

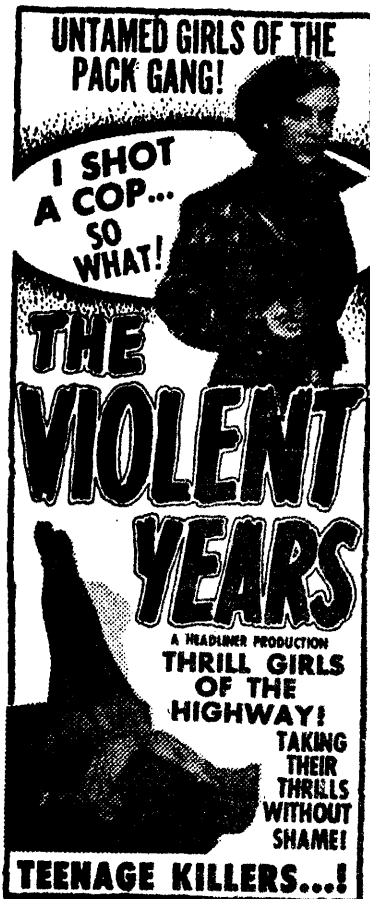


Program Notes

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THE VIOLENT YEARS (1956)

Directed by William M. Morgan. Written by Edward D. Wood, Jr.
Director of photography: William C. Thompson. Film Editor: Gerard Wilson. Associate producer: William M. Morgan. Set director: Jack Miles. Music supervision: Manuel Francisco. Makeup: Stephen Clensos. Master electrician: Frank Leonetti. Produced by Del Productions in association with Headliner Productions. Running time: 58 minutes. (*Distributor of tonight's print: Budget Films; 4590 Santa Monica Blvd.; Los Angeles, CA 90029.*) CAST: Jean Moorehead (Paula Parkins), Barbara Weeks (Jane Parkins), Arthur Millan (Carl Parkins), Theresa Hancock (Georgia), Joanne Cangl (Geraldine), Gloria Farr (Phyllis), Glenn Corbett (Barney Stetson), Lee Constant (Sheila), I. Stanford Jolley (Judge Clara), Timothy Farrell (Lt. Holmes), F. Chan McClure (Det. Artman), Bruno Metsa (Manny).



THE SINISTER URGE (1960)

Written and directed by Edward D. Wood, Jr.
Director of photography: William C. Thompson.
Set design: Jerome Lapari. Film editor: John Soh. Special effects: Roy Mercer.
Musical arrangements: Manuel Francisco.
Set dressings: J. B. Finch. Miss Fontaine's wardrobe: Eileen Younger. A Headliner Production. Running time: 75 minutes. (*Distributor of tonight's print: Budget Films; 4590 Santa Monica Blvd.; Los Angeles, CA 90029.*) CAST: Kenne Duncan (Lt. Matt Carson), James "Duke" Moore (Sgt. Randy Stone), Jean Fontaine (Gloria Henderson), Carl Anthony (Johnny Ryde), Dino Fantini (Dirk Williams), Jeanne Willardson (Mary Smith), Harvey B. Dunn (Mr. Romaine), Reed Howes (Police Inspector), Fred Mason (Officer Kline), Vic McGee (Syndicate man), Harry Keaton (Jaffie), Conrad Brooks (Connie).

"A bad actor," wrote the underground cineaste Jack Smith, "is rich, unique, idiosyncratic, revealing." The same may be said for the objectively bad film. . . . [It is] usually made against all odds in a handful of days on

a breathtakingly low budget. . . . A good bad movie is a philosopher's stone that converts the incompetent mistakes of naive dross into modernist gold. Such movies are unstable objects. They ping-pong back and forth from diegetic intent to profilmic event.

--J. Hoberman,
Film Comment,
July-August 1980.

He [Edward Wood] enjoyed playing the role of The Director, recalls one of his friends who worked with Wood on his last two projects. This meant that The Director sat there on his chair like De Mille, shouting out orders with this megaphone, and he would have this person doing that, and everybody running all over the place.

--Harry and Michael Medved,
The Golden Turkey Awards.

Objectively bad films are almost always targeted at the most exploitable lumpen sections of the movie audience (ethnic minorities, teenagers, sub-literates, 42nd street derelicts). Like every other sort of movie, however, the best bad films are personal, even obsessive works.

