

# Canadian Gothic, eh?

## A glib overview of current schlock

by Andrew Dowler



No matter how good Canadian film as a whole is looking these days (and with works like *Sonatine* or *La guerre des tuques* and Telefilm spewing sovereigns like Scrooge on Christmas Day, it is looking better than it has in years), it must sadly be admitted that the past 18 months or so have been purely rotten for Canadian *schlock*, those low-budget epics of sex and violence, forbidden thrills and deeply disturbed viewpoints that provide nourishment for the subconscious and a break from the stifling respectability of Canadian (or at least Ontarian) culture. True, we've never been world-class trashmasters, but we have had our moments now and then — early Cronenberg, *Big Meat Eater* and a handful of others. But lately we've been making more of the things than ever before (six out of the 23 features eligible for this year's Genies count as *schlock* by anybody's standards) and we've never made them worse: no sex, violence or lunacy worthy of the name, just cold, pallid and relentlessly dull simulacra.

A number of reasons for this unhappy state of affairs spring to mind. As *Cine File* editor John Harkness has suggested, numbers have a lot to do with it; you have to produce 100 bad exploitation movies to come up, more or less by accident, with one good one. By such reasoning, Cronenberg's emergence in 1975 and his continued work pretty well gives us our quota, but this entails ignoring the phenomenon of good sequences.

Good sequences in bad movies are as commonplace in *schlock* as beginning-to-end good movies are rare. These are the fat chunks of visceral and imaginative power that keep the legion of die-hard fans happy and coming back for more: the man/woman using the syringe full of his/her own blood to make love to

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the water-filled fuck doll in *Private Parts*; the sanctimonious mouthings of the Blands in *Eating Raoul*; Christopher Lee's point-of-view death, with the disused church suddenly turned clean and holy and the choir ringing in his ears, in *Taste the Blood of Dracula*; the whole sex-motivated plot of *The Stud*; the demented, deserved fate of Anthony Franciosa, who can only get it up by watching one specific TV commercial, in *The World Is Full of Married Men*; Rory Calhoun's remorseful dying confession that he put preservatives in his human smoked meat in *Motel Hell*. I could go on like this for pages, but from our own current crop the best I can muster is *The Surrogate* — nice premise.

Another suggestion, also from Harkness, is that our troubles are due to the lack of an indigenous *schlock* tradition, so that we are forced to imitate the Americans, something we are notoriously bad at. There is some truth here: neither our cinema nor our literature is strong in action-adventure-horror-mystery-what-have-you, but so what? Neither is Australia's and *Mad Max*, dubbed from English into English (Aussie to Yank), was a huge hit in the U.S. Exploitation is the language of film at its most international: *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is still raking it in throughout the Orient. Hammer Films of England, a distribution company with, I think, two previous shots at production, launched *The Curse of Frankenstein* in 1957 and *The Horror of Dracula* a year later with, according to Hammer mastermind Jimmy Sangster, nothing to guide them but the perception that there weren't any good horror movies around and here were a couple of characters in the public domain. They captured the world market and set the style in horror for over a decade. The point is that you don't need to imitate the Americans or anybody else, you just need to crank up that old sex and violence and get lively. But *we* don't; we stay dull and imitative.

It's tempting and to a degree justified to blame the directors (and this is where the story might start), for they are the men responsible for the success or failure of any individual film. But a look at the past careers of Paul Lynch, our king of *schlock*, and William Fruet, heir apparent, suggests that both men are wasted and misplaced in exploitation (and indeed in thrillers of any kind). Both made their start and their reputations with realism, Fruet with *Wedding In White*, Lynch with *The Hard Part Begins* and *Blood and Guts*, low-key portraits of ordinary people dealing with ordinary problems. Nowhere in those movies is there any kind of interest in, or talent for, sensationalism and the grotesque. By way of illustration, I'll tell you about a phone call I got from Paul Lynch a few years ago. I had given *Prom Night* a bad review in these pages and he rang up to express his outrage that a man who wrote pornography for a living (which I was doing full-time at that point) should dare to trash his horror movie. I replied that I worked hard to produce the best porn that I could and that I'd bad-mouthed his work not because it was horror, which I love, but because it was bad and boring. He replied that it was making big bucks and talked about how he'd had to give up realistic drama



because he just wasn't making the rent. I raised again the question of bad versus good horror and he raised my (and this magazine's) responsibility to support the Canadian film industry. And so it went for about 20 minutes; he never addressed my question of content and I never conceded that a fat TV sale meant a worthwhile movie. I thought we were talking about two different things: I'm not sure that Lynch did.

