# Beneath Still Waters:
The Brian Yuzna Interview

Xavier Mendik

Brian Yuzna is a prolific horror director and producer who has consistently managed to combine shock imagery and social critique across the range of international film traditions in which he has operated. Yuzna first emerged in the otherwise moribund American horror scene of the 1980s as part of the creative duo behind Stuart Gordon's influential *Re-Animator* (1985), which fused body horror techniques with Gothic sensibilities in a narrative derived from the work of H. P. Lovecraft. Before helming its sequel *Bride of Re-Animator* (1990) himself, Yuzna debuted as a director in *Society* (1989), which used unsettling scenes of bodily transformation and Freudian imagery to critique the glut of consumption within "Reaganite" America.
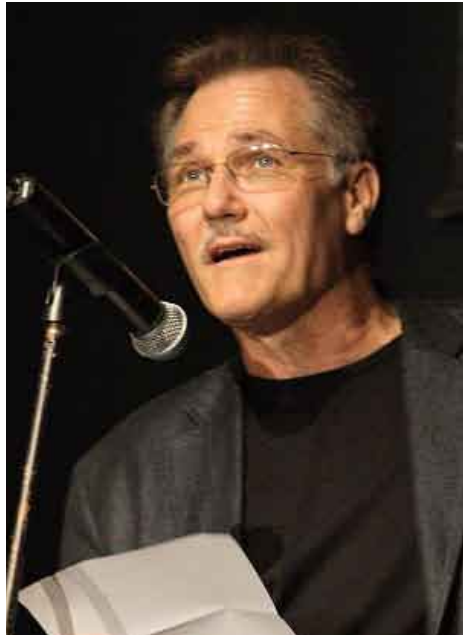
Having establishing his creative presence on the Stateside scene during the 1980s and 1990s, Yuzna then demonstrated his ability to craft transnational horror productions in the period of via Spain's Fantastic Factory. This production house employed European and American production talents on a range of features that included *Faust: Love of the Damned* (2001), a comic book version of the man who sold his soul to the Devil; *Arachnid* (2001), a scary spider extravaganza directed by Jack Shoulder; the sequel *Beyond Re-Animator* (2003) featuring the horror genre's most memorable mad scientist, Herbert West; and Paco Plaza's innovative lycanthropy narrative *Romasanta* (2004). One of Yuzna's last movies for the Fantastic Factory was *Rottweiler* (2004), adapted from Alberto Vázquez Figueroa's political parable *El Perro.* Yuzna's film version fused established Gothic themes around necromancy and morbid loving, with a pointed political critique surrounding the fate of Islamic immigrants in Europe in the not-so-distant future.

It was his skills in transnational terror film production that Brian Yuzna brought to his recent cinematic interventions in Indonesia, which culminated with the *Takut: Faces of Fear* anthology in 2008, as well as the 2010 film *Amphibious.* In the following interview, the director discusses his experiences of working in a range of international horror environments, his interest in adapting Eastern mythologies to genre cinema, and his views on *Amphibious* being an intrinsically Indonesian horror film.

Xavier Mendik (XM): What interested you about working in Indonesia?

Brian Yuzna (BY): The challenge of working in a new place with a culture I was not yet familiar with is what attracted me to the opportunity to develop a genre production line based in Jakarta.

XM: You have a reputation for nurturing local filmmaking talent across a range of related film productions. Was it your intention to create an Indonesian Film Factory? And why did this project not come to fruition?

BY: Yes, Komodo Films was intended to be an Indonesian Fantastic Film Factory. I wanted to create a line of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror films using Indonesian technical and creative talent, as well as bringing in international talents. The original idea was to make these films for the Indonesian market first and the international market as a bonus. There were some obstacles to begin with. One of the partners in Komodo was Ananda Siregar who was building the Blitz Megaplex chain of

cinemas. So the Komodo Films productions were originally purposed to provide products for Blitz. But because of the slow but steady pace of construction, there just weren't enough screens at the outset to justify a film's budget. And the video market in Indonesia is dominated by pirate videos, so there is no substantial income to be made after the theatrical release. At that point the Komodo partners decided to change the aim of the productions to be primarily for the international market, and the Indonesian market was secondary.

