



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Society

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

Out of the morassic age of huge teen mullets, John Hughes high-school psychodramas and squishily analogue genre FX came this unnerving, unheralded freak, veritably the Bosch *chef-d'oeuvre* of 1980s home-video theatre.

Anyone who rented out a VHS of Brian Yuzna's *Society* expecting an orthodox horror film in structure or thrust was probably appalled. This is largely because the film's Marxist subtext is never quite 'sub'. Amid the snitty air of teenage temper tantrums and movie-movie Beverly Hills hyper-privilege lurks a critique of class predation that would've suited Buñuel, exploding in the film's climax into a taboo-busting surrealism which edges the movie towards a kind of mating between William S. Burroughs and Thorstein Veblen.

As cheaply made and ramshackle as the film is, the brilliance of *Society* – written by Rick Fry, Woody Keith and an uncredited Yuzna, who had cut his teeth producing Stuart Gordon's first three features – is that its vision of societal cannibalism is couched in the familiar and angsty perspective of children not quite understanding what their own parents are doing, loudly, behind closed doors. This universal anxiety doesn't eventually lead to a symbolic creature or force but to the working of society itself.

Saddled with an intolerable mullet, the black-haired LA high-school hero (Billy Warlock) becomes more than a little suspicious of his blond parents and sister as they prepare for her debutante debut, and the movie's only half done with us when it becomes disturbingly clear that there is some kind of institutionalised incest afoot, shared by the snotty upper-crust teens and leering grown-ups around them and kept secret from the lower classes. Warlock's exiled brat just doesn't suit the bloodline, it seems. Of course the crux of the matter isn't sex at all, but something far worse, a rousingly imagined (and plasticised, by prosthetics master Screaming Mad George) metaphor-in-action fleshy orgy-feast, the likes of which are as hard to describe as they are vividly evocative of every kind of aristocratic co-optation and consumption.

In short, the brisk generalisation of Yuzna's title is nothing if not apt. The mutability of the body is symbolic itself of the many ways the underclasses can be absorbed and drained by the wealthy, but the visual details can leave a mark, particularly the fat rich men in their underwear slavering over warping young flesh and then absorbing it into theirs like amoebae. It might be fruitless to search for a modest B movie quite as outrageously rich with both Freudian qualm and political disgust.

Michael Atkinson, *Sight & Sound*, August 2015

One of the most extraordinary genre debuts of the 80s, *Society* finds Brian Yuzna, the producer of Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond*, taking over the megaphone for an unclassifiable fable that proposes that the rich are literally inhuman. The early stretches of the film concentrate on establishing an atmosphere of unease, with bizarre bodily distortions

unnervingly glimpsed and written off by the protagonist as signs of his rootless anomie. Unusually for a modern-day effects/horror picture, many of the chills are verbal, as in the funny, weird and deeply disturbing tape Blanchard plays Bill, which has the proud parents discussing the etiquette of a coming-out party with their clean-cut daughter: 'First you'll copulate with your father and me, then with other people.' Like such recent fringe horror movies as *Parents* and *Heathers*, *Society* is nourished by contradictory genre roots, drawing as much on *The Graduate* as *From Beyond* in its well-paced build-up, with only the slightly too callow central performance of Billy Warlock faulting the film's pastel-coloured nightmare vision of Californian savagery.

Authority figures obsessively lecture the hero on his obligations to 'society', while his perfect girlfriend prods him towards toadying to the junior versions of the judges and psychiatrists who turn out to be literally a breed apart. With Clarisa representing Bill's exact opposite, a conscience-stricken monster who sympathises with the would-be victims, the film gradually establishes a truly strange variation on the vampire/werewolf legends as it depicts an ancient aristocracy of inhuman parasites who invisibly run the world.

'The rich have always sucked off low-class shit like you,' Ferguson sneers, while the cigar-smoking, slime-covered judge explains, 'You're a different race from us, a different species, a different class ... you have to be born into society.' In the almost indescribable extended finale, the film pulls out all the stops to live up to the credit 'Surrealist Make-Up Design by Screaming Mad George' as Bill returns to his home to find the Los Angeles elite performing a bizarrely sexual ritual involving shape-shifting, plentiful ooze, po-faced pronouncements about the individual's responsibility to 'society', a peculiar use of the 'Eton Boating Song' on the soundtrack, and torturous duels.

