



TERROR VISION

My Little Eye

+ intro by producer Jon Finn and Mike Muncer, host of *The Evolution of Horror* podcast

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Though it would be a mistake to underestimate the skills and film knowledge of director Marc Evans and screenwriters David Hilton and James Watkins, *My Little Eye* is a movie that coalesces out of the zeitgeist. Mercilessly charting the plight of five contestants who have been confined to a remote house to compete for a big cash prize, their every move scrutinised 24-7 by watchful internet users, *My Little Eye* is pitched as a horror movie for the wired generation. Shot like a live webcast – complete with steady, unceasing zooms that home in on the house's hapless inhabitants and grainy infra-red night shots – the film implicates us in the contestants' fate, putting us in exactly the same position as the putative internet audience 'out there'.

While it's likely to be heralded as a horror film as innovative as *The Blair Witch Project* or *The Sixth Sense* (both 1999), *My Little Eye* can more accurately be described as a breakthrough in that it brings into general circulation elements that have been percolating in the straight-to-video substratum for years.

People have almost been making *My Little Eye* for some time, and it seems likely its existence will do nothing to discourage the greenlighting of a host of similar projects. *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002) also uses a webcast to frame its series of slashings, and due soon in the website-from-hell genre is William Malone's *FearDotCom*. I'd put a bet on there being as many tormented-for-the-cameras movies on video racks next year as there are now post-*Blair Witch* wandering-terrified-in-the-woods outings.

My Little Eye takes a classical premise and gives it a contemporary, cutting-edge twist (I'd advise those of you who wish to remain in ignorance of its nature to stop reading now). Strangers are lured to an old dark house to appear on an internet webcast for a \$1 million prize (once it would have been for the reading of a will) and set against one another, with perhaps a murderer on the loose in the wilds outside and a smiling killer within the group.

A surprise caller (just like the bogus asylum attendant in *The Cat and the Canary*) imparts maybe dubious news that makes everyone question their assumptions about the terms of their stay in a house packed with omens (broken dolls, wounded birds). The five young contestants have to remain together in the house for six months and obey a strict curfew after dark in order to collect the money, which will be forfeit if any of them opts to leave. The goings-on of the increasingly paranoid and violent quintet are viewed obsessively by an audience we never see.

Given such cultural phenomena as the proliferation of reality TV (*Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *The Mole*) and the rise of the internet as a medium for narrow-casting staged events or material, along with the combination of mock-documentary techniques and old-fashioned suspense-based horror essayed in *The Blair Witch Project*, *My Little Eye* is a logical progression. It's a direct hit on a target clumsily missed by Daniel Liatowitsch and David Todd Ocvirk's straight-to-video quickie *Kolobos* (1999) in which the 'five young people in a house being filmed as they are murdered' premise was diluted with supernatural material that rendered its selling point irrelevant. *Kolobos* riffed on an earlier generation of reality TV (exemplified by *The Real World*, 1992) that approximated soap opera rather than gameshow. Closer still to *My Little Eye*

is *'Ibiza - £99 Return'* (written by Chris Bucknall, directed by David Blair), an episode of Channel 4's occasional horror series *Shockers*, in which a suspiciously tempting holiday offer leads a batch of lads and ladettes of the sort found on Sky's *Real World*-in-the-sun variants (*The Villa*, etc.) to a mansion where they are murdered for the benefit of a paying audience spying on their antics over the internet.

Before *The Real World* and its imitations were available to prompt fantasies of the horrific extremes to which the format could be stretched, there was the famously sadistic Japanese elimination gameshow *Endurance*. The premise was that a large number of contestants (404 in series one) would embark on a round-the-world trip, with indignities and tortures forced upon them at every stop (for instance, throwing a woman into a Mexican bullring with an enraged *toro*). The group was gradually whittled down until one hardy soul emerged as victor from a quiz held at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. The show became familiar in the UK from extracts snickered at by Clive James on ITV and has been packaged for video release in the US. It may be that its producers were inspired in part by such fictional precedents as the gladiatorial gameshows invented by Robert Sheckley and Stephen King in stories filmed as *The Tenth Victim* (1965), *The Prize of Peril* (1983) and *The Running Man* (1987). Japan's own exaggeration of the trend came in Fukasaku Kenji's perverse horror comic *Battle Royale* (2000) in which a class of schoolchildren are turned loose on an island and encouraged to murder each other until a sole survivor emerges. *Slashers* (2002), a low-budget American horror movie inspired by *Endurance*, runs the risk of coming out after the trend has moved on.

Though it has a North American setting, *My Little Eye* is a British film (although with some US and French co-production finance). This means its inspiration is the enclosed, claustrophobic UK hit *Big Brother* rather than the more expansive and action-oriented *Survivor*, which topped the ratings in the US. The American equivalent of *My Little Eye* is Daniel Minahan's *Endurance*-influenced *Series 7: The Contenders* (2000) in which armed contestants chase each other around a small town rather than rubbing up uncomfortably inside a monitored house. Certainly it takes *My Little Eyes* famous five longer to fall out than it did the *Blair Witch* kids, but the antagonisms are pronounced from the outset.

