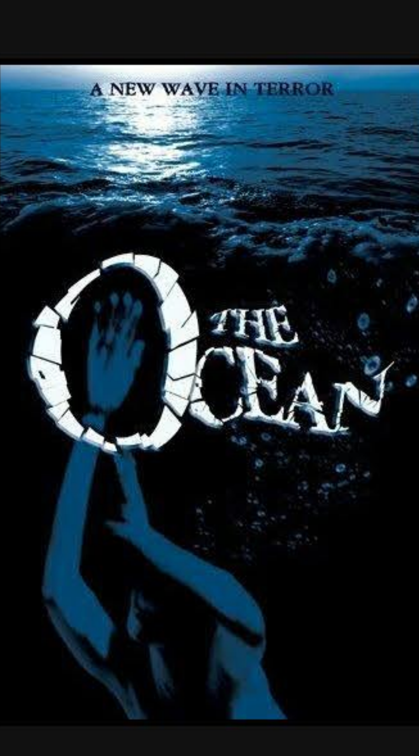
Dante Tomaselli's Nightmares

December 2, 2015 | By Mark R. Hasan

Between 2014 and 2015, MVD Audio / Elite released a trio of concept albums by writer-director-composer Dante Tomaselli, atmospheric works of sounds and fragmented music & voices that immerse listeners into a nightmarish yet eerily calming underworld.

Scream in the Dark was followed by **The Doll** (an album which also conceptualizes some of the sonic elements Tomaselli was experimenting with prior to filming his next movie), and **Nightmare**.

As detailed in the following lengthy Q&A (originally published at Rue Morgue's website prior to its 2015 revision), Tomaselli invests an extensive amount of time crafting the soundscapes for his films. His latest movie **Torture Chamber** features a rich sound design which is quite hypnotic, and in addition to discussing the aforementioned projects, we also touch upon **The Ocean**, a production that was ultimately cancelled; the amazing subterranean locations used for **Torture Chamber;** and his intimate relationship with sound.



Mark R. Hasan: Before we discuss **Torture Chamber**, I wonder if we could briefly talk about **The Ocean**, which was a project long in planning with Michael Gingold, and was to follow **Satan's Playground**. Is **The Ocean** currently in stasis, or are there complicated circumstances that have prevented the project from coming to fruition?

Dante Tomaselli: Well, that was a very uneasy period. And a real life lesson. I had everything aligned, screenplay, actors, crew, locations, everything but the financing. It was painful having pre-production discussions with performers like Adrienne Barbeau and Dee Wallace and then never shooting the movie. It felt like a knife in my heart. **The Ocean** was very personal, centering on a psychic haunted by visions of a watery apocalypse. I had no idea that it would turn out to be nearly my own apocalypse. When I discovered the funding was not there I just turned the lights off. I was gone. Done. I went into a dark place.

You know, I was having relative success up until that point. Every movie I visualized was made reality by the power of positive visualization. And while not theatrical releases, the budgets were so low… the films always landed solid DVD distributors like Image, Elite and AnchorBay. I ended up seeing them sold in stores. Each film found its audience. Like many independent films, there were some years in between projects. **Desecration**, **Horror** and **Satan's Playground**…They materialized… and I sincerely believed **The Ocean** would too. I learned that there's an ebb and flow to these things dictated by a higher power, beyond comprehension. It's not always about the force of my will.

MRH: I understand **Torture Chamber** was filmed in a short time-span and for a tight budget, both of which you transcended, crafting a really enjoyable nightmare. How did this project come about?

DT: Thanks. I shot the film in 19 days on a $200, 000 budget. **Torture Chamber** came about as a result of not shooting **The Ocean**. There was a horrible, aching void there. I knew I needed to move on. **The Ocean**'s required budget was relatively high… Shooting in and around water is always more expensive and there was a recession in the States at that time. I'm not trying to rationalize not getting it off the ground but funding for independent films was really scarce in 2007. Of course it would have been easier if I had a # 1 horror film under my belt, a commercial hit. Anyway I realigned my thinking completely. I decided that **Torture Chamber** would be very low budget, even lower than my last feature, **Satan's Playground**, which was around $500, 000. I knew I needed to shoot another film. I poured all my torment and suffering into the screenplay.

MRH: Did you have a screenwriting and pre-production time-frame similar to prior works, or was this a more difficult project, if not one fueled by different pressures and adrenaline?

DT: I was brainstorming the project in late 2008 and started seriously writing the screenplay in 2009. The film was shot in May 2010 and the final sound mix was completed in 2013. I finally realized…and it was a breakthrough moment… that as long as my budgets stay low, I can continue making films. Pre-production on **Torture Chamber** ran pretty smoothly. I was in my element. Suddenly there was light in my eyes and I could breathe properly. I felt aligned with who I really am. A creator. I even said to myself that if this is the last film I ever conjure, I'll be at peace. I was glad to be given the chance. It was like starting over.

MRH: Back in 2007 when we were discussing **The Ocean**, you explained you liked to create the sonic world of a film before advancing to writing and visual designs. How difficult was it to craft the sound design for **Torture Chamber**?

DT: It's always a challenge and my favorite part of the whole filmmaking process. I create a soundtrack before actually shooting any film. A demo. It bubbles up as I'm brainstorming or writing the screenplay.

