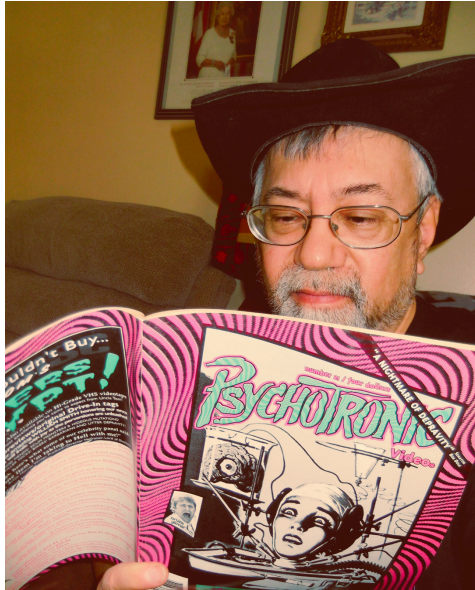


Poster Exhibit: YOUR GUIDE TO PSYCHOTRONIC FILM OR, “THIS MOVIE’S A BIT STRANGE, ISN’T IT?”



Michael Weldon created the term “Psychotronic” when he put together a self-published weekly movie guide that he circulated locally, later turning it into a full-sized magazine. The term “Psychotronic” was originally intended to cover his 2 main interests in film: Horror (the “Psycho” part) and Science Fiction (which usually contained a lot of “Electronic” gadgetry). He would expand the definition to include other types of genre films, like rock and roll movies (which would include movies with Elvis and The Beatles), juvenile delinquent movies, blaxploitation movies, counterculture movies, women in prison movies, Hercules movies, spaghetti western movies, kung fu movies and just generally

anything outside of the mainstream. “Psychotronic” movies continue to be made to this day, although with much larger budgets, and very often achieving a greater amount of respectability (for example, the films of David Lynch) than they did in the past. The Psychotronic creed definitely believes in the auteur theory, with attention given to the work of inept auteurs who somehow managed to create a body of work such as Ed Wood Jr., Andy Milligan, Al Adamson, and Jesse Franco (though some would argue that Franco is a genius, but I don’t agree). But it’s not all about movies that are badly made. Consider also the innovative, sometimes dazzling work of Mario Bava, Dario Argento, David Cronenberg, George Romero, John Carpenter, Wes Craven, William Castle, Roger Corman, and others.

The quote, *“This movie’s a bit strange, isn’t it?”* was overheard from someone who was watching SUSPIRIA while tripping on acid, a prospect so frightening that I would never even consider it, since the movie is already a case study in sensory overload even without any stimulants.

Barry Yuen, Poster Collector & Writer

February 2024

FOUR FLIES ON GREY VELVET (1972)

Dario Argento's 3rd film in a genre known as "Giallo". These are Italian-produced murder mysteries where the emphasis is on staging eye-catching murder sequences, in the manner of Alfred Hitchcock. The story involves a serial killer stalking a drummer in a rock and roll band. With the aid of wacky science, the police use high tech equipment to photograph the last image seen from the eyeball of the last murder victim. The image they get is of 4 flies, which, in an unexpected turn of events, does lead to the unmasking of the killer. The flies also have a symbolic function, since in the course of the story, 4 people are killed off like flies. Argento manages to make the death scenes feel very violent while showing very little blood (much like Hitchcock). Seeing how beautifully shot this movie was, Jessica Harper was convinced to take the lead role in Argento's later movie, *SUSPIRIA*, which would surpass all expectations of what Argento was capable of.

KILL BABY KILL (1966)

This gothic ghost story comes from director Mario Bava. The ghost of a little girl who died in an accident haunts a small village, causing anyone who sees her to take their own life. The story

might seem straightforward, but Bava makes it become more surreal and dream-like as it goes along, with such touches as a spiral staircase that goes on forever, leading nowhere. Science and rationality are pitted against the supernatural and the unexplainable, and in the end, science admits defeat. Watching this on late night TV, I was convinced that I had fallen asleep somewhere and was dreaming the movie! Part of this movie was even “borrowed” by David Lynch for the final episode of TWIN PEAKS! Talk about flattery! And Lynch wasn’t the only one who was inspired by Bava’s movie. Both Fellini and Martin Scorsese lifted the concept of the evil ghost girl dressed in white for TOBY DAMMIT and THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST, respectively.

PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE (1957)

No discussion of “Psychotronic” film can take place without mention of Ed Wood Jr.’s notorious PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE, which makes everybody’s list of “Worst Movies Ever Made”. Wood was working under severe budgetary constraints, which goes halfway to explaining why his movies turned out so poorly, but they were also plagued by poor writing and poor acting as well. But for those who get some enjoyment out of bad cinema and it’s unintentional hilarity, this movie is heaven. Bela Lugosi had only shot about one minute of footage, without dialogue, but because Lugosi’s name added marquee value, Wood inserted the footage into his movie anyway. In the most flagrant example of incompetence, he tried to pass off another cast member as Lugosi by having him skulk around with his cape covering most of his face. Absolutely no one was fooled. Among other flubs, you can also see the wires on the hubcaps which are supposed to be flying saucers.