My Little Eye works masterfully as a suspense/horror piece, especially in the early stretches before everything becomes clear. Part of the film's strategy is its explicit address to the audience – at one point, uncertain of the fate of a vanished group member but unwilling to imperil their prize by venturing out at night, the survivors address the webcams, imploring the internet viewers to send help to the missing camper. Even the dimmest of the contestants assumes this won't work – that their only viewers are sadists who enjoy their sufferings. The cleverest touch comes when the victims hack into their own site and work out that the ever-changing numbers under their portraits are gambling odds. The big money being made out of this spectacle comes not from subscriptions but from betting.

The notion that someone out there is watching filmed murder as solo psychosis or subcultural activity is deeply ingrained in film culture, a persistent rumour that surfaces in that strange netherworld between true crime and gothic perversion. The 'video nasties' controversy in the UK in the mid-1980s was clouded by frequent mislabelling by the police and tabloids of the blatantly meretricious hoax *Snuff* (1973) and the pre-*Blair Witch* 'found footage' horror *Cannibal Holocaust* (1979) as actual snuff. News items to the effect that real snuff movies had been seized, however, were always followed by shamefaced retractions accompanied by appalling nods to the idea that

shoddy Italian zombie films or American slasher pictures were the moral equivalent of actual murder committed on film for a mythic pornography.

The cinematic source of the urban legend of the snuff movie is, of course, Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), a title whose nursery tone is echoed in the whimsy of *My Little Eye*. Among its many graceless imitators is Charles Davis' *Die Watching* (1993), a negligible direct-to-video slasher in which psycho Michael Terrence (Christopher Atkins) is a Hollywood hanger-on who lures silicone starlets to his apartment with the promise of a videotaped screen test and then gets his serial-killer thrills from murdering them on camera. Though Davis copies his model closely, down to a clumsy attempt at working up some pathos through the madman's almost relationship with the dim girl next door, the tired old business of exposing and slaughtering non-actresses is far removed in spirit from the careful and engaged work of Powell and screenwriter Leo Marks. Davis' true antecedent is perhaps Terry Bishop's *Cover Girl Killer* (1959), an astonishing but unthrilling British B-movie in which a raincoated Harry H. Corbett, torn between prurience and puritanism ('surely sex and horror are the new gods in this polluted world of so-called entertainment'), poses as a photographer to get close to his chosen victims, the brazen hussies who pose for *Wow* magazine ('Come, come, Miss Adams,' he coaxes a model reluctant to disrobe, 'you're too modest – after all, you are Miss Torquay').

In *Peeping Tom* (and *Cover Girl Killer*, come to that) the psychotic voyeur inhabits a private world, consuming pornographic images that fail to satisfy his personal kink, then manufacturing his own. But *Die Watching* tentatively introduces the idea of a snuff-movie industry. Like Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (2000) Terrence is a regular video renter and at one point gets his tapes mixed up so that instead of returning the film he has borrowed hands over a video of one of his murders. Later, trying to cover his tracks, he returns to the sleazy video store to retrieve the incriminating tape, only for the manager Jake to compliment him on his work. Slyly, Jake probes Terrence as to whether he has any more tapes in this line, and asks if he hasn't ever wondered 'whether there might be a market for this sort of thing.' It's a theme pursued in Joel Schumacher's *8MM* (1999) where the minions of a wealthy degenerate discover that real snuff movies don't exist and so establish a production set-up to supply their one customer.

Like *8MM*, *My Little Eye* teases with the possibility of a whole snuff industry, only to reveal at the end that this is a tiny operation that has arisen spontaneously to meet a need. The movie is less quick to make the salacious link between death and sex that renders *Peeping Tom* and *Cover Girl Killer* such unsettling viewing – though there is a suggestion by one of the contestants that they are being tortured by the shadowy organisation behind the webcast because they've failed to provide viewers with any real-life sex. The squirming contestants are all-too-familiar from current reality shows, and it may be that audiences will feel more complicit in their fate if they've ever fantasised a murderer loose with a power-tool in the *Big Brother* house (as in Ben Elton's novel *Dead Famous*). But getting a thrill from the deaths of fictional characters is not equivalent to wanting to watch real people die, just as being opposed to capital punishment doesn't mean wishing *Dirty Harry* movies ended with Clint Eastwood arresting rather than gunning down the bad guy.

