters. Blood and guts. The undead. For some, these images represent nightmares pulled from the darkest corners of the human imagination, fears of a society on the brink of collapse. For others, they are just a fun Friday night at the movies. From the bewildered cabaret audiences drinking in Georges Méliès' fantastical *Manor of the Devil* (1896) to modern-day multiplex-goers cringing at the latest chapter of serial gore films like *Saw 2* (2005), time and again viewers have flocked to theaters in search of a scare. Horror films began with the advent of cinema more than a century ago, and have continued to thrive on an audience's desire to be frightened by smoke and mirrors, latex, and red food-coloring.

Yet, despite the popularity of the genre, horror has frequently found itself on the fringes, which is oftentimes exactly where it needs to be. Films like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Evil Dead* (1981), independently produced works by filmmakers with a compelling desire to scare the living daylight out of their viewers, have now become classics. The tradition continues even into the digital era, in which filmmakers subject to low budgets and even lower expectations still try to shock and disgust audiences, to rise above the formulaic slasher flick or the mundane monster movie. Either through contemplative terror or campy bloodbath, directors such as Philip Chidel, Christopher Alan Broadstone, and Sue Corcoran demonstrate that even with, and at times specifically because of limited resources, small budgets don't mean small projects. In fact, they can be the very key to innovative horror.

"Having a low budget forced us to be creative," says Bay Area-based writer and director Philip Chidel about his feature-length project *Subject Two* (2005), which screened at both Sundance and San Francisco IndieFest in early 2006. A twisted "character thriller" set in the remote majesty of the Colorado mountains, the story follows a troubled medical student, Adam (Christian Oliver), as he volunteers himself to the obsessive Dr. Vick (Dean Stapleton) for gruesome resurrection experiments. A vicious cycle soon ensues: with each new death experience comes unknown and spectacular sensations, and also horrible side effects. As Vick struggles to help Adam and to refine his life's work, Adam evolves into something increasingly inhuman—and eventually both

discover what lies beyond the limits of life. It's a modern monster story picking up where Mary Shelley's classic *Frankenstein* left off, an exploration by Chidel of the dynamic between a doctor and his abominable creation.

"The one thing missing [in the *Frankenstein* story], even in the Kenneth Branagh version, was the relationship between the doctor and the monster. The doctor shuns the monster, finds his morality, and then it becomes a fight between the two. I never bought it. If you work that hard on something, you're going to love it."

Loving a monstrous creation is a sentiment Chidel could relate to well when planning for the production of *Subject Two*. Completely shot on HD within three-and-a-half months of the filmmaker's decision to begin the project, the production was a test of endurance. "A few weeks before shooting, an avalanche buried our cabin. We found a different cabin. Not only was it at a higher elevation, but accessing the place required an hour-plus snowmobile ride, caravanning our crew and dragging our food and equipment on a sled. There was an outhouse, no electricity, and no running water. It slept eight; we were nine. This is the place we ate, slept, and worked. It was cozy."



Lisa Montague as Cindy in Christopher Alan Broadstone's 2002 short horror flick, *My Skin*, which uses recorded dialogue to convey necessary back-story elements, rather than taking up screen time with expensive exposition.

Horror

Filmmakers lure viewers into the heart of darkness

by Sherezada Kent

The cabin was an essential part of the story. In fact, it turned out to be the very inspiration for the entire project. When Stapleton, also Chidel's producing partner, mentioned that he had access to a municipally operated series of cabins in Aspen, Colorado, the two decided it was the prime location to film a new type of horror film. "In America, most horror movies are dark and dingy. We wanted something different: a bright, beautiful world where horrible things happen."

Also taking into consideration their limited financial assets, Chidel was faced with the multiple challenges of crafting a story for a location he had never seen before and making it horrifying with very little money. "I couldn't go overly gory. I didn't know who the makeup artist would be, or if we would have time for it. We couldn't slow down production with heavy makeup effects. But having a limited location and limited resources forced me to focus on characters and an internal, emotional struggle."