In a sequence quite unlike anything seen in an American mainstream movie (one would have to resort to Jan Svankmajer's *Dimensions of Dialogue* for a precedent), Yuzna stages the incredible process of 'shunting' in which characters are literally turned inside-out. Flesh is twisted into surreal shapes as sex, violence, slime and surrealism are whipped into an appalling but fascinating climax which leaves the film in an impasse from which the finish can merely retreat. While a few cheap wisecracks – 'Gee son, I guess I *am* a butthead,' admits Bill's father when his face erupts from his own rectum – that betray the vile influence of Freddy Krueger, this is on the whole a remarkable, unusual and challenging movie that genuinely stretches the horror genre into new areas, breaking away from the formulae that have hampered it in the last ten years.

Kim Newman, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1990

SOCIETY

Director: Brian Yuzna
Production Companies: Society Productions, Wild Street Pictures
Executive Producers: Paul White, Keizo Kabata, Terry Ogisu
Producer: Keith Walley
Executive in Charge of Production: Dean Ramser
Production Manager: Gary Schmoeller
Production Co-ordinator: Debra Spidell
Location Manager: Eric Gage
Production Assistant: Daniel Carrey
Production Assistants: Tom Rainone, Peter Phillip Bayham
Set Production Assistant: Paul Kowalczk
Assistant Directors: Terry Benedict, Jeffrey Zeitlin, Jerome Goldberg
Casting: Donna Anderson
Screenplay: Woody Keith, Rick Fry
Director of Photography: Rick Fichter
Additional Photography: Mark Gutterud
2nd Unit Photographers: Bruce R. Cook, Greg Gardiner, Eric Anderson
Eyeballs: Tech Optics
Editor: Peter Teschner
Production Designer: Mathew C. Jacobs
Art Director: Kelle DeForrest
Set Dressers: Franklyn M. Gottbette, Christy Mozillo
Storyboard Artist: Peter Von Sholly
Costume Designer: Robin Lewis
Set Costumers: Meg Goodwin, Kelly O’Gurian
Make-up Artists: Sheri P. Short, Valerie McKnight, Lisa M. Lowe
Additional Make-up Artists: Phyllis Temple, Wendy Gosse
Surrealistic Make-up Design/Creation: Screaming Mad George
Shunting Puppeteers: Philip J. Slaghter, Mitchell J. Greenblatt, Roy Garcia, Mike Johnson
Titles/Opticals: Motion Opticals
Music: Mark Ryder, Phil Davies
Sound Recording: William Fiege
Sound Re-recording: John ‘Doc’ Wilkinson, Doug Turner, John L. Anderson
Supervising Sound Editors: Adam Johnston, Sync Pop
Sound Editors: Dale Johnston, Jim Koford, Mike Virnig, Ted Johnston, Gonzo, Marty Stein, Duke Brown, Mike Cook
ADR Mixer: Tom Ruff
Foley Artists: Casey Troutman, Robert Friedman
Foley Recordist: Leonard Smith
Foley Mixer: Albert Gomez
Stunt Co-ordinator: Daniel Bradley
Stunt Doubles: Matt McColm, Tom Elliot
Ultra-Stereo Consultant: John Lawson

Cast

Billy Warlock (*Bill Whitney*)
Devin Devasquez (*Clarisa*)
Evan Richards (*Milo*)
Ben Meyerson (*Ted Ferguson*)
Charles Lucia (*Jim*)
Connie Danese (*Nan*)
Patrice Jennings (*Jenny Whitney*)
Heidi Kozak (*Shauna*)
Ben Slack (*Dr Cleveland*)
David Wiley (*Judge Carter*)
Tim Bartell (*Blanchard*)
Brian Bremer (*Petrie*)
Marie Claire (*Sally*)
Conan Yuzna (*Jason*)
Jason Williams (*Jason’s friend*)
Pamela Matheson (*Mrs Carlyn*)
Rohni Lee, Michael Schipper, Chris Claridge, Amy Obrand (*Ferguson’s gang*)
David Wells (*Sergeant Burt*)
Mike Diamant (*cop in woods*)
Raffaella Commitante (*nurse at hospital*)
Seely Abraham
Chris Anne
Laura Tulaska
Mike Colletta
Robb Willoughby
Tom Druzay
John Fraser
Allen Eisenhart
Michael ‘Tony’ Merten
Donamaritia
Thomas Lewis
Blanche Bimstein
Tom Rainone
Kristine Kauffman
Lisa Bal
Nicole Durant
Daniele Heren
Caroline Lomas
C. John Merrill
Steve Morgan
Rick Widman
Chanel Ryan
Mark David
Don Storey
Robin Agee

USA 1989
99 mins

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