

## A Very British Chainsaw Massacre

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London. 1957. On a bleak mid-winter's morning, a solitary figure walks through a deserted funfair towards a caravan. After knocking on its door, he enters slowly and cautiously. Not five minutes later, his lifeless body slumps against the door. His skull has been drilled open, his brains splattered across the walls and down his jacket. Some time later, a judge commits an elderly couple to an insane asylum. Their crime? Cannibalism. The film? Pete Walker's *Frightmare* (1974).

The 1970s were a strange and trying time for Britain's horror film industry. Hammer Films, long the purveyors of countless *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* movies, were struggling to find subjects that appealed to an audience clamouring for more blood, gore, nudity and sex than ever before, whilst their distribution deals had all but dried up as American capital went back to the States. Hammer's main rivals at Amicus Productions were also finding life difficult: their portmanteau films were losing their punch. Even *The Beast Must Die's* (Dir. Paul Annett, 1974) 'werewolf break', where the film's action stopped so that a narrator might cajole the audience into guessing which character the werewolf might be, seemed a desperate measure to entice people into the theatre.

But British horror was not dead. It was merely at a crossroads. To the left were its well driven, dusty, worn out, faded glories. To the right was a highway leading to the most lowest-budgeted and culturally transgressive end of Britain's horror film industry. Exploitation filmmaking is about making money, and exploitation horror became a breeding ground for new, talented directors let loose with buckets of Kensington gore, a slightly more relaxed British

Board of Film Censor, and the ability to have nudity, sex and lashings of blood on the big screen. As Hammer's old guard lay in state, directors like Jose Larraz offered a genuine sense of European art sensibilities to his grisly and incredibly sexy *Vampyres* (1974), and the American Gary Sherman's remarkable *Death Line* (1972) saw cannibals in London's underground as a metaphor for Britain's class divisions. And then there was Pete Walker, the best exploitation film director Britain ever produced.

The son of a Music Hall comic, Walker had plied his trade making hundreds of nudie cuties during the 1960s. Honing his skills at producing well-photographed glamour films delivered to Men Only Clubs and Photographic Emporiums up and down the country, he invested his own money – so any profits were his – into his first production. For £6,470 he produced, wrote and directed the sex comedy *For Men Only* (1968). Spurred on by its box office success Walker alternated between sex film and gangster genre fare. His films were not pretentious, and he admits that he 'was an exploitation director. That's what I did'. But what exactly did he do? Well, his gangster films *The Big Switch* (1968) and *Man of Violence* (1971) were rough and tumble, with fistfights, chases, and nudity. His 'problem pictures' like *Cool it, Carol!* (1970) and *Home Before Midnight* (1979) were thought-provoking examples of the older generation praying on the younger. Walker made a James Bond spoof, *Tiffany Jones* (1973), and even a 3D movie, *The Four Dimensions of Greta* that had the tagline 'A boob in your lap!'

And then he made his self-labelled Terror Films for which he is probably best known. These

films were all blood, gore, sadism and violence, and encapsulating well used tropes like familial madness, death and decay. But whilst other filmmakers also used these narrative devices as a hook on which to hang their grisly horrors, Walker's films delved deeper to strike a chord with audiences witnessing a Britain that was undergoing vast social, sexual and political upheavals. The halcyon Swinging Sixties had become the Dour Seventies, or as Leon Hunt memorably remarked, 'The decade that taste forgot' (1998: 1). And Walker was there, bridging the gap between traditional Hammer-esque outings and out and out exploitation fare. He made six of these Terror Films, each one imbued with a sense of mischief in them, each one of them in one way or another critiquing both the younger and older generations, society, and the Establishment.