THE TINGLER (1959)

Director William Castle earned the moniker of “King of the Gimmicks”. In the 1950’s, movie theaters were competing against television, since more people were staying home. Castle would come up with gimmicks to attract people to the theater, creating a carnival atmosphere. His movie HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL advertised being filmed in “EMERGO”, which meant that at the climax of the movie, a big plastic skeleton on a wire would sail over the audience’s heads. THE TINGLER had “PERCEPTO”, and legend has it that some seats in the theater were wired to give a mild electric shock (!), although this might be an exaggeration. Other reports suggest it was a motor that made the theater seat vibrate. In addition to this, Castle inserted a brief scene shot in colour (involving a bathtub filling with blood – I’m providing visual aids for this part) while the rest of the movie was in black and white. This was the kind of thing that would create a lot of talk and drum up business, so this was possibly William Castle’s finest hour, even though the movie itself isn’t really that good. The story is pretty preposterous by itself. Vincent Price plays a doctor who discovers that everyone carries a parasite within them that grows when we feel fear... it can kill us unless we scream! He calls the parasite “The Tingler” for no good reason except that someone else thought it would make a good title for the movie. There’s even an audience participation section where Vincent announces that The Tingler (which he had surgically removed from a dead body) is now loose in the theater, and everyone must scream for their lives! At this point, the lights would go down and the wired seats would be activated, goosing a number of paying customers. Naturally, this would create a big reaction.

PEE-WEE’S BIG ADVENTURE (1986)

A Psychotronic movie doesn’t necessarily have to deal with dark subject matter, it just has to feel strange. “I myself am strange and unusual” says a character in Tim Burton’s movie BEETLE JUICE, which would seem to be a calling card for Burton himself. The meeting of the worlds of Pee-Wee Herman’s comedy and Tim Burton’s world view was a perfect match in eccentricity. The slim plot

(Pee-Wee going on a road trip in search of his treasured bike which was mysteriously stolen) is just a clothesline to hang bizarre incident after bizarre incident on. It's still great fun, after all these years.

SHOGUN ASSASSIN (1980)

A Japanese film called "Baby Cart at River Styx" was shortened, dubbed and re-edited for an American release. In Japan, it was second in a series about Lone Wolf, a rogue samurai who is on the run with his infant son, as both have been targeted for death by the Shogun for disobedience. But thanks to his superior skill with a sword, he makes mincemeat out of all the assassins who have been sent after him. Also, the baby cart is rigged with weaponry, and sometimes works like a chariot in BEN-HUR. It's pretty much all spectacle, with minimal plot, but there's nothing wrong with that. The blood sprays in geysers, but it's all so stylized it's hard to take offence.

INVASION OF THE SAUCER MEN (1957)

In Michael Weldon's book, any science fiction film automatically qualified as "Psychotronic", but especially those made in the 50's and 60's. This movie capitalizes on the public's interest in flying saucers and what manner of creatures might be piloting them, but it doesn't take the subject matter entirely seriously. The design of the aliens, with their huge heads, is classic. Too bad the movie makes us wait so long before we actually see them. American International Pictures had a way of devising posters that created much more excitement than the movies themselves. The movie itself is somewhat slowly paced, and the whole "We saw little green men from outer space but no one believes us" trope is handled in a plodding manner.

TIME BANDITS (1981)

Terry Gilliam achieved fame as the animator for MONTY PYTHON'S FLYING CIRCUS. Is it any wonder then, that his feature films play like live-action cartoons, packed with the same sense of silliness and surrealism? A map of the universe, which gives the user access to various time portals which enable them to travel to different time periods in history, is stolen from the Creator of the universe by a small band of thieves (small in both senses) looking to accumulate great wealth. The possibilities are endless, as they move from Napoleon's France to medieval England to ancient Greece.

The funniest performances are given by Python alumni John Cleese and Michael Palin.

COFFY (1973)

Pam Grier became a cult film star by appearing in various "Blaxploitation" films, always playing strong women who fought back against villainous characters. In COFFY, Pam plays a nurse who turns vigilante when her little sister becomes addicted to drugs. Coffy takes revenge on drug dealers and pimps in the city. The opening scene is quite startling, showing Coffy blast a drug dealer right in the face with a shotgun. Looking back, Grier said "My movies featured women claiming the right to fight back, which previously had been out of the question." This seems pretty accurate for 1973. And Coffy does fight back heroically. Along with firepower, she uses her wits, her sexuality, and a ton of nerve as she eliminates drug pushers, pimps and crooked cops and politicians. At the end, it's left unknown whether she will face any consequences. It's not exactly a happy ending, but it spares us having a downer ending where she goes to prison. After the 70's Grier seemed to disappear until Quentin Tarantino brought her back for his movie JACKIE BROWN (1997), but surprisingly, he didn't give her anything to do that was half as outrageous as what she does in COFFY or FOX Y BROWN.