But if Fruet and Lynch have no real interest in exploitation flicks, they still get hired to make them and it's the men doing the hiring who are really responsible for the state of *schlock* in this (and every other) country. The producers (and this is where the story should start) have the cash and the distribution connections. They decide which projects are going to fly and who will pilot them. Given the conditions of exploitation filmmaking — low-budgets, short schedules and an inexperienced or indifferent cast and crew — the producers' ability, or lack of it, to make those basic decisions will show up on the screen far more clearly than in productions with dollars to gloss the dross. So, let us examine the recent works and workings of the nation's *schlockmeisters* in the hope that some pattern may reveal itself.

As noted earlier, our *schlockmeisters* (and everybody else's) don't innovate a whole lot, preferring instead to follow the light of the latest popular success (itself invariably an innovation). Since 1977, that light has been the blazing figure of Michael Myers, the murderous masked moron of John Carpenter's *Halloween*. Taken together, *Halloween* and its ugly step-sister, *Friday the 13th*, suggest that you do not need stars, acting, plot or anything resembling filmmaking skills, you can do it all on a maniac and mutilated minors. And, for five years, their imitators proved this to be true, at least in the financial sense. Nobody but Carpenter ever made a good slasher movie. But all things change and by 1982 the slasher had burnt out (except for those damned *Friday the 13ths*) and our *schlockmeisters* were left to scurry around in the darkness, hoping to stumble across a new route to the haven of big bucks on the teen sex-and-violence market.

Of course, not all of them realized this. Simcom, which had brought us the first Canadian slasher movie,

*Prom Night*, kept moving lemming-like to bring us the last Canadian slasher movie and the worst: *Curtains*, a film so bad that they gave the director's credit to one of the characters (an inept and repulsive director played by John Vernon in his classic I'm-too-sick-with-a-cold-to-come-to-work-but-I've-come-anyway manner). In reality, the film went through a year of reshoots under four different directors, including Simcom president Peter R. Simpson, a non-filmmaker who, according to the press kit, thought up the original idea while out jogging with the writer. Though internal evidence suggests that Simpson may have had something other than a slasher movie in mind, a slasher movie is what he got and it was garbage, even by the slasher's open-hearted standards. A cutting-room Frankenstein stitched up without brain, heart or guts, it lurched through two weeks at a Toronto Cineplex and expired. At least it took the genre with it.

(Note: if the foregoing comments read more like invective than insight, it is because I have done full reviews of *Curtains* and most of the other movies discussed here at the time of their release. If you want justifications for my statements, dig through your back issues.)

But not all our *schlockmeisters* were as rigid as Simpson. Most of them adapted to the slasher's failure in the time-honoured manner of *schlockmeisters* everywhere. They: 1) picked a current hit and copied it and, 2) fell back on the tried-and-true.