Whilst his *The Flesh and Blood Show* (1972) was a proto-slasher-cum-Agatha Christie-whodunit, it was really about the nature of performance, performers and the dual nature of the individual. *House of Whipcord* (1974) was a thoroughly vicious treatise on the nature of a corrupt judicial system. *House of Mortal Sin* (1976) defrocked a blackmailing, sexually frustrated priest who used the iconography of the Catholic Church to bump off his parishioners. Two years prior to John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), Walker's *Schizo* (1976) unravelled the Freudian angst in all of us. His last Terror Film, *The Comeback* (1978), with its ultra-chic modern décor and music industry backdrop deconstructed ideas of familial madness, and also had Bill Owen from *The Last of the Summer Wine* (BBC One, 1973-2010) lopping the heads of roses as easily as the killer does with his victims. Nice.

But that is only five Terror Films. What about the sixth? Well, *Frightmare* stands out amongst his work. I make no bones about it, I love the film. Danny Peary argues that cult films are 'special films which for one reason or another have been taken to heart by segments of the movie audience, cherished, protected, and most of all, enthusiastically championed' (1981: xiii). His final reasoning is that cult films are loved by an audience who believes that they are 'among the blessed few who have discovered something in particular that the average moviegoer and critic have missed – the something that makes the film extraordinary' (ibid.). *Frightmare* is extraordinary. Made on a shoestring budget of less than £80,000,



and filmed over four weeks in the spring of 1974, the idea of an elderly lady stalking the Home Counties, aided by her feckless husband, a violent teenage daughter and a Black and Decker power drill was definitely outrageous enough to be a winner amongst horror fans. Walker's scriptwriter, David McGillivray, did his homework: he contacted the National Association for Mental Health and asked if there was such a condition as pathological cannibalism. There wasn't, so he invented one: caribanthropy. He also enquired as to how one might go about removing a brain from a corpse's head: he should use a trephine, a surgical saw with a cylindrical blade that penetrated the skull via circular motions. McGillivray reckoned a power drill would do the job just as well, beating Abel Ferrara's 1979 film, *Driller Killer* by some margin.

The film's basic premise is this: Dorothy Yates is a cannibal. Both she and her husband, Edmund are locked away in an insane asylum in 1957, leaving apparently 'cured' in 1974. But Dorothy has passed on her cannibalistic tendencies to her daughter, Debbie who in typical Seventies-teenager style wears denim flares, swears a lot, drinks and smokes, and shouts abuse at her half-sibling, Jackie. Jackie has become Debbie's guardian, due to their parents'

incarceration. As the narrative unfolds, Edmund and Jackie try to stop Debbie bringing her pickups home for mother to dispatch on their secluded farm. Along the way Dorothy stabs a young woman to death with a flaming poker, drills into and eats a young man's brains as his blood splatters across her face, and ends up eating... well, why spoil it for you?

Walker assembled a strong cast. There were some familiar faces in there: Rupert Davies, TV's *Maigret* (BBC, 1959-1963) and genre favourite, was Edmund the husband. Paul Greenwood, fresh from *Z Cars* (BBC, 1962-1978) was the bland and useless psychiatrist, Graham. The relatively unknown Deborah Fairfax was Jackie, Edmund's 'normal' daughter; the aptly named Kim Butcher played teenage cannibal-in-training Debbie. For the role of Dorothy Yates, cannibal mother supreme, Walker chose the gentle, kind, and unassuming Scottish character actress Sheila Keith. Keith was used to playing judges, barristers, kindly spinsters and the like. But for Walker she was allowed to run riot, making Dorothy both sympathetic and violent in equal measures. Whilst the men in *Frightmare* are useless and weak-willed, the women are strong. Dorothy manipulates others with consummate ease and glee. She also wields a power tool with some considerable dexterity. Due to Keith's vivid portrayal Dorothy is the real *tour*

*de force* of the film, ranking amongst the horror canons most memorable creations. Dorothy represents matriarchy and family, the two bedrocks of society. But duality means everything in this movie: town and country are corrupting; Jackie and Debbie constantly argue; Edmund is an ineffectual father and husband; Dorothy is both mother and killer. It is this that makes *this* film so complex.

