

Diversions

PSYCHOTRONIC

The Michael Weldon Interview By Dave Meile



Weldon

Dave Meile/Diversions

Christmas Eve 1983. A friend gives me a copy of Michael Weldon's "Psychotronic Encyclopaedia of Film," 800 pages of film reviews, original posters and movie ads. It casts a pall over the holidays. Family relationships are frosty. I scoff at eggnog. I eschew Mom's succulent cream-cheese, date and maraschino-cherry treats. I become withdrawn and downright surly. Retiring to my room, I pore over the book for two days, emerging only for an occasional box of Screaming Yellow Zonkers.

Weldon's term "psychotronic" applies to a wide range of films. He is first and foremost a horror/sci-fi movie fan. But the phrase is more: low-budget exploitation, sexploitation, teen films, rock 'n' roll, big-budget flops, bikers, cavemen and, thank God, "Zonter, Thing from Venus." He started out with a Xeroxed, handwritten guide to little-covered films on local New York TV.

It's 1986. Weldon is a minor celebrity. Newspapers and magazines like *Films in Review*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *People*, *Rolling Stone* and *Heavy Metal* call the book "inventive," "informative" and "eccentric." The book has such a powerful, mesmerizing effect on me that I write Weldon frequently. He is always gracious, answering questions and informing me of new literature on the world of psychotronic films.

I decided to meet this fellow face to face. I wheeze up 2,000 flights of stairs to get to his apartment in New York's Lower East Side. His pad is adorned with original movie posters and stills, among them a still from the 1961 classic "The Killer Shrews." I drool.

We discuss his concern about the intentions of New York planners to bulldoze psychotronic-type theaters on 42nd Street between Eighth Avenue and Broadway. "It was supposed to have happened already, but one of the main guys was

indicted for racketeering." The plan is to put up office buildings, high rises, hotels and mini-marts. But Weldon senses some classism going on. "These people get publicity not by saying, 'We want to put up tall buildings and make money.' They take a moral stance . . . they say by tearing down these theaters they'll rid the area of drug trafficking and prostitution in New York, which is absurd. I'm not against trying to improve conditions of neighborhoods, but this looked like a scam from day one, and a lot of people have been against it. All the changes in the city have to do with money. And movie theaters, specifically the ones on 42nd Street, are entertainment for poor people, and that kind of entertainment is being wiped out."

These 42nd Street theaters show a variety of flicks, ranging from porn and Kung-Fu shops to a staple of the psychotronic diet: "gore" or "splatter" movies. My bleeding-heart liberal conscience tells me to be offended by the violence.

Weldon makes few apologies: "I think it's been really overdone, and I think there are a lot of movies that have no reason to exist except for the gore and they're getting really boring. I like gore movies if the gore is so shocking that it shocks me and I can't see how obviously the special effects were done, then I'm impressed, even if it's a dumb movie. If it's a good movie and also has gore in it, then that's great."

Being one of the country's leading champions of offbeat, bizarre cinema has its drawbacks. He runs psychotronic film festivals in Chicago, Cleveland, Boston and, this particular weekend, New York. He has shown entertaining obscurities like "Carnival of Souls," "Daughter of Horror," "She Demons" and "Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!". Not all of it is dreck, despite the restrictive low budgets these films were made on.

The writers and publicity folks

call them bad film festivals. "It's a media expression. Media simplifies it. They use the term even when it doesn't apply. Some of the films I show are bad, but not all of them are, and that's too much for people to deal with. I'd get this kind of publicity in Boston, mostly because I showed some Ed Wood films ("Plan Nine from Outer Space," "Night of the Ghouls") along with the other ones. It got labeled a 'bad film festival.' In a way, I can't complain. More people will probably show up if they think it's bad. But on the side I'm saying, 'I think these movies are really good, and I think you'll think they're really good too.'"