From Hitchcock and Powell onwards, it's a given that voyeurism implicates us in what we see in the movies, confronts audiences with the conflicting desires to look and look away. *My Little Eye* puts us in the position of the internet audience – we are the ones watching, ignoring the pleas for help, hoping for some action. Some of us are betting on who will die, but those gambling odds beg other questions: who will kill?; who will live? Would *Halloween* (1978)

have been a hit if audience favourite Jamie Lee Curtis had died? Will *My Little Eye* alienate audiences by violating our expectations, cheating us out of our emotional investment in the characters?

The movie-makers in such films tend to be desperate film-school dropouts who rationalise their work as 'still the movies' in the way ambitious 1970s porno directors did. (My own recent short story '*Going to Series*' explores this area.) But who's in the audience? Rich sickos, obviously (a \$50,000 credit limit isn't enough to subscribe to *My Little Eye*'s fictional website) – Mr Burns from *The Simpsons*, Mason Verger from *Hannibal*, Noah Cross from *Chinatown*? These shadowy figures are the real monsters of this type of film, and one factor in keeping us safe from the commissioning of *Series 7 – The Contenders* or *Battle Royale* is that they don't exist in the real world. Yet.

Kim Newman, *Sight & Sound*, October 2002

MY LITTLE EYE

Directed by: Marc Evans

©:WT Venture LLC

Presented by: Universal Pictures, StudioCanal, Working Title Films

A WT² production

Produced with the assistance of: Nova Scotia Film Industry Tax Credit

Executive Producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Natascha Wharton

Co-executive Producer: Christopher Zimmer

Producers: Jon Finn, Jane Villiers, David Hilton, Alan Greenspan

Chief Operating Officer for WT/WT²: Angela Morrison

Head of Production for WT/WT²: Michelle Wright

Production Executive for WT/WT²: Sarah-Jane Wright

Head of Legal/Business Affairs for WT/WT²: Sara Curran

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Story Editor for WT/WT²: Rachael Prior

Assistant to Natascha Wharton for WT/WT²: Hannah Farrell

Production Manager: Margaret Harrison

WT² Co-ordinator: Amanda Boyle

Production Co-ordinator: Adele MacDonald

Location Manager: Scott Simpson

Post-production Supervisor: Deborah Harding

1st Assistant Director: Stuart Renfrew

2nd Assistant Director: Kevin J. Walker

3rd Assistant Director: Evan Kelly

Script Supervisor: Maggie Thomas

Casting: Billy Hopkins, Suzanne Smith, Kerry Barden, Mark Bennett

Casting (LA Associate): Deborah Maxwell Dion

Casting (Toronto Associate): Diane Kerbel

Casting (Halifax Associate): Sheila Lane

Screenplay by: David Hilton, James Watkins

Story by: David Hilton

Director of Photography: Hubert Taczanowski

Camera Operator: Warren Jefferies

Visual Effects by: Double Negative, Matthew Holben, Mark Coleran, Matthew Shaw

SFX Supervisor: John Laforet

SFX Technicians: Mark Ahee, Darcy Callaghan, Michael Gagnon

Model Maker: Nicki Bayard

Editor: Marguerite Arnold

Production Designer: Crispian Sallis

Art Director: Laura Macnutt

Draftsman: Peter Child

Key Scenics: Kelly Chamberlain, Tony Owen

Storyboard Artist: David Cullen

Costume Designer: Kate Rose

[Costume] Set Supervisor: Jim Worthen

Key Make-up: Cathleen O'Connell

Key Hair: Barbi Hollota

Titles Designed by: Mark Coleran

Digital Film Lab Tape to Film: Duboicolor

[Duboicolor] Production Manager: Tommaso Vergallo

[Duboicolor] Executive Producer: Antoine Simkine

Music by: bias

Music Written, Mixed and Recorded by: Flood, Alan Moulder, Rob Kirwan

Music Supervisor: Nick Angel

Music Editor: Mike Higham

5./1 Music Mixes by: Andy Richards

Sound Recordist: Jim Rillie

Recordist: Lyle Scott-Darling

Re-recording Mixers: Ray Merrin, Graham Daniel, Adam Daniel

Supervising Sound Editor: Glenn Freemantle

Dialogue Editor: Gillian Dodders

Sound Effects Editor: Mark Heslop

ADR (NY Mixer): Bill Higley

ADR (LA Mixer): Matt Beville

Foley Artists: Felicity Cottrell, Ruth Sullivan

Foley Mixer: Kevin Tayler

Foley Editor: Grahame Peters

Stunt Co-ordinators: Branko Racki, Randy Boliver

Head Wrangler: Lee Phillips

Crow Wrangler: Richard 'Butch' Hughes

Cast

Sean CW Johnson (*Matt*)

Kris Lemche (*Rex*)

Stephen O'Reilly (*Danny*)

Laura Regan (*Emma*)

Jennifer Sky (*Charlie*)

Bradley Cooper (*Travis Patterson*)

Nick Mennell (*the cop*)

UK-USA-France-Canada 2002

95 mins

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