David Cooper's *The Death of the Family* (1971) was in general circulation at the time Walker made the movie, and he argued that families were not the loving caring hubs that bound its members together. Far from it, he saw 'family' as holding people back. Whether consciously or not, Walker's film shows the family as corrosive and destructive. Remember, this is post-Manson. American movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974) and *The Last House on the Left* (Dir. Wes Craven, 1972) were still in the public's conscience. Therefore, any idealistic notions of the family are destroyed in a key scene. Jackie delivers a parcel of beef to Dorothy in the hope that she thinks it is human flesh (even Jackie has a form of dualism here, as loving daughter and as confidante to her mother's crimes). Dorothy takes the parcel excitedly, as a child would a birthday present. Through intercutting of Jackie, Dorothy and Edmund, the following dialogue exchange takes place:



Dorothy and Debbie prepare their supper...

Dorothy: It's so much fun being a night person isn't it, Jackie. Some people are day people, but we like being night people. Don't we? Night people.

Jackie: How's your migraine?

Dorothy: I haven't had a migraine for many, many months now. I thought you knew. Things have been so much better since we came here. I think I left my headaches and problems behind in the other place. I closed the door very carefully when I left and locked them all in.

This effective scene shows the family under direct strain. Jackie becomes the mother/parent by providing food. The nuclear family is being pulled apart; the following scene has Jackie sitting in a train compartment and as she looks around, her mother appears carrying the bloody package of meat. As Jackie tries to back away Dorothy leans over her, blood now dripping from her mouth. Jackie wakes up screaming, and even though she turns to Graham for help, he is completely useless when dealing with unravelling the complexities of the Yates' family 'problems'.

The film was a box office disaster, not least because of its ultra-nihilistic and downbeat ending. Released in December 1974 at the height of the IRA bombing campaign in the capital, the public naturally stayed away. Only Disney movies took money at Christmas, and despite a brilliantly lurid poster campaign and almost all negative critical reviews to help bolster attendance (one reviewer called it 'disgusting, repulsive, nauseating rubbish'), it took numerous re-issues to get the film into profit.

But perhaps this is why I love *Frightmare* so much. I first saw Walker's films in the early 1980s, when a video van would come around on a Friday evening and my gran and I would watch the latest gory horror flick (thanks, nan!). Walker's films were not comfortable viewing for a 12 year old (I know!), and even though I could find out lots of information about Hammer et al., there was nothing about Walker except a few snippets of information here and there, and even then these were mostly negative. Steve Chibnall's excellent introduction to Walker, *Making Mischief* (1998) opened the doors for me, and then along came *The Pete Walker Collection* on DVD. At last I was able to watch, appreciate and understand just how good Walker was as a filmmaker.

*Frightmare* is not just a simple, straightforward exploitation flick. Sure, it looks cheap, and there are numerous plot holes that defy any narrative logic. But whilst it shocks and disgusts in equal measures, it does so with such a gruesome sense of style and conviction that any faults can be overlooked. Perhaps that is part and parcel of liking anything 'cult', and I must admit that whilst I do not see myself as 'among the blessed few', I do think the film is out of the ordinary and that *I discovered it for me*. It is rich with interpretation; the performance of Keith is exceptionally strong; and, above all else, it really does tug at the very sensibilities that were being eroded in 1970s Britain. When I had the pleasure of interviewing Pete Walker for a future project that might just see the light of day quite soon, I asked if he felt that the film stood the test of time. He thought that it did, but that it was 'of its time'. This is at the very heart of *Frightmare*. Whilst the film was not the box office success he thought it should have been, it has aged well to become a truly remarkable achievement in horror cinema. The script has its holes, the pacing may be a tad slow, but the ideas within the film are culturally transgressive, thought provoking, challenging and above all else, fun.

Everyone goes on and on about *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and it is an undeniably bold piece of horror cinema, but I would hope that I have piqued your interest in Walker's work, especially with *Frightmare*. Later this year, the Barbican Centre in London is holding a retrospective of some of his films. So why not go along and see for yourself just how terrific his movies really are? Perhaps I shall see you there. I'll be the one holding the power drill.

## References

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