It's a simple structure—two primary characters, one primary location—but one that allowed Chidel to make use of one of the project's greatest resources: the talent and flexibility of the actors. Chidel had written the screenplay with Stapleton in mind as the determined doctor

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and Oliver (who had recently wrapped Steven Soderbergh's *The Good German*) as his "monster." An actor himself, Chidel had worked with both Stapleton and Oliver in an actor's workshop in Los Angeles years before, and was able to play to the strengths of his cast. When the time came to shoot, the actors were given free rein of their characters' wardrobes and even aided in the set dressing of the locations.

For a film in which one character is repeatedly killed, Chidel felt it important to tread the fine line between horrifying the audience and desensitizing them. "When we show gore, we really want it to push buttons. It's the dramatic beat, not just to revolt, but to remind the audience what death really means." With gory scenes that involve

surgeries, messy murders, and an elaborate frostbitten head (created by makeup artist Joanne Gross in the cabin set sans electricity and running water), *Subject Two* does not shy away from making the audience squirm in their seats.

Nor does it dwell needlessly on the blood and guts. Several of the more disturbing scenes are constructed of cut-aways and grizzly sound mixes, letting the audience fill in the visceral blanks. It's an effective technique long used by horror filmmakers to save on costly and complicated special effects, from Hitchcock's infamous shower scene in 1960's *Psycho* to the brutal "meat hook scene" in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. By focusing on sound rather than image, the filmmaker not only saves on precious production resources, but also guides the viewer to a much deeper level of horror that already exists within their own imagination.

Christopher Alan Broadstone is also a director who understands the power of a strong post-production sound mix to manipulate the audience. With short-format films, in which screen time is a filmmaker's most limited resource, sound can be a powerful tool to convey not only



For their campy feature *Gory Gory Hallelujah*, filmmakers Sue Corcoran and Angie Louise asked Kodak for its re-canned 16mm stock and local advertising companies for the spare rolls in their refrigerators.

unseen physical horror, but the story of the film as well. In his 13-minute digital video *My Skin* (2002), the Los Angeles-based director uses recorded dialogue to convey a bitter conversation between a murderer and Death himself.

"The voice of George [the murderer] on the phone is to sell a character you never actually see," says Broadstone. "It was also an effort to cut cost and time, which would have otherwise been eaten up by filmed cutaways of actors or elaborate back-story sequences." Broadstone uses a similar technique in another film, the noirish *Human No More* (2004). In the bowels of a decrepit building, a lone detective listens to a taped recording of the interrogation of a crazed killer. Using a montage of meticulously gruesome images as the chilling dialogue plays on, Broadstone gives the story a depth beyond its 17 minutes, adding a context to the slowly unfolding horror as the audience learns why the detective is yielding to a greater darkness.

"The interrogation tape was recorded, built, and mixed entirely on its own and then inserted as an audio stem into the full soundtrack for the final mix," explains Broadstone. "I decided, partly for budgetary reasons, to do all the audio myself for *Human No More* using Final Cut Pro on my Mac G4. The only production sound used, short of a few stolen and processed sounds, was the detective's monologue. Everything else heard was recorded during post-production."

Both films were shot using only one actor—the versatile Tony Simmons playing both the reaper and the detective—and one location. Having starred in a previous project of Broadstone's, Simmons volunteered his apartment for the shooting of *My Skin*, saving the expense of having to rent a location. For *Human No More*, however, the director required something a bit more complicated than someone's living room. Calling upon his connections at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc), he was able to secure a free location in the basement of an old freight depot in downtown Los Angeles, which had been renovated and is now home to SCI-Arc. Broadstone, set designer Wendy Broadstone (the filmmaker's sister), and art director Danilo Montejo spent one month between day jobs to assemble the set for four intensive days of shooting.

"I highly recommend finding a location you can completely control for as long as you need it to shoot. I've had to exercise endless patience with my projects and take as much time as needed to make them as good as they can be," says Broadstone. His patience has paid off in the form of numerous festival screenings, including Fearless Tales Genre Fest in San Francisco and Tromadance in Park City, Utah, and awards at the New York City Horror Film Festival and Shriekfest in Los Angeles. "It's amazing how much the world of horror festivals and Web sites has grown in the last several years. It's definitely made it much easier for me to get my work into the hands of the right people—those that love the macabre."