To succeed in the former course requires a certain basic skill: one must know what is worth imitating and whether or not it can, in fact, be imitated. The degree to which this skill has been assimilated in Canada may be gauged from RSL's *Heavenly Bodies*, child of *Flashdance*, and Schulz Productions' *Falcon's Gold*, out of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. *Flashdance* is generally acknowledged to be a triumph of marketing as much as of its *Rocky-meets-Saturday Night Fever* content and *Heavenly Bodies'* failure most certainly reflects its inferior marketing, so it's hard to guess just how far wrong RSL went with the content. But *schlock* has always drawn its largest audience from the working-class and, for *Flashdance's* working-class fantasy of getting out of the killer job into something glamorous, *Heavenly Bodies* substitutes the upper-middle-class fantasy of owning your own chic business. *Raiders* has been generally acknowledged to be a hit because it was well-conceived in almost every detail and elaborately, almost perfectly executed. Neither of which can be said for *Falcon's Gold*. Produced by Keith Rothman and directed by former commercial maker Bob Schulz, it features Simon MacCorkindale as a journalist on the trail of the treasure of the lost rocks from outer space and consists of clumsy action sequences stolen from 25-year-old Tarzan movies, a villain stolen from James Bond, flat jokes, over-long exposition and a near-total disregard for the mechanics of sense and suspense (the copter pilot who sits on camera doing nothing throughout the big flight until it's time for the hero to make a dive for him being just one example of many). As an example of a would-be imitator's failure to realize that there is nothing inherent in the

jungle adventure movie that can suck \$5 out of anybody's pocket and that you can't do on a shoestring and a prayer what Spielberg does on money and talent, the film is priceless; as anything else — toilet time.

To succeed at failing back on the tried-and-true requires a simpler version of the imitator's already simple skill: one must know what does, in fact, constitute the tried-and-true. The short answer is, of course, sex and violence, but the forms they are successfully cast in change over the years — neither the western nor the biker movie survived the '60s — and a producer contemplating a new project might do well to figure out just what those forms are today. RSL did not when, in co-production with the French, it produced *Joy*. Historically, this simple, mindless tale of a young woman who likes to fuck a lot, has a small breakdown when she's raped toward the film's end and, at the very end, stumbles across the father we didn't know she'd been missing all these years, belongs to the late '60s when the media were proclaiming the sexual revolution and touting porn as legitimate middle-class entertainment. In 1984, with the media proclaiming just the opposite, *Joy's* soft-focus, "respectable" pitch to the couples audience was virtually doomed from the start, while its wholly lacklustre content made it a guaranteed snooze for the regular porn audience.

RSL did manage to lock onto a nice update of the tried and true with *Bedroom Eyes*, as did Cinepix's John Dunning and André Link with *The Surrogate* and Tony Kramreither with *Thrillkill*. All three are straightforward examples of what used to be called "the romantic mystery" but might now better be known as the "thriller with sex in it" (actually, *Thrillkill* bills itself as a high-tech thriller, but it spends more time with nice girls being menaced by nasty ones). The genre has been selling steadily at least since 1929's *The Cat and the Canary* and a look at its advertising over the years suggests that, no matter how it's phrased, it all sells on the same promise: lots of sex and violence here, folks.

Sadly, that promise has not been kept and in place of three nice little rockers, we have three leaden exercises in producer malfunction.

Executive producers Dunning and Link hired Don Carmody to direct his own script of *The Surrogate*. They're the pair who gave Cronenberg his first shot at a feature, but Cronenberg came with a calling card of nifty little amateur movies. Carmody came with various producing credits on *Porky's*, *Spacehunter* and a few others. If memory serves, that means he's worked with Dunning and/or Link before, so it might be fair to call him one of the boys, and it might be fair to hint that's why he got the job. It might not be fair to call him a filmmaker. *The Surrogate* begins from a fairly good, berserk premise: yuppie couple with sexual dysfunction hires kinky Carole Laure to show them how to do it right. Meanwhile, the unseen killer comes ever closer. We know the killer is one of the three principals. We know that experimental sex will both fuel the killer's rage and bring about his/her undoing. We can look forward to lots of weirdness and some kind of

crazed sexual liberation for some of the characters. We can look all we want. We won't find it, because Carmody can't handle it. That he can't handle a movie is painfully evident from the crawling pace, clumsy camera placement, imitative slasher-style suspense and the tendency to play trivial scenes in full and truncate important ones. But much more importantly, Carmody can't handle the sex. Every time he gets near the non-conforming sexuality that's at the centre of his movie, he starts to snigger. It's like watching a little boy who hasn't reached puberty trying to put down his sibs who have. It's pathetic. Really. The presence of talented name actors, Jackie Burroughs, Michael Ironside, Art Hindle, Marilyn Lightstone, where we'd expect to see unknowns suggests that Dunning and Link laid out extra cash or called in a lot of favours. Either way, it looks like they were particularly interested in seeing *The Surrogate*, but if they were that interested why didn't they get a script doctor or a real director or at least some professional coaching for Carmody? Didn't it occur to them that a sex thriller can only work if it actually contains sex and thrills?