Therefore, our first film, *Takut: Faces of Fear* (2008) was shot using all Indonesian talent and crew and in Bahasa Indonesian. But the second production, *Amphibious* (2010), was changed in mid-development from an Indonesian language film to an international film, shot in English, with international stars. In my opinion, the Komodo Film Factory didn't come to fruition for a couple of key reasons: the switch from films aimed at Indonesian audiences to international audiences necessitated much larger budgets, and the company wasn't capitalized to that extent; and most importantly, Komodo Films was a victim of the international collapse of the capital markets of 2008.

XM: Given these experiences, how would you describe your transnational approach to terror?

BY: My approach is to first introduce the local technical and creative talents to the type of genre filmmaking and storytelling that I am a proponent of, based on my experience in the field. Secondly, I encourage the local filmmakers to tell their stories in that style of filmmaking, thus, hopefully achieving my ultimate goal which is to produce original genre films inspired by the culture, legends, and aesthetic of the local country—films that can find success with audiences worldwide, regardless of the language in which they are shot. At the beginning, it is necessary to import key creative and even technical talents. Once the local directors, writers, crew have the experience of making films that are accepted internationally, it becomes increasingly viable to produce wholly local productions. In the Fantastic Factory, we began with *Faust* [2000], a film using script, direction, key SFX, and even cinematography from the US. Then we went through a phase of bringing in more and more local talent and telling more local stories, for example in *Romasanta* (2004), which was based on an actual werewolf trial in Spain, and written and directed by Spaniards. Finally, although not technically a Fantastic Factory film, I would say that *[REC]* (2007) [directed by Jaume Balagueró

and Paco Plaza, 2007] represents the final goal of the Fantastic Factory which was a film shot in Spanish, developed and produced 100 percent by Spaniards and which found success worldwide.

XM: How did these experiences with the Fantastic Factory impact your work in Indonesia?

BY: I took the lessons of the Fantastic Factory with me to Indonesia, along with the confidence that success could be had. Of course, we cannot equate Indonesia with Spain, and the concept had to be adapted to the unique circumstances of the Indonesian film industry and Komodo Films. From my experience in Spain, I knew that the first job was to set up a core Komodo team of a Production Manager, a Production Accountant, and a Development Head. The next job was to become familiar with the Indonesian film industry—to visit the main film equipment and service providers and to visit film productions in order to understand the Indonesian filming system. And simultaneously, I wanted to become familiar with the creative and technical talents that we might want to work with—directors, producers, writers, cinematographers, art directors, casting directors, actors, etcetera.

XM: Were you aware of the rich tradition of fantastical storytelling that existed in the culture?

BY: Once I arrived in Indonesia and began developing projects, I became aware of the rich myths and folktales of Indonesia. I was very excited about the possibility of bringing this storytelling to international genre films. I am very disappointed to have not had a chance to do this. I developed various film stories that incorporated traditional Indonesian village ghost stories and creature legends that I would have loved to have seen on screen. Most of the horror that I have worked on existed in a Christian cultural context. For example, our popular vampires are unable to confront a crucifix. I was hoping to have Komodo Films tell genre stories that were informed by a Muslim and Javanese context. So for example, on *Takut: Faces of Fear* (2008), I was excited to include a story of revenge involving a *dukun* (shaman), a story that takes place in a traditional *Wayang Orang* Theater and with *gamelan* (traditional Indonesian musical) instrumentation. On *Amphibious* (2010), I tried to incorporate a legendary Javanese origin to the monster and set it on a fishing platform. I developed an outer space thriller that took place on an Indonesian biological research space station on the edge of the galaxy

during the month of Ramadan. There is such a wealth of culture in the country that is almost completely unknown by the rest of the world. It is to my great dismay that I was never able to realize my dream of mining the rich Indonesians traditions for genre films for world audiences.

XM: Going beyond the wealth of culture in Indonesia, you have often commented on your childhood, specifically being raised in distinctly non-American territories such as Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, and Panama. How did this influence your view of international horror traditions?

