

In Interview: Brian O'Malley Director of Bleak Future

Interview by Helen Cox
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Each issue *New Empress Magazine* checks in with an independent director or two and for this edition we've been talking to Brian O'Malley who spoke exclusively to us about reissuing his first feature film *Bleak Future* on DVD.

The making of the film itself sounds like an excerpt from a J.J. Abrams picture: shot back in 1996 entirely on Super 8 cartridges, it tells the story of a futuristic travelling salesman who deals in 21st Century relics: Twinkies, toilet paper, you know, the important stuff. The actors have their tongues pushed so far in their cheeks it's amazing they haven't worn away the flesh, the dialogue is, in places, comically surreal and consequently the film is a fun ride for any film punter who can appreciate a generous dose of irony.

O'Malley has delivered a creative and unapologetic science fiction curiosity that will appeal to fans of the so-bad-it's-good sub-genre but his film also reveals something of deeper importance: how important it is, once in a while, to do something just for the love of it. Not for the money. Not to improve your CV. Just because you want that film to be out there, somewhere making people laugh or perhaps making people angry enough and to shout at their TV. Either way, making something that you enjoyed crafting, that gets a reaction from

others is, in itself, one of the most rewarding bi-products of making a cult film.

O'Malley has since returned to the original footage and spent 3 years scrupulously re-editing the piece for DVD. This process included re-recording every last line of dialogue as well as returning to the desert of Death Valley California to re-shoot missed scenes. We caught up with him to find out more about the movie and to ascertain what's next on his production slate.

Helen: How did you come up with the original story for *Bleak Future*?

Brian: The original story for *Bleak* was bouncing around for a while, having been inspired by tales of the far, far future such as *Foundation* and *Dune*, and wondering what legacy we human chimps would be leaving to folks thousands of years after us.

Helen: Are you a big fan of cult film? If so what are your favourites and why?

Brian: I'm a fan of cult film, but I'm not a cinephile. Lots of my friends collect films and know everything about every cult film ever made, but I just don't have the cc's in my human chimp brain for such an activity. My favourites are typically by Sam Raimi, Jim Jarmusch, or even Woody Allen, but I really love small films as well. The Polonia Brothers are

actually a huge influence as well. When I saw their alien VHS film *Feeders* for the first time, of course I knew it was just terribly, awfully terrible, but there was an earnestness that those guys had that flew in the face of the overwhelming cynicism that lords over movies and pop culture now. They made terrible films, but they did it honestly, and with all their heart, and I still love laughing along with their films, which is what it's ultimately all about.

Helen: Why have you decided to go back to the project and put out a DVD?

Brian: George Lucas can say "Star Wars wasn't finished, and that's why I put out the Special Editions." But me being not George Lucas, I have to admit: the original *Bleak Future* the world saw was a low-quality print, with terrible sound, direct from the Super 8 sound stripe, and you couldn't really understand what was going on. I wanted the film to find a bigger audience, which meant redoing the sound and clearing up the picture. Making the DVD enabled me to get it out there with fewer warts. Fewer warts meant a wider audience. That being said, if you've seen the DVD, you know the film still has its share of warts.

Helen: What were the biggest challenges of making the film?

Brian: The biggest challenge making *Bleak* was the money. But I don't want to dwell too hard on

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that, because it's a common lamentation from indie filmmakers and one I hate hearing. Virtually every indie filmmaker who plays a festival gets up in front of the audience and says something like "It was a real WAR making this movie." I'm more along the lines of the Louis CK school of thought when it comes to cell phones on an airplane. Louis CK bashes people who whine that the "cell phone reception isn't good enough" on a plane and says "Can you give it a minute? The signal is going UP TO SPACE. And you're an aluminum tube. In a chair. IN THE SKY." I'm paraphrasing it and probably butchering poor Mr. CK, but my point is, if you're lucky enough to live in a country where your biggest problem is: "How do I pay for my indie feature film?" you shouldn't be whining about how hard it is.