Not that professional help always helps. Robert Lantos and Stephen J. Roth booked William Fruet to do *Bedroom Eyes* and, though the result is a slicker picture all round, it isn't a better one. Where *The Surrogate* took a good premise and gave it a pedestrian treatment, *Bedroom Eyes* takes a pedestrian one and kills it every step of the way. The premise: stressed-out young stockbroker turns peeping tom, becomes erotically obsessed with a redhead and winds up on the run from the cops and her murderer, gives us all our hot bits near the beginning and demands that we don't see the key murder, so that once the story's under way, it can only get worse. It almost seems as if writer Michael Alan Eddy wanted it worse: the most interesting thing going is the fact that the hero's a pervert — you don't see that every day — so the first thing that Eddy does after establishing his hero's kink is send him to a shrink who lays down the law — no way is this boy a pervert, no sir, he's just reacting to stress and it's as impersonal as a cold, nothing to do with the man at all, nope. It's not easy to make a good picture with a script like that. Or with a director who just doesn't seem to care. A caring director would not have cast Dayle Haddon as the shrink-cum-girlfriend, not when she looks and acts just like a brand-new grade 12 graduate and nothing at all like a working medical professional. Nor would he have let her play her first scene in that black leather skirt that's all wrong for both her sexuality and her job. A director who wanted his movie to work would have done something about the redhead's make-up and lighting so that we could understand, and hopefully feel, the hero's obsession. He would have fiddled with the dialogue in the S & M number she runs on the hero so her actions wouldn't quite so blatantly contradict her words. Above all, he would have blocked his final fight so it was not so hideously apparent that the villain was slashing the air a good two feet from the hero's face. Some of these things might have been unavoidable, but not that last one. There's no way a seasoned pro blows a simple perspective cheat unless

he just doesn't care.

By far the biggest disappointment of the lot was *Thrillkill*, produced and co-written/co-directed (with Anthony D'Andrea) by Tony Kramreither, disappointing not because it was worse than the others, or because it was worse than Kramreither's last outing, but because it was not. For those of us who labour daily in the schlockyards, finding a truly, awesomely, awful movie is as rare and as big a delight as finding a really good one. Most bad movies are just dull; *All In Good Taste*, Kramreither's last picture, was such incomprehensible gibberish that it transcended dull to achieve the heady depths of anti-art. I thought at the time that his next work would surely be an anti-masterpiece, a film so bad that, to paraphrase J. Hoberman in *Film Comment*, it would deconstruct itself before your very eyes. I was wrong. He went on to make *Thrillkill*, an epic of merely workaday ineptitude distinguishable from Carmody and Fruet's efforts only in that its plot centers on a computer-fraud gang killing each other off for the hidden loot instead of on somebody's sex life. Though there are a couple of good howlers — the solarized live-action meant to stand in for computer animation, the concept of killer bank-tellers — the old, authentic Kramreither touches are almost gone. The figure of the sexually incompetent hero and a few leering references to a hot-dog joint called the Teeny Weeny are all that remain of the man who once bid fair to become the Edward D. Wood of the Frozen North.

What all this commentary boils down to is a consistent tendency on Canadian producers' parts to go with half-backed scripts and then make of them movies that utterly fail to exploit exploitation's potential for excitement. It is not, I think, a case of mere incompetence. For one thing, some of our *schlockmeisters* do considerably better with their A material. If Peter R. Simpson was lackwit enough to think he could direct *Curtains*, he was still wise enough to put *Hank Williams: The Show He Never Gave* on film — and a fine film it is. If RSL gave us no joy of *Bedroom Eyes*, they demonstrate a commitment to serious talent with *Josbua: Then and Now* and *Night Magic*. For another, the movies discussed here are all remarkably similar, too similar to be the result of pure chance. Almost every one features yuppie middle-class people in more-or-less realistic peril (no walking dead here), tiny, porno-style glimpses of unimaginative sex, watered-down slasher-style violence, a sense of humour confined to people making jokes and nice, middle-class-order-restored happy endings. In short, nothing that needs more than the slightest trim to make it to prime-time, which is probably part of the idea. But only part. For the rest of it, we need to look at Canadian society and our *schlockmeister's* place in it (and this is where the story *really* starts).

