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"FRANKENSTEIN'S BLOODY NIGHTMARE" (2006)

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Starring: John R. Hand, Amy Olivastro, Chester Delacruz, Chip Chism, Mike Ensley, Karl Borst, Wade Best & Erin Pittkin
 Written & Directed by John R. Hand
[Official Website](#)

Polly Staffle Rating: ****

"Man lives in the sunlit world of what he believes to be reality. But there is, unseen by most, an underworld. A place that is just as real, but not as brightly lit... a darkside."
 - "Tales from the Darkside" intro

In many ways, "Frankenstein's Bloody Nightmare" takes me back to my childhood days of television watching. Not in the way watching a family sitcom like "Punky Brewster" does. The part of my younger years this movie taps into is when there was actually horror programming on regular TV and it scared the living crap out of me. Believe it or not, I didn't see many R-rated films as a youngster. I never had cable much either. So when I got to stay up late on the weekends and watch stuff like "Elvira's Movie Macabre," "Friday the 13th: The Series" and "Tales from the Darkside," I was in heaven. Or hell, depending on the way you look at it because these programs were creepy, freaky and absolutely mind blowing. To a ten-year old boy, anyway.

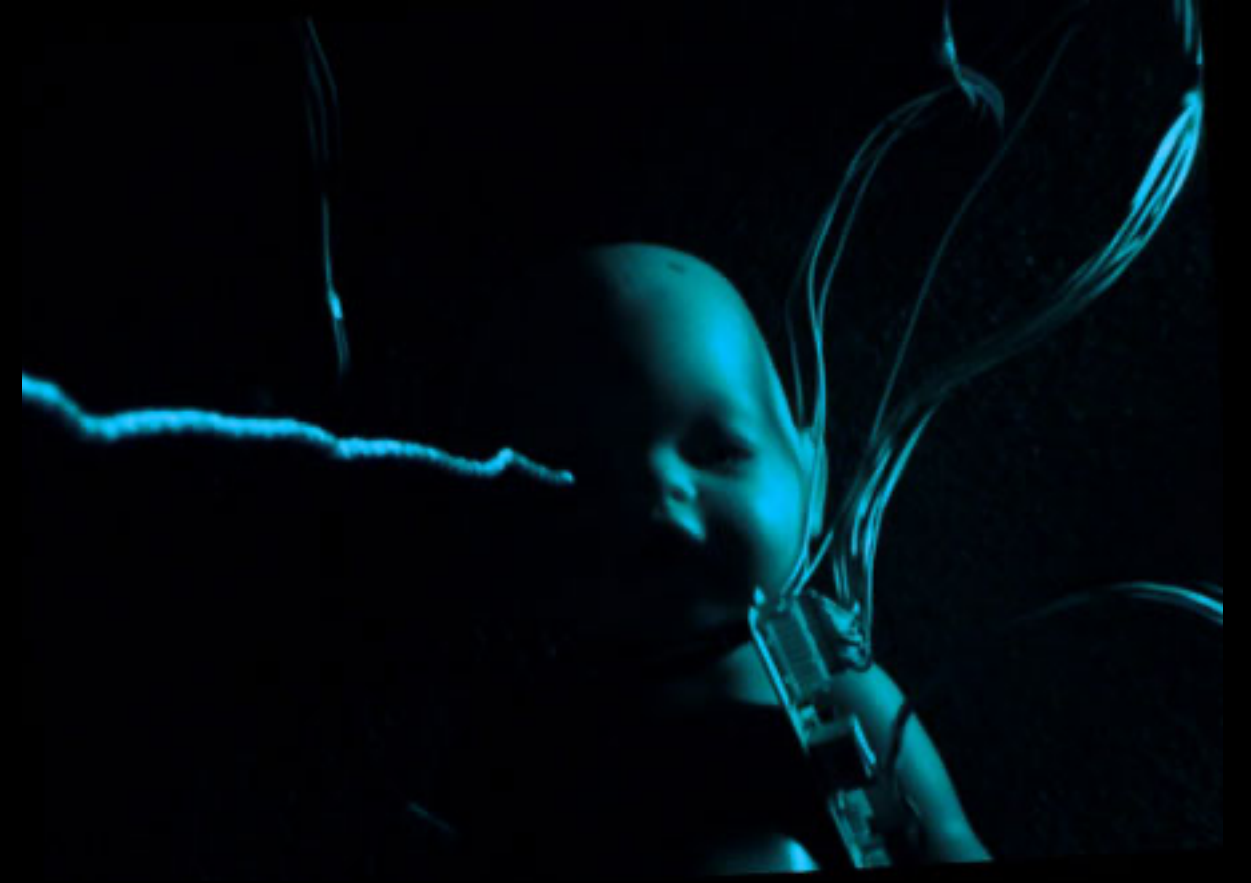


Some how debut filmmaker John R. Hand, 27, taps into that part of my psyche with his indie mad scientist/monster movie. I'm not quite sure what it is or what to even make of this bizarre piece of cinema. Perhaps it's because "Frankenstein's Bloody Nightmare" is so strikingly different than most of the homogenized films made today. Shot on super-8 and miniDV, Hand's experimental project is eerie and sort of feels like the viewer is trapped inside a nightmare - a bloody nightmare. It's not a gore-a-thon that many audiences have come to expect, but it also isn't a straight forward take on Mary Shelly's "Frankenstein" either. It's just a weird little movie that feels like it was locked away in a vault decades ago and now is finally available to the public. Its part art house and part horror, making it a "haunted art house film," I guess.