Helen: What are your fondest memories of making the film?

Brian: My fondest memories are many, but can be summed up like this: I've made two feature films since. Three, if you count one I produced and co-wrote. And not one of those three films were what I would consider to be an "honest" film. That is, made with the honest, devil-may-care intent of simply having fun and letting the audience in on the fun. Every other film I've made has been: "I have to please the producer so he'll work with me again" or "I have to bang this out to make a buck." Bleak Future was done for the sheer, stupid fun of it. It's something I'm trying to reconnect to as I sketch out a possible sequel. Sure, I want to see a sequel, but more than that, I want to have fun making a movie again, and a Bleak Future 2 seems like a good place to start.

Helen: What advice would you give to filmmakers starting out?

Brian: I think there are enough filmmakers, so I wouldn't give any advice. 50,000 films were made last year, from what I read recently. How is it possible that 50,000 films get made and only a small sliver of those are seen, or even heard of? I feel that just because we have the tools more available and cheaper than ever doesn't necessarily mean everybody's using them the right way. We have an entire generation of filmmakers now who don't read books, or know how to stand in line at a coffee shop without looking at their phone to avoid human interaction, or even look outside their window. They smack out Facebook statuses (statii?) and beg for retweets, but many of them haven't lived, at least not in the way the previous generation of film artists lived. My advice is this: stop being a filmmaker. Stop calling yourself a filmmaker. Be a human being. Go fill your head with everything that has nothing to do with film, then, once you're interesting, make an interesting movie, because consumers and their larvae seldom make interesting movies.

Helen: What would you do differently if you made the film again?

Brian: If I could do the film again, I'd try to cast at least one somewhat-famous/name actor in it, for at least some tiny little role. I've learned that while having name actors in your film isn't required to make a good film, it does help bridge the gap between you (the unknown film) and the audience member with the \$10. Finding a market for your film means building rapport with your audience. If you can do that with a poster that has mutants on it, awesome. You'll get all the fans of mutant comedy films. But for everybody else, for whom seeing a mutant comedy film may be the equivalent of going out for the occasional Korean barbecue, you have to speak their language at least a little. Putting a known face on the box does that. Hoofing a film over many years without a name actor in it can be rewarding, but I believe you can make things easier for yourself and your audience with a well-placed, well-cast famous personage of some sort, without being a sell-out.

Helen: Do you think there is less room for edgy cult films in the modern-day film climate?

Brian: There's actually more room for edgy cult films in the modern film climate. The problem is, all those films are all now infinitely easier to watch while simultaneously infinitely more difficult to find. It's this "Inter-Nets" thing that's both liberated film and packed it like lemmings into shiny metal boxes, to paraphrase The Police. Whereas film moguls and hucksters and Vaudevillians and artists used to run the picture studios, now you've got all the studios as some sort of arm of one or another cable company, run by MBA's and beholden to shareholders. So they don't take chances any more. The best a cult film can do now is to be ripped off and rebooted 5 times like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. The thought is less and less: "Wouldn't it be cool and new to take a chance on audiences liking?" and more and more: "Has it worked before? Cool, let's remake it and make more money." I'm starting to sincerely believe that movies as a successful example of business merging with artistry is a 20th century anomaly, quickly metamorphosing into a curiosity. They're not even trying to be artistic about it anymore. "Here, eat some Spiderman. You ate some Spiderman before, remember? So you like it. Go on, eat it." The best we can do as film fans and filmmakers (don't call yourself that!) is keep our money in our wallets and scream: "Hey what about a Harold and Maude? Or a Buckaroo Banzai?" and demand more originality and more risk-taking.

Helen: Will you ever work on another film, if so what will it be?

Brian: The script for Bleak Future 2 is starting to take shape. Three other possibilities I'm working on: a disaster movie comedy, a stalker comedy and quitting film altogether and touring the world with my crappy rock band.

You can get your own copy of Bleak Future for just the cost of postage at bleakfuture.com

Sincere thanks go to Steve James for securing our interview with Brian.