Still, Weldon is genuinely flattered by the attention he has received; simplified or otherwise. "These films are sort of forgotten gems that were thrown in with the bad ones, and I threw them in with the bad ones so I guess I'm to blame, too. I'm just trying to get these films exposed. I'm trying to have some fun and hopefully make a little money on the side."

We discuss Weldon's dismay over the modern audience's trend to stay home and watch films on video rather than opting for the communal experience of viewing in a theater. The psychotronic experience is best when indulged in by hordes. Weldon wants lots of patrons for his psychotronic film festival Saturday night at the Theater for the Living Cinema. In fact, he defiantly tells a Jersey radio programmer that "we expect to outdraw the World Series."

On the agenda are "Killers from Space" (1954), wherein Peter Graves is terrorized by aliens in hooded sweatshirts with ping pong eyes, and one of my favorites, "The Hideous Sun Demon" (1959), starring Robert Clarke as a scientist who mixes whiskey and science instead of whiskey and soda and becomes a radiation-poisoned creature who

turns "scaly and lizardlike" whenever the sun comes out. Also notable is fourth-rate Peggy Lee lip-synching a clinker called "Strange Pursuit" while the scientist salivates.

"I've shown 'Killers from Space' before and people really get into the humor of it and pretty much laugh all the way through. 'Hideous Sun Demon' has some laughs, but it's a lot more serious and better done. Hopefully the audience will be more quiet during that one." "Hideous Sun Demon" was made by director-producer-star Clarke for \$60,000 or \$70,000 and lost a bundle.

Any advice for low-budget filmmakers today, be they hacks or geniuses? Weldon pauses and grins. "I think they should be encouraged. Sure, some are hacks. I'm glad they're still around because it's getting harder for them, too. Keep that hackwork coming — it entertains us."

I inquire about good new psychotronic and low-budget horror.

"When I go to a movie theater to see a movie that I don't know much about, which is the best way to see a movie, and it turns out to be a little-known, low-budget movie by unknown people and it's good, I'm thrilled. 'Evil Dead' was a real low-budget project that came out great. Even 'reAnimator' was a relatively low-budget movie that was great and really caught on with the audience. One that didn't catch on that I really liked was 'Eyes of Fire,' which was made in Missouri. All these films were made by first-time, young directors. That's real encouraging."

Although Weldon lives quite modestly, his "Psychotronic Encyclopaedia of Film" has sold almost 30,000 copies, and his second book, tentatively titled "The Psychotronic Star Atlas," is due out next summer.

"It's going to be a guide to actors, actresses and some directors, with filmographies, brief biographies, and

dealing with work these people did only after 1950. I'm not gonna deal with the "Golden Age of Hollywood" which many of the other books deal with."

Will he include Les Tremayne ("Creature of Destruction", "War of the Worlds", "Monolith Monsters")? "Sure, I have him written up."

Whit Bissell ("I was a Teenage Werewolf", "Monster on the Campus")?

"Whit Bissell definitely. He's a good actor who's in all kinds of movies and worked constantly. A lot of TV. People remember him for his science-fiction and horror roles, but he did a lot of other films. It'll be a book about actors and actresses who don't normally get written about much. Somebody like John Hoyt, who occasionally got starring roles. He was in 'Attack of the Puppet People' and still does TV. There's some people who worked so much I wonder if I'll have room to run all their work. People like Klaus Kinski or John Carradine. It's ridiculous."

The next evening I begin the long walk to the Theater for the Living Cinema on White Street. Right by the Baby Doll Lounge — Topless Go-Go Nightly. The Cinema is a struggling little joint sandwiched between old textile warehouses. Weldon arrives and is greeted by enthusiastic applause. He gives some interesting background information on the films and positions himself near the projection room to make sure every thing goes OK. I glance around the room at the patrons. Of the millions of potential psychotronic film fans in New York, only about a hundred are there. Conquering the world can be a slow process.

Michael Weldon's second book, "The Psychotronic Star Atlas," will be published by Ballantine Books this summer. He will have articles published in *High Times* and a monthly feature in *Video Review*.