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Film 4 Frightfest, 2010
London, 26-30 August 2010

A Festival Report by Deborah Mellamphy, University College Cork

The Film 4 Frightfest continues to attract a growing audience every year and it has now become the premiere international film festival for genre fans. First held on the August bank holiday weekend of 2000, the festival took place at the Prince Charles theatre—a small, hidden cinema in Leicester Square. The niche film festival had become so popular by 2009 that it was moved to the nearby 1300 seat Empire Cinema and took over two screens in the cinema; the "main" screen for big, crowd-pleasing films and the "discovery" screen for smaller, more obscure, independent films. The festival is notable for its support of independent and foreign horrors, fantasy and grindhouse that would otherwise have never been distributed or screened in the United Kingdom, if at all. The festival shows an incredibly diverse range of films, with "horror" being an umbrella term for subgenres including slashers, werewolves, vampires, suspense, monster, comedy, exploitation, art-house and documentary. In the past, the festival has screened the UK premieres of *Audition, Donnie Darko, Battle Royale, Cabin Fever, Old Boy* and *Pan's Labyrinth*, with most of the directors and principle cast in attendance. Almost every screening was preceded by an introduction by the film's director, producer or members of the cast and was then followed by a Q and A session about the making of the film. These sessions are informative, friendly and humorous to go with the atmosphere, as the cast and crew then mingled with the crowds after the screenings and were available for questions. In addition, the festival organisers, Greg Day, Paul McEvoy, Ian Rattray and Alan Jones were very accessible throughout the event. The defining characteristic of the festival, and one that the organisers promote, is the atmosphere of anticipation and friendliness: there is a community atmosphere and a shared appreciation of horror and cult cinema, and it is this that continues to draw growing crowds. The ease at which one can strike up a conversation with a stranger about how good (or bad) the films are, or the genre in general, is striking, as everyone appreciates the festival spirit. I met festival goers from around the world: from Australia, the US, Canada and Japan, who had travelled to London especially for the festival, demonstrating that its unique atmosphere has an international reputation. There is the shared knowledge that these are often bad films but this is what makes it one of the most fun festivals to attend.

Frightfest 2010, which took place over the weekend of 26-30 August, began with the world premiere of Adam Green's *Hatchet II* (2010): a sequel to the rarely seen *Hatchet* (2006) and a generic genre offering that attempts to mimic the slasher's heyday of the 1970s and 1980s. The first "Total Icon Special" took place on the second day with Tobe Hooper. This event presented his first, relatively unknown experimental film *Eggshells* (1969), which had originally gone down well at US drive-ins. It had been thought lost for many years, but a print resurfaced in 2010 and the film is now being shown at festivals ahead of its DVD

release (later this year). Festival goers were pre-warned about the onscreen imagery and strobe lighting, but the film was also plagued by sound problems, making it an uncomfortable viewing experience—after which many viewers complained of suffering from headaches. The film follows a group of young hippies, who are continuously high, in a shared house, while a creature grows in the basement. The film is worth seeing for its portrayal of 1960s confusion, as the audience is never sure what is real and what takes place in the minds of the stoned teenagers. The film taps into the political atmosphere of the late 1960s, and it uses some news footage from anti-war protests in Texas at this time, linking the film with Hooper's later, more well known film. This was followed by a screening of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which, although one of my favourite and most watched horror films, I appreciated even more on the big screen. In addition, the sound in the Empire allowed me to experience the film like I never had before, as it did others: the audience screamed like they were seeing it for the very first time. Even the protracted chase sequence at the end of the film seemed like a masterpiece in suspense on the big screen—making this particular screening a festival highlight. It was ironic that the film, a symbol of the video nasty era and heavy censorship despite its lack of gore, was shown at a festival that has caused controversy in the past due to its violent imagery. This was followed by an interview by Jamie Graham from *Total Film* magazine with Tobe Hooper, which often drifted into inane anecdote and nostalgia, but was ultimately very informative and humorous. This was followed by a "meet and greet" with the director, wherein the length of the queue to meet Hooper and to get his autograph—stretching the entire way around the enormous auditorium and delaying the rest of the screenings for that day—was a testament to his legend, the continuing popularity of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and its significance both within contemporary horror and to its audience.

