

Screening is Believing:
A Note On The Style Of *The Grateful Undead*

When Allen Riley and I set out to make *The Grateful Undead* we belonged to no movement, no film collaboration, no political or artistic party. We had no experience making films, no backing in film school, no financial support from statewide grants or nonprofit organizations, and absolutely no one that believed we could make a movie.

What we did have was hours and hours logged watching bargain-bin videos in the basement and an almost apocalyptic calling to create a work of art outside the stream of Hollywood and pseudo-professional society. Will alone made *The Grateful Undead*.

At the heart of *The Grateful Undead* is a story of people unable to accept responsibility for their own actions, communicate with each other, or face a reality outside themselves. Using genre archetypes (undead monsters, reluctant hero/victims, a wise but sinister helper), *The Grateful Undead* ensconces an imaginary, absurd world, but also one that is on a heightened, more primal stage of reality.

Despite these genre tropes, we had little interest in making yet another self-perpetuating genre yarn. We saw no point in churning out the same schlock playing both the Hollywood and independent circuit year after year. Yet similarly, we loved the style of supposedly "camp" movies, the rawness of spectacle, cheap effects and extreme personalities. In a sense, amateur productions capture reality more than their big-budget counterparts. Amateur films are not a prescribed reality: in amateur films, there is no strict reliance on cause and effect, personal intentions, or even logic or rational thinking. *Things happen*, much like in real life, and we often don't know what to make of them.

"Camp" has become a dirty word: at its essence, it has become a marketing phrase for a certain perception of what a film should look like, a comparison tool in relation to the so-called glorious Hollywood movie. The very word "camp" tells you how to watch a "campy" movie: it practically forces you to enjoy things on the most crass, brutal level, as a source of mockery, as an example of unprofessionalism and cheapness. "Camp" is a class word.

Present-day genre films, the grandchildren of those "camp" movies, are produced and experienced more and more cynically. Nothing created in the past twenty years can be held at face-value: after the success of *Scream*, genre

movies had to be more self-referential, more tongue-in-cheek. To make a film seriously was to hold yourself up to ridicule, to be considered "camp" without even meaning it. That is why there is so much lampoonery and spoofing in the marketplace, from amateur movies like *Die You Zombie Bastards!* to more mainstream hits like *From Dusk 'Till Dawn*. There is a feedback loop in current genre culture, a system which references itself and other films in the medium to no end, creating nothing of original content. And the simple reason why is because both filmmakers and the audience are afraid of opening themselves up to the sarcastic, smarmy mob.

They are afraid of exposing themselves to real emotions, to being ignorant of a topic outside of their normal film vocabulary. There has logically been a collapse in the narrative of genre films because there is often no need for a story: the jokes, innuendos, and "gratuitous goriness" are all that the most brazen film consumer craves. Yet the narrative often stubbornly remains, like the shredded skin of a snake, to burden the film further. It is as if genre films have gone the way of Civil War reenactments: all historical accuracy, no original content.

The Grateful Undead is not tongue-in-cheek. The film plays its "badness" seriously; it takes its imaginary, absurd world seriously. It is unabashedly exposing itself in its naked rawness to the audience. And by watching it, you have nothing to lose but freeing your mind of the old oligarchy of Hollywood taste and values.

There is a collapse of narrative in *The Grateful Undead*. There are amateur or non-actors projecting terrifying real emotions. There are some scenes that look horrible, and there are probably parts that make no sense to you, or some pieces of dialogue you can't even hear. There is nothing of the stylized over-produced portentousness of even the cheapest art film. There are no jokes at the expense of the movie. *The Grateful Undead* makes many references to other works, but it does not hit you over the head with these references: the references are not there simply to make the initiated feel superior. *The Grateful Undead* truly was made for \$850, perhaps even less, depending on who you ask. The fact that it exists at all in its entirety should precede all discussion of its artistic merit compared to other films of its caliber. There are no films of its caliber. No other film being made today has been made so cheaply, yet with so much decision and thought into what it would seriously be about. It was made by thinkers that created a piece of art that stands by itself:

in that way it is a true independent film. In the words of Goethe, it is a "very serious joke."

To enjoy *The Grateful Undead* you must watch it a certain way. You must not watch it like you have ever watched a camp movie, where you ridicule and take a smugly superior attitude, morally and ethically, to what's happening on screen. Making anything is hard. Love *The Grateful Undead* without guile, without cynicism; recognize it is entertaining in the form of a personal vision. Is *The Grateful Undead* inept and ridiculous? Sure. But were you entertained? Do you have a clear vision of somebody's mind, of another universe? That fits all the criteria of art.

The Grateful Undead is a hybrid project. Not only does it encompass the collective minds of its creators, Allen Riley and myself, and all the various people involved with its production, but the film's very style combines the aesthetics of a thousand nights of movie watching.

Four movies principally come to mind, two generational Hollywood films and their alternative counterparts. For the hippies, Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* and Al Adamson's *Satan's Sadists*, and for the slackers, Ben Stiller's *Reality Bites* and Richard Linklater's *Slacker*, with Russ Meyer-fast pacing thrown into the mix. *The Grateful Undead* is part drive-in movie and part student art film, and it is neither. It is unabashedly amateur and in-your-face, a stark headrush, a kaleidoscope ride through the absurd, a magical mystery tour of misery, something that must be seen to be believed. In the final analysis, that's all *The Grateful Undead* wants. It wasn't made to be consumed, or to imitate the rights and rules of everyday filmmaking. It was made to be made, and it was made to be seen. When was the last time you tried to make anything without listening to the little Hollywood voice in your head, the little fanboy critic? Think for yourself! Go out and watch *The Grateful Undead*. Experience independent movies independently.

-Patrick May, 2008, Pawtucket RI