Most of these producers live and work in Ontario, where the ethos grows daily more conformist, repressive and generally tight-assed. None of them is the sort of young rebel who might be expected to challenge the system. It is not hard to imagine, therefore, that they've been thoroughly infected with



the prevailing anti-sex and violence norms to the point where, deliberately or not, they're making movies for censor Mary Brown. If true, this might also explain why none of them is following Roger Corman's tried-and-true technique of hiring gung-ho kids fresh out of film school to make the *schlock*: 1) they're not comfortable with and do not trust the young turks, or, 2) the conservative trend is so well-rooted that we're not breeding young turks.

Most of these guys are businessmen, not filmmakers (which explains a whole lot right there) and, in our respectable society, many of them are respectable businessmen, pillars of the industry. It's hard to be a respectable businessman without making a respectable product. Roger Corman, it is said, has on his office wall a framed letter from Ingmar Bergman, praising him for giving *Cries and Whispers* the best North American promotion Bergman has ever received. Corman makes a point, so it's said, of showing it to all his visitors. We all hunger for respectability. So, however easy it may be to imagine Robert Lantos nurturing private fantasies of the hideous revenge of cute girls in trashy clothing from beyond the grave, it is hard to see him publicly enthusing about producing the movie while performing as chairman of the Academy of Canadian Cinema. Personally, I find it hard to imagine him, or any of them, publicly enthusing about going to such a movie. As far as I can gather from back issues of *Cinema Canada*, none of our *schlockmeisters* is a rabid film fan (I could be wrong about this; I don't know these guys personally and what I'm doing here is speculating), at least not the sort of junkie who's spent great chunks of his life sprawled in some three-for-a-dollar fleapit drinking it all in. Which is too bad, because that's the best way to get what Pauline Kael has called a movie sense, in particular, it's the best way to get a sense of the potential for disturbing joy that lurks within the low-budget exploitation film.

As long as Canadian *schlockmeisters* lack that sense, which is to say as long as exploitation remains the province of respectable businessmen making a respectable product they don't particularly care about, the darkness that blankets this one little corner of our national cinema will not lift. And do I hear some of you saying: Hooray, who needs this

pornographic, sexist, ill-made, death-glorifying, anti-social crap anyway? *We do*. It's good for us (most Canadian of reasons); it gives us a window on our inner selves; it keeps us from totally believing that we're the rational and benign citizens we pretend to be. Trust me. All right, don't trust me. I'm a self-professed pornographer and junk movie freak, the last person you should trust. Trust, instead, Angela Carter. She's respectable. Scholar, journalist, fantasy writer, she's been visiting professor in Brown University's Writing Programme, writer-in-residence at the University of Adelaide, winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, the Somerset Maugham Award and the Cheltenham Festival of Literature Award. Part of her volume of reshaped fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, was filmed as *The Company of Wolves*. What she has to say about tales, in the Afterword to her first collection, *Fireworks*, could just as easily have been said about exploitation movies:

"...Formally, the tale differs from the short story in that it makes few pretenses at the imitation of life. The tale does not log everyday experience, as the short story does; it interprets everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience, and therefore the tale cannot betray its readers into a false knowledge of everyday experience...The tale has relations with subliterary forms of pornography, ballad and dream, and it has not been dealt with kindly by *literati*. And is it any wonder?..."

"The Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism. Character and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions. Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural — and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact. Its only humour is black humour. It retains a singular moral function — that of provoking unease."

By those standards, Canadian *schlock* has a long way to go.