BY: Well, it caused me to view my own home, the United States, as kind of a foreign country and also instilled in me a sense of being a foreigner, an outsider. I wasn't a native of where I lived, and when I finally moved to the USA, I was fifteen years old, and I felt like an outsider there. So in that sense, I think it has given me an improved capacity to understand and get along with non-Americans. The specific quality of Nicaragua and Panama—and Puerto Rico, too, perhaps to a lesser degree—being "developing countries" means that I was raised somewhat outside of the post-World War II modernization. In the 1950s and into the 60s, these countries were still quite "third world," and the Catholicism practiced there impressed me as being very mystical. And there were always ghost stories in the evenings, and the jungle is always scary at night. However, my sense of the horror movie was shaped mainly by the Hollywood horror films that I saw at the weekend matinees.

XM: Did you bring that combination of American and international influence to a project like *Amphibious?*

BY: *Amphibious* (2010) was originally developed along with Ray Haboush and Ted Chalmers—my partners then in Halcyon International Pictures—as we were thinking of film projects to produce that could take advantage of the SyFy Channel TV market in North America. We looked for a monster that hadn't been done before and found articles about sea scorpion fossils which maintained that these creatures were the reigning predator millions of years ago and were actually the original amphibians, that is to say, they were able to crawl up on land as well as dominate the sea. In our original story, we imagined an arctic submersible probe breaking through a frozen deep sea, brittle from global warming, and releasing these ancient sea scorpions. One of them rides the warm currents to North America and leaves a trail of death

as it goes inland. When the idea was adapted to Komodo Films and they announced a three-picture slate of 3D movies, the whole idea was jettisoned in favour of an ancient creature released from the sea floor off Java from an undersea volcano. My inspiration for this was the poem by the Ankara Murka prophecy of Jayabaya, and my intent was to make a traditional "creature feature" within the context of a Javanese legend.

XM: How did you find working on the project with a multinational cast?

BY: It was very challenging due to the language issues and the different acting cultures. On the one hand, I had experienced Hollywood actors like Michael Pere and Frances Magee, as well as accomplished Indonesian actors such as Dorman Borisman. On the other hand, I had lesser experienced actors such as the Dutch actress Janna Fassaert and Singaporean Francis Bosco. The most memorable actors—and the ones that hold a very dear place in my heart—were the boys of the fishing platform, (*jermal*)- Muhammad (Ronald Reagen), Herlian Ujang, Steven Baray, and Micael Cakrawala Jehian, and our young lead Monica Sayangbati. Some of these boys were found from casting on the streets of Jakarta. They were street performers, almost living on the streets. They had never been on a movie set and had no idea about acting. But since we were unable to find any young actors that were believable as the *jermal* workers, I chose instead to try to teach these boys not only acting and how a movie was made but how to speak enough English to carry the quite important roles assigned to them. I must also single out Monica Sayangbati, who had the strong support of her family and was very accepting of adapting herself to a role that had nothing in common with who she was. Not only that—she had to make us believe that she was a boy for the first half of the film! The experience of working with these young people has been the highlight of my filmmaking career. I also remember with great appreciation the experience of working with the dancers for the ritual ceremony that we invented for the story. I spent afternoons at a community center in Jakarta with the lead dancer—Subur Sukirman who played the Ritual Dukun—as we worked out the choreography of the ritual.

XM: Do you feel you managed to capture Indonesian myths and traditions with the story?

BY: I believe that I captured some of the feeling and atmosphere of Indonesia but not a lot of the myths and traditions. During my time in Indonesia, I really fell in love with the culture and wish that I had had a chance to make more movies in Indonesia.

XM: Many critics have argued that Indonesian storytelling seems to emphasize order and community over the individuality and ambition expressed in American cinema. Did this affect any split between North American and Indonesian 'stories' in *Amphibious*?

BY: Possibly, but it wasn't conscious on my part. I was very conscious of the artificiality of imposing a standard Hollywood style story on top of the more organic story of the girl who calls up the ancient creature in revenge for her brother's death. This duality may have positioned *Amphibious* in-between two audiences or markets—the Indonesian and the Hollywood/International—without necessarily satisfying either of them.

XM: Indonesia also has its own distinct style of acting, performance and physical displays. Do you feel these were captured in some of the Indonesian performances in *Amphibious*?