--J. Hoberman,
Film Comment,
July-August 1980.

In 1954, Francois Truffaut wrote an essay for the French journal *Cahiers du cinema* on personal authorship in film. Simply put, this concept, known as the *auteur* theory, means that any given film ideally should be a product of personal expression. As David Cook states in his book *History of Narrative Film*, the film should bear "the stamp of the filmmaker's individual personality, controlling obsessions, and cardinal themes." Some of the more famous American directors who have made the *Cahier* list include Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, John Ford and Anthony Mann. Whenever a *cinophile* sees films directed by these men there are usually some elements in the work that spark recognition as to whom that film particularly belongs, some characteristic tendencies of the director. Generally we think of the *auteurs* as great filmmakers. However, just as a bad novel has an author/hack, so too can bad films have their *auteurs*. Tonight's minor "messterpieces" are such films. The guiding force behind them was Edward D. Wood, Jr.

Ed liked to sit there in his director's chair and give people orders. It was pretty strange, in his high heels and woman's clothing, you know, shouting out to everybody what to do. He had a megaphone--he liked to use a megaphone on the set. I think he knew that just in terms of weirdness alone, this would be a movie that people would remember. . . .

--Harry and Michael Medved,
The Golden Turkey Awards.

The book has yet to be written (and more than likely never will be) on Wood's life and career. He may have begun working in film around 1948, an aspiring director/writer/producer who would become known more for his personal quirks than for his movies. His career never seemed to make it beyond cheap exploitation films or grade Z horror schtick. Instead, it deteriorated until he was reduced to making 8mm. hard-core "educational" sex films and, in his later years, writing pornography.

Today, if Wood is remembered at all it is likely due to his having won The Golden Turkey Award for "Worst Director of All Time," a dubious honor. Wood's PLAN NINE FROM OUTER SPACE was voted "Worst Film of All Time." Targeted for *auteurist* assassination, Wood had three of his efforts featured at the "World's Worst Film Festival," the aforementioned PLAN NINE, BRIDE OF THE MONSTER, and his directorial debut, GLEN OR GLENDA?. It is, perhaps, this last film which holds the key to Wood's works.

According to Harry and Michael Medved, authors of *The Golden Turkey Awards*, Wood was a transvestite who would wear women's pantsuits, high heels, pantyhose and angora sweaters on the set. Wood himself was fond of claiming that as a Marine in World War II, he landed on an enemy beach wearing a bra and panties under his fatigues. In a society where very few lifestyles are considered more macho than the U.S. Marines, a transvestite marine certainly runs the risk of an identity crisis. With that in mind, GLEN OR GLENDA (also released at various times under the titles I CHANGED MY SEX, I LED TWO LIVES and HE OR SHE) can be looked upon as both personal confession as well as a plea for acceptance. Inspired by the Christine Jorgenson sex-transformation operation, GLEN OR GLENDA? was an opportunity for Wood

to exploit the Jorgenson affair as well as examine some of the possible psycho-sexual angst that may have existed within himself. As the various titles suggest, the film was a soliloquy that could be labeled, "To be or not to be."

GLEN OR GLENDA? was blatant and didactic in its efforts to sell transvestism and sex-change to the world. Tonight's films are only relatively more subtle in regard to the juxtaposition of sexual roles and expectations. Wood's personal views are endemic to the framework of two different exploitation plot structures. THE VIOLENT YEARS professes to be a juvenile delinquent film. It's the thrill seeking youth versus the anal retentive complacent and smug establishment. THE SINISTER URGE, though promoted as a slasher flick (Hitchcock's PSYCHO was released earlier that year), poses as an anti-pornography movie. Both of these plot devices are heavy handed yet shallow surface structures that must be stripped away before the films can be appreciated as personal statements by Wood.