In *Subject Two*, Philip Chidel's story unfolds in a bright, beautiful landscape, not in the usual shadowy places of horror films.

Broadstone isn't the only independent director who has benefited from the recent surge of horror-themed film festivals and programs. Seattle filmmakers Sue Corcoran and Angie Louise (the self-anointed Von Piglet Sisters) found raucous audiences from San Francisco, California, to Neuchâtel, Switzerland, for their horror-comedy *Gory Gory Hallelujah* (2004). Garnering the Gus Van Sant Juror Prize for "Bravest Film" at the Bend Film Festival in Oregon, the movie was a labor of love for the Von Piglet Sisters, a tribute to the cult cinema they were weaned on.

"We wanted to do something where the process would be fun and worth it," says Corcoran, who was executive producer, director, and editor on the project. "We asked ourselves, if we had our last dime, what would be the movie we wanted to see?" The answer: a deliciously trashy saga of four misfit actors who hit the road after they are all rejected for the role of Jesus. Bound for Broadway glory on the backs of motorcycles, the odd foursome—made up of a black revolutionary (Jeff Gilbert), a bisexual hippie (Tim Gouran), a Jewish mama's boy (Todd Licea), and a fiery redhead (Angie Louise)—encounter bizarre misadventures along the way, including a gang of coke-snorting Elvis impersonators, small-town religious zealots, lesbian witches, and, of course, zombies. The gore-soaked musical finale alone is enough to land the film among the ranks of low-budget cult classics such as Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste* (1987) and Trey Parker's *Cannibal: The Musical* (1996).

Penned by Louise, the genre-bending script was ready to go three months after the idea struck. With only a modest \$15,000 in the bank and a script that called for 20 principal actors, 50–60 extras, and 18 locations, Corcoran knew she had to make the most out of every resource. Like Chidel and Broadstone, Corcoran secured her locations for

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free, both by calling on friends and by simply asking Seattle merchants for the use of their space in the off-hours. Having worked before with both 35mm and 16mm film, and preferring the aesthetic outcome of film to that of DV, she solicited donations from Kodak for their re-canned 16mm stock and approached local advertising companies for the spare rolls in their refrigerators.

As for special effects, Corcoran found herself at a advantage when the time came to add the blood and guts. Midnight movie audiences come for the camp—to laugh at over-the-top spectacle as much as to be grossed out by gore. Corcoran did not disappoint, providing her viewers buckets of cheap blood, zombies made up with oatmeal, latex, and airbrushed makeup, and a “sacred rod” devised of a gel-wrapped Kino-Flo light bulb and gold-glittered dildo. In post-production, Corcoran relied on the camp aesthetic to fill in the narrative blanks. Rather than mounting a complicated and expensive sequence with the four actors cruising the country on their motorcycles, Corcoran shot the characters against a green screen and digitally added a background. The result:

an endearingly cheesy montage of four Jesuses riding off into a kaleidoscopic mushroom cloud, which has become the iconic image of the film. “In this genre you can get away with so much more,” Corcoran laughs, “which is helpful with a small budget.”

Skillfully blending horror, comedy, and camp, the Von Piglet sisters created a singular experience, one they hope will endure. “We went into this saying we wanted to make a cult movie, but you really can’t since time has to go on so people can remember it. If someone is a fan they’ll maybe watch it once a year, show it to friends. By introducing it to people it becomes a shared experience.”

Horror films, perhaps more than other genres, create a shared experience for their audiences. Be it a campy gorefest or a twisted thriller, each film guides their viewers into the heart of darkness, touching upon primal feelings usually ignored when one is not shrouded in the safety of the movie theater. When the lights come back on, and the viewers find themselves still intact in their seats, a palpable feeling of survival, and, at times, a sort of camaraderie pervades the theater. Perhaps that’s why the horror genre has found itself such a loyal fan base, and why independent filmmakers continue to stretch every penny and resource to bring these gruesome images to the screen.

Having written her U.C. Berkeley honors thesis on African American representation in horror films, Sherezada Kent has worked in and written about independent film for more than five years.

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