GOLIATH AND THE VAMPIRES (1961)

Former Tarzan Gordon Scott plays Goliath in this combination peplum/horror film. Goliath must save the kidnapped women of his village from becoming the victims of the shape-shifting vampire Kobra. Kobra is creating an army of waxy-faced zombies to do his bidding. At the end of the movie Kobra shape-shifts into Goliath's twin, so that Goliath must fight himself. The illusion is beautifully sustained. You can tell which one is supposed to be the imposter from his evil grimacing. For a 1961 film, it's surprisingly graphic, with scenes of someone getting shot in the eye with an arrow, and someone else getting their throat torn out by the vampire's claws. It captures the feel of a comic book, and is just as colourful.

VIDEODROME (1983)

A special-effects heavy work from David Cronenberg that explores horrors of the body and the mind. Max Renn (James Woods), looking for material to air on his TV station, views pirate videotapes of a show called VIDEODROME, which features non-stop torture and murder, which is probably not faked (in the context of the story, I mean). He experiences bodily changes which may be hallucinations, and gets sucked into a weird conspiracy which appears to be run by the extreme Right, and is brainwashed into becoming an assassin. Or....maybe the whole thing is just in his mind. Because we only see events from his point of view, our sense of reality becomes unreliable. Hallucinatory images like a videocassette made of pulsating, organic material being

thrust into a slit in Max's stomach puts this squarely in Psychotronic territory. And it has the added bonus of Debbie Harry of BLONDIE fame in a supporting role. She becomes Max's guide into the world of Videodrome, a modern-day siren leading him to his doom.

YELLOW SUBMARINE (1968)

The Beatles seemed to embody the spirit of the 1960's, and were prime representatives of the counter-culture. While Elvis was still making movies that were "family friendly" and which tamed his image (and were full of mediocre songs which outnumbered the hits – "Song of The Shrimp" – seriously?), The Beatles were making movies that were more true to themselves and their music. For instance, the script of A HARD DAY'S NIGHT came from the writer's direct observation of The Beatles and how they spoke and interacted with each other. But no one could have been prepared for the psychedelic excesses of YELLOW SUBMARINE, a fable of the power of peace and love, very appropriate for the time. Along with 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY (released the same year), it seemed to have been made especially for pot-heads everywhere. But because it was a cartoon, plenty of young kids would have seen it on first release, and I wonder what they made of it? (I missed it in 1968, and only saw it when it debuted on network TV several years later, but even on a small screen, it was dazzling.) It's all enhanced by the songs, of course, some of them taken from the SGT. PEPPER and REVOLVER albums.

THE TENANT (1976)

Controversial director Roman Polanski made this film after his scandal in Hollywood, filming in Paris. Critics described it as the final part of an informal “Apartment Trilogy” which includes *REPULSION* and *ROSEMARY’S BABY*. All three films have characters living in apartment buildings who experience feelings of paranoia and mental instability. In *Rosemary’s case*, her paranoia turns out to be completely justified. *THE TENANT* seems to swing in the opposite direction. Polanski plays Trelkovsky, who moves into an apartment where the previous tenant, a woman, committed suicide by jumping out of the window. As the story progresses, he becomes convinced that the other tenants in the building are conspiring against him, plotting to drive him insane so that he will not only imitate her final actions, but take on her identity as well! It was based on a novel, where the events that take place seem to have a supernatural explanation, while the movie takes the position that everything that happens is the product of an unstable mind. Audiences in 1976 were perplexed by the whole thing (the sight of Polanski in drag is pretty hard to take), but the film has garnered admirers since then. The first video release classified it as “Science Fiction” which indicates that even Paramount Pictures didn’t know what to make of it. Today, you could imagine David Lynch tackling this story and winning accolades.

GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS! (1962) **/ VIVA LAS VEGAS (1964)**

Rock ‘n’ Roll Movies, especially those from the 50’s and 60’s, fall under the Psychotronic banner, and no one made more rock’n’roll movies than Elvis Presley. Elvis movies were often plot-heavy, but they existed solely as a showcase for Elvis to sing a bunch of songs. There would usually be one hit song in the batch, and that’s the song that would make the movie come alive. In *GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS!*, the hit was *RETURN TO SENDER*. No matter what character Elvis was playing (a race

car driver, a helicopter pilot, a private in the army or a shrimp fisherman) the writers would find some excuse to put him in a nightclub setting or other public venue where out of nowhere he would sing and knock the crowd dead. VIVA LAS VEGAS is considered to be one of the best Elvis movies, in part due with the chemistry between him and Ann-Margret, along with better direction than usual. Very often Elvis was given mediocre scripts and pedestrian directors who just wanted to get the movie shot as quickly as possible.