

Screen Time Images Restores “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre”

September 2007

In 1974, writer/producer/director Tobe Hooper unleashed “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre”, a dark, visionary tale about a group of five young friends who face a nightmare of torment at the hands of a depraved Texas clan. The film was immediately the subject of controversy. It was attacked by churches, banned by governments and received acclaim only by the bravest of critics. Today, it remains unequalled as a landmark of outlaw filmmaking and unparalleled in its impact as perhaps the most frightening motion picture ever made. It has been called “grisly,” “sick,” and “perverse,” as well as “raw,” “unshakeable,” and “the movie that redefined horror.” Nobody can argue that Gunnar Hansen’s portrayal of “Leatherface” helped enshrine the character in the annals of horror movie history, alongside the esteemed company of favorite movie anti-heroes known by their first name, such as Jason, Michael and Freddy. So popular is the character, that the movie was remade recently.

Stories of outtakes and film elements being thrown on the street corner by Tobe Hooper’s mother, then being taken by one of the actors who happened along, and in turn selling them to a university not allowing access to Hooper has only added to the legend and mystique of the film.

When Dark Sky Films, a division of MPI Media Group, decided to re-release the original film, they embarked on quite an undertaking. They hired Donald May, Jr. from Synapse Films, an expert on the film, to produce the restoration. Because of the fragile nature of the original film materials (the original 16mm ECO negative A/B rolls were extremely worn and brittle and all the original timing sheets were lost), Mr. May decided the best way to work with the materials was to create brand-new 16mm inter-negatives from the original 16mm ECO, and then transfer to HD D5.

Screen Time Images, a facility near Chicago specializing in film restoration for approximately 10 years, was hired to perform miracles on what had turned out to be a film desperately in need of some digital magic. Owner Sean McKee, a recognized expert in the restoration industry, explains, “This film went far beyond the restoration requirements of typical jobs. Dust-busting is a common term used in our field, but to say that “Chain Saw” got a dust busting is putting it lightly, it needed more of a thorough grime-cleansing, and required every trick in our arsenal, and necessitated the need to develop some new ones. In addition, the film exhibited severe flicker, “breathing” and drastic color shifts.”

Screen Time Images employed the use of their da Vinci Revival restoration system as the main tool to tackle the immense challenges presented by the film. Mr. McKee continues, “The color shifts and flicker required some combinations of morphing and color averaging to smooth out the jarring effects, which would sometimes occur mid-scene. When the need arises to refine or add to our toolset, as was required by this project, the Revival product engineers have always been able to come through for us with useful tools

specific to our needs. One of these was the ability to be able to manually add in color information from any of the red, green or blue channels from another frame, which was useful in extreme shots where a de-flicker algorithm would not be appropriate.”

After the problematic color-shifting shots were restored, the movie was then brought in to the da Vinci Resolve system to re-balance and match the scenes back with the rest of the film. “Resolve made the transition to digital intermediate (DI) easy for our colorists, thanks to the familiar toolset that was derived from the expertise of da Vinci’s industry-leading 2K Plus technologies. Having the telecine/scanner, Resolve, Revival and Discreet editing/effects products on the same shared SAN is the ultimate workflow,” exclaims McKee. “The integration of the products allows us to complete jobs quickly, that would otherwise be tedious having to import/export between systems.”

One of the most used tools at Screen Time Images is Revival’s ability to track motion in surrounding frames. McKee continues, “If you have a fast panning shot, where some automated tools may not be ideal, and there is some damage for a few frames, we can reference any surrounding frame and quickly line up the current and surrounding frames so that we can replace something obscured by a reel change marker, etc. The tool allows you to automatically track the position of your surrounding reference frame and line it up with the frame in question, but for quick pans with blurred backgrounds, I still like to use my own eyes.” Some shots in the movie proved to be too difficult to complete with traditional restoration techniques, but Screen Time Images is not a traditional restoration company. They employed the use of advanced visual effects and compositing techniques, which help differentiate their abilities in the restoration marketplace. Traveling mattes, machine vision algorithms for isolation, object and sky replacement and other tricks were all put to good use on this project.

McKee adds, “After all of this effort made the movie look stunning, we sat down with the client and looked at the grain. Some facilities will tout their silky smooth grain reduction and try to use it on every job. We’ve got that ability as well, but we like to let the film dictate the need. It was decided that the 16mm, grainy look was integral to the gritty feel of the movie, and so no grain reduction was performed. I think fans of this film will be ecstatic when they see the restored version and all the new extras that will be on the DVD. It’s time to be scared all over again, but this time without the distractions that aging film presented in previous releases.”

“The Texas Chain Saw Massacre” will be re-released on September 26, 2006.

Screen Time Images has been very busy restoring other horror films as of late, including another Tobe Hooper film, “Eaten Alive”, starring Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger), “Trilogy of Terror”, starring Karen Black, and a series of Mexican horror films for Casanegra Entertainment. On the lighter side of things, Screen Time has also recently restored the “Family Affair” television series, starring Brian Keith.

Screen Time Images is located at 974 Estes Court, Schaumburg, IL, 60193. They can be reached at 847-534-9000, or on the Internet at www.screentimeimages.com.