

Best film at this year's FanTasia was Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead*.

FanTasia Film Festival

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By Maurie Alioff

Now in its eighth year, Montreal's FanTasia Film Festival is a geek convention, a Goth powwow, and, at its best, an energizing showcase of outrageously imaginative storytelling from around the world. Mitch Davis, the festival's co-director of international programming and most visible front man, embodies FanTasia's spirit. He enjoys heavy dollops of darkness and doom onscreen and he's an amiable guy with boundless enthusiasm for movies, especially the kind of pictures FanTasia shows.

A fantasy moviemaker himself, Davis deplores the widespread condescension toward genre films he sees in Canada and the U.S. "It's a real tragedy," he told me recently. "In Europe, you have festivals like Sitges in Spain, which are gigantic, \$4-million-budgeted-and-up events funded by the government." FanTasia, backed since its inception by Montreal post-production company Vision Globale, and aided by other private sponsors, has never received a nickel of government funding. As Davis works himself up into a characteristically heated rap, he points out that prime ministers attend European genre events, which also attract "everybody from Terry Gilliam and Tom Cruise to people like Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader, Angelina Jolie and Tim Robbins. It amazes and angers me that our government will snub its nose at the genre when it's one of the oldest traditions in film. From Meliès to German expressionism in the 1920s, it defined film language and played with it." Moreover, "genre films are often the only means through which filmmakers can address, very aggressively, social ills. They're pop culture hand grenades."

Davis praises TIFF's programming of genre films both inside and outside its

Midnight Madness sidebar, but elsewhere on the Canadian scene he can't understand why it's almost impossible to pick up government-agency funding for smart fantasy pictures. "One of the only [Canadian] directors with really good export value is David Cronenberg, who is one of the best examples of confrontational genre filmmaking. It's ironic that people who might achieve the same in the work he loves and represents are not, despite a few exceptions, given support. In Europe, it's very easy to get government funding to make a fantasy/horror film because those films do sell." The mindset Davis alludes to is evident in the Canadian mantra: "We don't do Schwarzenegger." Hollywood directors who have done him best, however, are from this country, and Kapuskasing-born James Cameron's *Terminator 1 and 2* are pop satire, sci-fi masterpieces.

In 2004, FanTasia sold 78,000 tickets, and roughly one quarter of the screenings were full houses. Because of easy access to classics on DVD, audiences showed less of an interest in retro films, but the appetite for Asian movies remained insatiable. Of this year's pictures, Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Doppelgänger* was a standout. Like Poe's William Wilson, Kurosawa's movie recounts the tale of a man engaged in a life-or-death struggle with his evil twin. Koji is a depressed medical inventor whose manic double will kill to help him succeed with his latest project—a bizarre wheelchair/robot. The picture is loaded with subversive humour, not to mention a mischievous use of split screen. Koji Yakusho's performance as both the repressive inventor and his smirking nemesis rivals Jeremy Irons's in *Dead Ringer*.



Takashi Shimizu's *Ju-On: The Grudge*

FESTIVAL WRAP-UPS

A former student of Kurosawa's, Takashi Shimizu, directed the Asian hit, *Ju-On: The Grudge*, and also its recently launched U.S. remake, *The Grudge*, starring Sarah Michelle Gellar. A must-see item at FanTasia, *Ju-On*'s fragmented, nonlinear story focuses on various characters' experiences of the ectoplastic contamination emanating from a house where a mother and son devolved into wrathful furies because of a violent trauma. As in most films spawned by Hideo Nakata's megahit *Ringu*, ghostly malevolence can be transmitted by telephones, television sets and other insidious electronics.

Supreme maverick Takashi Miike's *One Missed Call* toys wittily with these conventions the way Brian De Palma once spun off from post-*Psycho* clichés. So many cellphones relentlessly chirp and chime in *One Missed Call*, they become funny. Then at the midpoint, it mutates into a very different movie. Also from Miike, FanTasia screened *Gozu*, a film that begins with a crazed gangster who hallucinates that a tiny Chihuahua is "a trained Yakuza attack dog" and smashes the hapless creature against a restaurant window. Although *Gozu* suffers from *longeur* in its mid-section, it eventually achieves a new level of maniacal perversity involving a golf club and an outrageous rebirth.

From the fastest-growing film industry in the world, and one that supports its genre movies, South Korean director Lee Soo-yeon divided audiences with her debut feature, *The Uninvited*. This labyrinthine tale begins on a subway with its apparent protagonist seeing two little girls, who turn out to be ghosts. In a more realistic vein, Joon-ho Bong's *Memories of Murder* was inspired by a real-life serial murder case during the 1980s. In *Sight and Sound* magazine, Tony Rayns wrote this about *Memories of Murder*, a multileveled picture that captures the social ills of the 1980s: "The most brilliant aspect of this highly achieved film (even better than the performances, the production design and the masterly blending of drama, horror and black humour) is the play with points of view."



Jeff Renfro's and Marteinn Thorsson's *One Point O* is an American film featuring Jeremy Sisto (Rachel Griffiths's insidiously psycho brother from *Six Feet Under*) as the paranoid inhabitant of a decayed apartment building where Roman Polanski's tenant meets Joseph K. Its ambitions betrayed by its pretensions, *One Point O* aspires to the gnarly nightmarishness achieved by Brad Anderson's *The Machinist*. Unfortunately, the film is made up of too many second-hand parts. Appearing in *One Point O*, cult actor Udo Kier was one of FanTasia 2004's special guests. He did one of his Q&As in a priest's cassock, shades and a lot of attitude. Another special guest was Paul Naschy, the 70-year-old writer and star of Spanish horror movies. Naschy introduced three of his films, including *Rojo Sangre*, about an elderly, unemployed actor whose homicidal rage leads him into a pact with the devil.

In the festival's Canadian highlight, *Ginger Snaps 3: The Beginning*, the Fitzgerald sisters from the first movie live out a past life in a 19th-century wilderness. During a shivery Alberta winter, the girls take refuge in a fort populated by men terrified by scary forest creatures. The well-made movie recalls British Hammer flicks, but also seems like the first Canadian Heritage horror production. The sisters, removed from their small-town high school context, continue to battle authority, but the satirical bite is not there.

FanTasia 2004 highlighted Thai films, including a screening of Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Last Life in the Universe*, and showed four classics

from the Shaw brothers, the Hong Kong martial arts producers. There was a section for the kids, as well as the Quebec launch of Edgar Wright's amusing zombie comedy hit, *Shaun of the Dead*. The latter took a couple of awards, including the jury's silver for "best overall FanTasia film." To top it all, the festival mounted Komikstok, a weekend devoted to comic books and Japanese mangas. The exposition was a harbinger of more special events in the future.