Another festival highlight was British horror *F* (2010), directed by Johannes Roberts. *F* is the story of a school teacher and various other staff and students who are trapped inside a school by a group of young, faceless hoodies, who are trying to kill all those trapped, cleverly playing on the media's fear of youth culture. The film is notable for its very realistic sense of terror and it rarely becomes farcical or overly gory. The atmosphere is mainly induced by it being set in a real and eerily empty school, and the film's use of free runners as the faceless youths, whose physical dexterity has not been graphically enhanced in any way. Their silent ascent of the walls is genuinely creepy and makes them appear supernatural. The film ends ambiguously and cleverly, distinguishing it from the many other films screened at the festival that chose to use more stereotypical endings.

The remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) was screened on the third day of the festival, and it was surprisingly enjoyable. The original is best known as one of the most notorious video nasties, and still remains heavily cut in its present form. Its remake keeps all of this in mind and relies heavily on the original's reputation as a shocker. The original is a stereotypical rape revenge thriller, following the story of a girl who is brutally raped and then seeks revenge. The remake does not change much of the story; rather, it is the victim's methods of revenge, which are genuinely novel and elaborate, that is the biggest update for a contemporary audience. Of all the screenings I attended, this film was received the best and had everyone talking about it afterwards: the general consensus seemed to be that the film far surpassed its original.

I was told by a fellow festival attendee that *Monsters* (2010), directed by Gareth Edwards, was a must-see, which proved to be true in many ways. It is a post-apocalyptic road movie, creature feature, set in a Mexico and a US that have been infected by a strain of alien

life form. The film follows a male photojournalist who must accompany a female heiress back to US soil through the Mexican quarantine zone. The film is an enormous technical achievement, as it was reportedly made for only $15,000, with its impressive special effects almost single-handedly created by the film's director, a British CGI artist. It received an incredibly positive reaction and has since been highly critically successful. Yet, with a British certificate of 12A, I questioned its place at a horror film festival that purportedly pushes the boundaries and screens the most graphic and goriest of films. This film is instead a love story, which repeatedly verged on the sentimental. It was an astounding achievement nonetheless.

The nefarious *A Serbian Film* (2009) was reportedly a major draw and was hugely controversial even before the announcement that it could not be shown. Already screened at numerous European film festivals and freely available online, the Westminister Council blocked the screening of the film, demanding that four minutes be cut from the film before it could be screened. The film's director, Srdjan Spasojevic (who had travelled to London for the screening) was given the choice of screening it in its BBFC-approved form, but refused, saying that he disowned anything other than the film's original cut. Having seen the film since the festival, I am not surprised that its screening was blocked owing to its vile imagery, but I would like to have seen the audience's reaction. The film has certainly initiated debates regarding certification and the over-18 category, as video nasties did in the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, *A Serbian Film* was replaced with Rodrigo Cortés's *Buried*, an extremely well-crafted, crowd-pleaser that is almost Hitchcockian in its suspense. The film begins with Ryan Reynolds's character trapped underground in Iraq in a coffin with only a mobile telephone, a pen, a torch, a lighter, a flask, a knife and glow sticks. The film then focuses on his character's attempts to escape his prison before the oxygen runs out. Although Reynolds is the only figure onscreen for 90 minutes, the film never becomes tedious or dull, which surprised me and many other audience members alike.

The festival also featured previews of such genre fare as *Hobo with a Shotgun* (2011), initially a fake movie trailer made for a competition to promote Quentin Tarantino and Roberto Rodriguez's *Grindhouse* (2007)—which has since been produced as a feature film, premiering at the Sundance Film Festival—and the hugely anticipated *The Human Centipede 2* (2011), with director, Tom Six in attendance. The festival ended with the UK premiere of Eli Roth's forgettable *The Last Exorcism* (2010), with the director and cast in attendance. While none of these films were major mainstream successes (apart from *Buried* perhaps), and while they feature stiff, emotionless performances and terrible plots, and will undoubtedly disappear into obscurity—*Isle of Dogs* (2010), *Christopher Roth* (2010), *13 Hrs* (2010), for example—they added to the community atmosphere, as often it was the worst films and performances that sparked the most heated and memorable debates.

Deborah Mellamphy completed her PhD at University College Cork in 2010. She currently teaches Film Studies at UCC, and is a member of the Editorial Board of *Alphaville*.