In THE VIOLENT YEARS the Moral Majority preach for a return to the Ten Commandments as a means of controlling juvenile delinquency (either that or raise all children in a police state). As in all of Wood's films, the subtext is the examination of sexual roles and identities so outrageously begun with GLEN OR GLENDA?. In her violent years, Paula is an attractive, can-have-anything-that-money-can-buy WASP who plays Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde with her parents. When around her parents she's the All-American girl next door, loving, passive feminine, happy with her role in a patriarchal society. But early in the film we get an indication that Paula is not quite what she seems. Hinting at the conflict between a socially dictated sex role of submissive female and an inborn, obsessive desire for the role of an aggressive, authoritative figure, is a series of incidents concerning Paula. Paula calls her friend Phyllis on the phone but greets her with "Phil, it's Paul." Within this brief moment the whole tone of the scene begins to shift. Paula seems to have discarded some of her WASPish charm and taken on a slightly harder edge. This immediately fades into a scene in which Paula and her friends, using Mother's car, dressed like men and carrying pistols, rob their seventh gas station and pistol whip the attendant. The scene shifts to an open assault on a young couple caught necking. Paula and her girlfriends gang-rape

the male. Paula savors this conquest because it is a situation that she can control. She has the gun, or rather her friends do, which makes her phallus bigger than her victim's, thus relegating him to the submissive role. Later, Paula is referred to as "a right guy," while a male reporter from her father's newspaper is labeled a sob-sister. Wood's script is peppered with moments such as these moments that don't necessarily draw undue attention to themselves (except as being part of a bad script), but nevertheless, play with the idea of sex roles and nomenclature--far more subtly than in GLEN OR GLENDA?.

Paula vacillates between passive, familial, goody-two-shoes, a contrived sex role, and her preferred selfish, aggressive, almost primal persona, a role she cannot play under the rules of the middle-class patriarchal society in which she was raised. She does not wish and will not accept the role of passive female for whom everything is provided. Paula is different from every precept of her family's middle-class world. And to the very end she is defiant, either unable or unwilling to become part of the normalcy of her parent's class structure.

Similar elements can be found in THE SINISTER URGE. The authority figure is a woman, Gloria Henderson. Her male subordinate, Johnny Ryde, is an ineffectual submissive male. Another all girl gang creates the opportunity to go straight from church to critically assault an ice cream salesman. But the questions of sexual identity and role playing that Wood tried to touch upon in GLEN OR GLENDA? and THE VIOLENT YEARS is not the focal point of this film. In fact, neither is the slasher aspect of the film of primary importance for Wood. What this film shares with GLEN OR GLENDA? is its autobiographical nature.

Wood died in 1978. His career began as a joke and went downhill from there, degenerating from merely bad to pornographic movies. THE SINISTER URGE is both a confession and a primal scream. Lt. Carson's statement that young girls from all over the country flock to Hollywood in hopes of making it big can also be applied to Wood himself. Edward Wood loved to play the role of director. He may have even thought,

though it's hard to believe, that his films were good. But by 1960 he must have been aware of what was happening to his "career." And *THE SINISTER URGE* is a reflection of that realization.

Wood can be found throughout the film, embodied in various characters. He is Dirk, the slasher of the film, who is really a victim of both the organization he serves and the compulsion that drives him to kill. So too has Wood become a victim of his obsession to direct, making him a victim of the industry. He can more obviously be seen in the figure of Jaffie, the old, lecherous director whose enjoyment in playing the role of director perfectly fits the descriptions of Wood's gleeful reactions when playing that role. But above all, Wood is embodied in Johnny Ryde. This parallel is almost too blatant. When Ryde is interviewing Mary Smith in his office, there are four framed movie posters on the wall behind her. Everyone of them is of an Edward D. Wood, Jr. film.

It's impossible to say exactly what Wood must have felt like, watching his career disintegrate. But it must have been something like what Johnny Ryde must have felt, looking at the porno films with Gloria Henderson, a sad vacant look on his face, remembering, or perhaps fantasizing, about the days when he used to make "art."

Edward Wood was a toadstool at the edge of Hollywood, nourished by the movie industry's compost.

--J. Hoberman,
Film Comment,
July-August 1980.

--Lee Perrin

Suggestions for further reading:

- Hoberman, J. "Bad Movies," *Film Comment* (July-August 1980), p. 7-12.
Medved, Harry and Michael. *The Golden Turkey Awards*. New York: Perigee, 1980.
Peary, Danny. *Cult Movies*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1981.

Edward D. Wood, Jr. filmography:

- 1952--GLEN OR GLENDA? [I CHANGED MY SEX, I LED TWO LIVES, HE OR SHE].
1953--BRIDE OF THE MONSTER. 1954--JAIL BAIT. 1956--THE VIOLENT YEARS (screenwriter). 1959--PLAN NINE FROM OUTER SPACE. 1960--NIGHT OF THE GHOULS, THE SINISTER URGE. 1972--NECROMANCY.