



#### Submit to Me

Director: Richard Kern  
USA 1985  
12 mins  
Digital

#### Blood Feast

Director: Herschell Gordon Lewis  
Production Company: Box Office Spectaculars  
Producer: David F. Friedman  
Cast:  
Thomas Wood  
Mal Arnold  
Connie Mason  
Scott H. Hall  
Lyn Bolton  
Toni Calvert  
Gene Courtier  
Ashlyn Marton  
Sandra Sinclair  
Al Golden  
USA 1963  
67 mins  
Digital

The screening on Thu 2 Apr will be introduced  
by writer Virginie Sélavay

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#### Trash! The Wildest Films You've Ever Seen

## Blood Feast

Violence, mayhem and murder most foul are the meat and gravy of American cinema, but if one man can be said to have added the ketchup it was Chicago-based filmmaker Herschell Gordon Lewis, originator of the gore film and one of the horror genre's most charismatic figures.

Working at the fringes of the American film industry as a regional independent in the 1960s and early 70s, Lewis made movies in a variety of genres, but it was his output in the field of horror that enshrined his commercial reputation. His films took screen violence to shocking new extremes, chopping and slicing and mincing the human body in ever-more inventive and hideous ways. And yet, while his imagery was frequently repulsive, the films remain oddly charming. Lewis raised bloodshed to the brink of absurdity and then gave it a hearty push over the edge, and while the results can make the unwary gag a little, the films are rarely depressing or upsetting.

Instead they convey a rambunctious sense of fun and provocation. It may seem an odd assertion when dealing with such violent material, but fans of Lewis really do *love* his movies. They adore his brash showmanship and revel in his riotous black humour. Lewis knew how to tickle an audience: gruesome murders are presented in his work with the obstreperous relish of a kid throwing a rotten dog carcass into a swimming pool, and it's the gleeful anarchic childishness that amuses (or offends) as much as the gore itself. Any attempt to drag the films into a sober adult context deserves the same raspberry a 15-year-old might give a stuffy high school teacher: when a critic for the French film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* wrote that Lewis was 'a subject worthy of further study', Lewis himself quipped, 'That's what they say about cancer.'

The route to success, he decided, was to find the lowest common denominator then milk it, and milk it hard. At the tail-end of the 1950s a format known as the 'nudie-cuties' had reconfigured an earlier exploitation trend, the nudist film (pseudo-documentaries promoting naturism as a healthy way of life), replacing pro-naturist rhetoric with comedy and fantasy. Scenting commercial hay, Lewis (working with fellow exploitation legend David F. Friedman) cranked out five such films in two years.

Although the nudies made money, Lewis soon grew restless (proving that man cannot live on strategically placed beachballs alone) and began puzzling over where to turn next. In an interview for *The Chicago Tribune* in 1972, he explained how he came to create the seminal film of a new genre:

'Around 1963 I came to the conclusion that every theatre owner who had played *Lucky Pierre* was about to make a sex film, and that that particular market would become unbearably crowded. I also thought that these kinds of pictures would degenerate into something that didn't require a filmmaker; someone just had to turn on the camera and graphically record the sex act. So the question became, which type of product wouldn't be in competition with the major film companies? The answer, I felt, was in the area of gore. No one had ever made such a picture. There had been horror films, but people always died with their eyes closed, people were shot and never had a stain of blood, and the most that could be expected was a very neat bullet hole through the forehead.'

## Trash! The Wildest Films You've Ever Seen

### Trash

Mon 30 Mar 18:10; Thu 9 Apr 20:30 (+ intro by Jaye Hudson of TGirlsonFilm)

### Reefer Madness

Mon 30 Mar 20:45; Sat 11 Apr 15:10

### Multiple Maniacs

Tue 31 Mar 18:20; Sun 26 Apr 18:20;

Thu 30 Apr 20:40

### Trash! Season Introduction:

**Some Films Are Trash, Some Have**

### Trash-Ness Thrust Upon Them

Wed 1 Apr 18:10

### Normal Love

Wed 1 Apr 20:20 (+ intro by Professor Dominic Johnson, Queen Mary University of London);

Mon 13 Apr 20:30

### Blood Feast

Thu 2 Apr 18:05 (+ intro by writer Virginie Selavy);