You know those campy compilations with really cool covers that feature older films like the four-movie DVD release "Blood Bath," which featured "Devil's Nightmare," "Pieces," "Kiss Me, Kill Me" [also known as "Baba Yaga"] and "Kill Baby Kill"? The technical quality of these gems is never very good. Most of the time the soundtracks don't quite synch right, the images are grainy, you can tell the directors shot without a full screenplay and the special effects are never really that special. Though it was shot in Northwest Florida and not the exotic European locations of "Blood Bath," Hand's \$2,000 "midnight movie" seems just as foreign and would fit right into one of those sets. For those that don't know, that's not a bad thing. It's actually quite a compliment as these type of films have been dubbed the punk rock of cinema by spooktacular movie and music exploiter Rob Zombie.

The story of "Frankenstein's Bloody Nightmare" centers on scientist Victor Karlstein, played by Hand, doing his best to keep the love of his life alive. Victor uses a pieced together reanimated corpse to do his killing in order to collect fresh body parts. The film doesn't really show it, but I am guessing he thinks he's going to somehow attach new arms, legs, etc. to his lady and she'll be perfectly fine. So his means may not be the best. At least his intentions are good... in an Ed Gein sort of way. His monster/helper looks a bit like those rubber suited creatures of yesteryear. Blinking red light for an eye included.

There's also a cheesy monster point of view video game-like effect that I happened to think was really cool. I may be in the minority though as the scene jumps out against the rest of the film's hand held old school whirlwind of saturated colors. What I liked about it though, was during most of the murder scenes we don't really see the killer. In fact, a number of death scenes occur before we see the "monster vision" point of view and even then we never get a long shot of the murderer. So it kind of leaves things up to the interpretation of the audience. Those that want a monster can have their Frankenstein. At the same time, the creature can be seen as a state of mind of Victor. Perhaps he is just off his rocker and there isn't really a reanimated monster at all.



Other odd highlights for me included a death scene involving a guy that has a striking resemblance to the cartoon character Beavis of Mike Judge's "Beavis and Butt-head." Not sure where Hand got this guy from, but now that I think about it, Hand kind of looks like Butt-head a little. The film's intro and closing are also personal favorites. The opening frame has you swearing you just put an old Jean Rollin movie like "Zombie Lake" on and the finale features a really cool burning film effect that Hand says was inspired by Karim Hussain's "Subconscious Cruelty."

"It's a chemical burn," Hand said. "You pour bleach onto a photograph and it just eats it up, but as it's eating, it really creates some interesting effects. And you light the photograph in a very specific way, slowdown or speed up the footage and color correct it to achieve a very unique effect."

Unique. Now that's a good word in summing up the entire movie. Perhaps this is the key to why this film sends me back in time to when "the darkside" seemed like a far away place I safely explored from the comfort of my home. In our current world of digitally mass produced slick films that are no way near as horrifying as the real life evil lurking outside, it feels as though Hand is breaking new ground.

Hand, who also produced and edited his project, says he has always been a fan of "fantastic films" and sort of been a "gearhead" and equipment collector, but it wasn't until he was helping a friend transfer old Super-8 home movies to DVD that he decided to tackle a feat such as "Frankenstein's Bloody Nightmare."

"The aged, granular quality of film set off something inside me and I felt it would be the perfect vehicle to tell this weird mad scientist story," Hand said. "I'd collected all of this Super-8 gear, but never really did anything with it and I just thought it'd be nice to pull that stuff out and try to do something with it all."



Hand started out thinking his film would open in a very conventional mode, mixing horror with some murder mystery and police procedural drama. The plan was to wait till the defenses of the audience were down and then hit them with the experimental aspects.

"I wanted to pull the rug from underneath them," Hand said. "And then get to what the film is really about - an experimental psycho-drama about this one character and where he inhabits, which is ultimately this kind of fuzzy, dream-like world. A very dysfunctional place. So I think the film still holds true to that idea but in the final version the audience definitely knows very early on that this is a very strange world and a strange film."

Hand says the final product is filled with unconscious emotional anchors rendered using a very detailed and multi-layered approach. He hopes audiences are able to pick up on these things and see his film for more than a gimmick.

"Beyond being retro or old looking," Hand said. "I just wanted to use the technology as a vehicle for this very otherworldly story about this insular little character, Victor. That was the ultimate goal. I think my process is I start with the medium and then I just work it until I feel I've expressed what I want to say, and I think strangely enough this is a very autobiographical film in some ways."

Autobiographical? Okay, so maybe Victor's not the nutty one. Perhaps Hand spent a bit too much time on this project as he also composed the soundtrack. The film was scored under the band alias The Greys, a concept born out of necessity.

"Once upon a time in a land far away from conventional logic," reads The Grey's [myspace page](#). "John R. Hand needed some music for a movie he was making so he had to make it himself. Back when he was 15 or 16 he used the name 'Codename Poobah' but that was way too stupid-sounding to put in the credits for 'Frankenstein's Bloody Nightmare' so this new name was invented. John doesn't like to think that this band is really just himself on a bunch of keyboards and software programs, but on the other hand he's got so much to do that he can't really think of any fake band members or anything, so he's a kind of in a 'grey' area, no pun intended."

You've got to love this guy. I'll admit when the credits rolled for "Frankenstein's Bloody Nightmare" I'm not exactly sure I understood all of what I saw. But what a fun experience. The uniqueness of it all kept me glued to the television, mesmerized like a 10-year-old boy in 1984 that hasn't been completely desensitized by our ugly society, watching a horrifying television show that has long been forgotten and yet to be released on DVD.

"The Darkside is always there, waiting for us to enter, waiting to enter us. Until next time... try to enjoy the daylight."
 - "Tales from the Darkside" outro

- CCF, August 2006