BY: Yes, although I tried to move all of the performances into an arena that worked for the Western adventure story that provided the over arching structure. One way to understand this dichotomy is to imagine if one were to produce the original version of *The Ring* a.k.a. *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) but imposing Western characters on top of the Japanese story being told. For Indonesian genre films to be profitable in the international film market, we would ideally make completely Indonesian films that would rise to a level that works internationally. However, as I stated before, my intention was to replicate the plan of the Fantastic Factory in Spain—to begin by making more Hollywood/International style films using the local talent and to transition into finally being able to make an Indonesian version of *[REC]* (2007).

XM: One of the key themes of Indonesian horror is that of the vengeful mother or the monstrous mother in mourning. Do you feel these themes are relevant to *Amphibious*?

BY: I am not sure. It was certainly not intentional. However, the story of *Amphibious* is marked by the absence of a mother for the boys, and that

absence can be seen as why the world of the movie is out of balance. The marine biologist aspires to be the mother to our young hero/heroine, Tamal, who instead calls up a vengeful monster from the deep, and she herself becomes the mother of monsters. So in a way, Tamal is the vengeful/monstrous mother-in-the-making.

XM: Nicely put! Your work is often renowned for fusing Gothic sensibilities with contemporary horror traditions. Do you feel that you managed to give *Amphibious* any Gothic elements?

BY: Regarding *Amphibious*, I had no specific Gothic intention in the development of the story. However, from a purely formal point of view, the movie does include a number of classical gothic elements such as a creepy atmosphere, an ancient prophecy, supernatural portents, and a woman threatened by a cruel powerful male.

XM: Your work has always been marked by unsettling images of the female body. Do you feel that you have managed to capture this theme with *Amphibious*?

BY: Yes. In *Amphibious*, the climax of the horror aspect of the movie comes at the very end when Tamal gives birth to the little monsters.

XM: With your earlier movie *Rottweiller,* you explored the plight of Islamic refugees in a futuristic Spain. *Amphibious*, too, saw you dealing with Islamic culture and tradition in Indonesia. What interests you about this faith and its constructions of horror?

BY: While I lived in Spain, I saw the tensions between the Islamic immigrant community within a Catholic country. What made the situation particularly interesting is that Spain was for centuries ruled by Islamic conquerors. In Indonesia, I lived for the first time in an Islamic country. I am fascinated by the history and traditions of Islam and did my best to understand how those traditions affected the storytelling sense of Indonesian filmmakers and audiences. In trying to adapt my own Catholic and secular-based horror sensibility to what I began to understand as an Indonesian style, I researched some of the pre-Islamic myths and supernatural elements of the Arabian people. These myriad demons and *djinns* (supernatural creatures), etcetera, include all manner of magical and evil entities that can be a rich resource for horror stories.

However, in Indonesia, this cultural mythos is supplanted by the Javanese and other traditional mythologies. The ubiquity of *dukuns* and casual acceptance of supernatural phenomena by Indonesians startled and strongly interested me. I tried to include this in the movies I made with Komodo Films. The film by Riri Riza in *Takut* is very interesting to me because it takes place in a uniquely Indonesian family celebration that is permeated with a spiritual/supernatural content. All around the world, Hollywood movies have made people aware of uniquely American celebrations like Thanksgiving or Halloween, and I thought to create that same awareness of Indonesian celebrations in the rest of the world. I didn't have the time to identify to my satisfaction which elements are Islamic and which are traditional, but it would be fascinating to continue trying.

XM: Ironically, despite these intentions, some have disputed the film's status as a "national" horror film. Do you see *Amphibious* as an example of "Indonesian" horror cinema?

BY: I am not sure what a "national" horror film means in this context. Are we dealing with a legal definition or a cultural definition? *Amphibious* wasn't directed or written by Indonesians, nor was the cinematographer Indonesian [although the original first draft version was written in Bahasa by an Indonesian screenwriter]. The film was created by an Indonesian crew, and much of the cast was Indonesian, and the story had Indonesian elements. The production company was Indonesian, as was financing. It was developed and shot and set completely in Indonesia. I guess you could make [a] claim as well that some of the Fantastic Factory films were not "Spanish," although all of them qualified legally.

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