Wed 15 Apr 20:45

### Sins of the Fleshapoids

Thu 2 Apr 20:30; Sun 12 Apr 18:10

### Hold Me While I'm Naked, George Kuchar!

Fri 3 Apr 18:20; Mon 13 Apr 18:00 (+ extended intro

by Professor Juan A. Suárez, author of

Experimental Film and Queer Materiality)

### Thundercrack!

Sat 4 Apr 17:20; Sat 25 Apr 20:00

### Pink Flamingos

Sun 5 Apr 18:30; Fri 10 Apr 18:00

### Plan 9 from Outer Space

Tue 7 Apr 18:10 (+ extended intro by BFI National Archive preservation and curatorial staff, and writer Ken Hollings); Tue 21 Apr 20:55

### Ed Wood

Tue 7 Apr 20:25

### Salvation! + pre-recorded intro by Beth B

Wed 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 28 Apr 20:30

### Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!

Thu 9 Apr 18:20; Thu 23 Apr 21:15

### Another Day, Another Man

### + Elevator Girls in Bondage

Sat 18 Apr 18:00; Wed 22 Apr 20:20 (+ intro by film scholar and critic Dr Elena Gorfinkel)

### Super 8½

Sat 18 Apr 20:45; Thu 30 Apr 18:05

### I Was a Teenage Serial Killer

### + A Family Finds Entertainment

Fri 24 Apr 18:30; Mon 27 Apr 18:30

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Lewis had found the motherlode. There was a taboo in the movies against showing the torn mangled flesh of bleeding screaming victims – but oddly enough, no actual *law* against it. *Blood Feast*, Lewis's first foray into blood and guts, was shot in five days in February 1963, for \$24,000, and it earned him his place in cinema history. The story of a mad Egyptian caterer carving up Florida's beehived beauties to recreate an ancient offering to the goddess Ishtar, it transcended its limitations to become a runaway drive-in hit and the progenitor of a new kind of horror film.

With the possible exception of Dali and Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*, *Blood Feast* was the first film designed not only to shock viewers, but also to wilfully revolt them. In a sequence that lingers in the mind of anyone who sees it, a woman's tongue (a foot-long mass of cranberry-coloured excreta) is ripped from her mouth. Another victim has her leg cut off at the knee. A moonlight tryst at the beach ends with a girl's brain ripped out. The *pièce de résistance*, a tabletop evisceration, presents a Grand Guignol vision that's simultaneously repulsive and astounding. If there's a fertilising moment in the Cinema of Bad Taste, this is it. Audiences in 1963 had seen nothing even remotely like it before.

Clumsily shot, terribly acted, and with a script so banal that Lewis used not a single line of it when he novelised the film a year later, *Blood Feast* ought to be impossible to watch. Instead, the technical shortcomings strike sparks against the outrageous violence and Lewis's underlying sense of the ridiculous. Yes, the film is disgusting, but there's hilarity in its butcher-shop mayhem, and to be outraged is to play straight man to Lewis's wind-up. Unless you're a 'concerned parent' or 'PTA member' with a yen for writing to local newspapers about the decline of moral standards, *Blood Feast* is impossible to take seriously. Its eruptions of gore are carnivalesque, and the film's villain, Fuad Ramses, is as bizarrely emphatic as a circus clown.

Despite their amateurish performances and rampant technical shoddiness, time does not have to be kind to Lewis's films. There's no need to coddle his memory, as some bad movie buffs do that of Edward D. Wood. *Blood Feast* does not cry out for the pity of an indulgent audience, nor will Lewis ever need some future Tim Burton to cheerlead his oeuvre. Implicit in *Blood Feast*, and explicit in Lewis's later films, is the feeling that we're being played, like fish by an angler; that the filmmaker is having a laugh at the expense of anyone unprepared for his butcher-shop hi-jinx.

Jocular and sly, with a breezy disregard for propriety and that particular taste for crudity that only the sophisticated can cultivate, his best work will always raise eyebrows, shock prudes and delight the unrepentant adolescents of the future. There's no doubt that the modern horror film owes a chromosome to Lewis, as seen in the bloodline of everything from *Friday the 13th* (1980) to *Hostel* (2005). And we can be sure that for many many years to come, if someone screens a Lewis film for the amusement of their friends, there will always be the chance that someone will retch, or shriek, or – as John Waters once memorably put it – give the ultimate standing ovation, and barf.

Stephen Thrower, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)

## Submit to Me

Collaged portraits of sexual provocation and death raise the temperature in Richard Kern's recently restored, audience-baiting short.