For **Torture Chamber** I plugged into a collection of sounds and soundscapes that I've been developing over the years. I have an extensive library and I'm main composer on all my film's soundtracks. In **Torture Chamber**, there were some soundscapes that were meant to be in **Satan's Playground** or **Horror** or **Desecration**. For certain scenes, I worked with three composers, Kenneth Lampl, Joseph Bishara and Allison Piccioni. Basically they supplied me with some different compositions and samples to mix and paint with.

These composers never screened any footage. I didn't want them to. I like to hear their own spin on the material, plus there's a very strong chance I won't even incorporate something. I reject most things. The bulk of **Torture Chamber** soundtrack or any soundtrack is my own soundscapes. So if I'm working with another composer, I'll send off a script section with some direction. What comes back is mostly not usable and they can retain their rights to it… but there's a good chance something will stick and it can be magical. I love to be surprised. Once I have all my chosen sounds together, my palette, the fun…or work, begins. I mix and score it all to picture myself, like it's a coloring book.

MRH: When you begin to compose the elements for your next film's soundtrack, what are a few of the stages you follow, in terms of finding sonic themes, specific sounds, pre-existing music and a structure?

DT: I can say that there is sound work happening constantly. I'm a sound hunter so I'm always searching for new sounds… or old. I like all kinds of sounds… clean… dirty… obscure… every day sounds, sounds that you've heard before in TV commercials. You know, stock sounds. I like that I can twist something until it's unrecognizable. Or maybe it is recognizable, and you might feel a pang of deja vu in this disorienting context. I tend to use many, many tracks while mixing. It's always been my instinct.

Back in the day, while sampling other sound studios in Manhattan I learned that… even though I had the lowest budgets… I was told that I incorporated the highest number of tracks, layers, more tracks than any other director that these companies ever worked with. I'm a pretty low-key, laid back filmmaker but in post production sound phase, I'm tense or intense. It's just me, every day or night with the engineer, alone in the studio with my sounds, my paint. I'd arrive with bags and suitcases of sounds, a crazy huge amount of material to digitize. I'd take notes at home and listen to each sound and mix them all in my head. Like there was a reel playing over and over.

The unconscious mind remembers everything. I'd synch the soundscapes up to different scenes, mixing and matching, mixing and matching… I'd really go inside the movie. There was another world poking through…the spirit world. While at the expensive Manhattan studios I'd work deep into the night or morning and set the sounds to different categories like: staccato… low tones… stingers…. and I'd paint. I'd mix and mix and mix, I mixed **Torture Chamber** for a full year.

MRH: How complex is your sonic experimentation? Are there sections or effects where you've spent considerably more time problem-solving and developing than others?

DT: The sound design. I'm very sensitive about it. It's not easy finding the right temperature for imagery that exists at the hazy intersection between life and death. Since **Torture Chamber** was told through a series of dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations, I put an emphasis, sound-wise on those specific sections and of course all of my films are mostly comprised of hallucinogenic events so it's very delicate to…you know, to transition… to weave in and out. It's easy to overkill or overstate and I try to avoid that. Sometimes silent is better. Those moments of stillness.

For example, there's a dinner sequence in **Torture Chamber**, an uncomfortable family dinner that is the heart and soul of the movie, the centerpiece of the film…and I went through countless sound design versions. More than any other part of the film, I was stuck on it. Each version had a different vibe and finally after all that exploring…I arrived at a place of mysteriousness. It was like an incantation…a spell being cast. I found it! Alignment. You could feel the emotional violence in the air. It finally glued to the picture. Tactile. Subliminal. Invisible. Mostly I believe the sound design shouldn't call attention to itself but there are no rules and definitely… definitely sometimes I like for it to dominate…it can jump out.

I have something called synesthesia. Sound-color synesthesia. In my films I like the overall atmosphere to be otherworldly. Psychedelic funhouses. There's a sensation of floating. I want certain moments to feel like out-of-body-experiences. These are unconscious sequences yet I want the viewer to feel awake… conscious… very conscious… like a lucid dream. Colors and sounds are pristine. There's a blur of sounds… I don't need clarity, ambiguity is its friend. It should feel hazy, indecipherable, like a real nightmare. There's very little dialogue and I never plan for it to feel one-note so I try to give the sound design a lushness… texture, nuances, shading, like a sculpture. I'm a sound sculptor.

MRH: Is there a point where you set aside sound, focus on writing, then switch to developing imagery during the pre-production, production, and post-production phases, or do you work on these areas simultaneously?

DT: There is no point where I set aside sound.

MRH: Part of **Torture Chamber**'s characters include the locations, and I wonder if you can describe how you discovered the tunnels and caverns which Jimmy uses to hide and torment his victims, and whether these locations were especially tough to light?

DT: I knew the look of **Torture Chamber** was crucial. I do consider the locations to be characters. Sometimes even more than the actual characters. Those underground tunnels… A circular, never-ending maze of underground tunnels. The New Jersey Film Commission were a big help. While I was writing the script and the bizarre story was swirling in my mind… at night I would have dreams about what might happen next. I experienced this on **Desecration** and **Torture Chamber**, more than any of my other projects. The whole final part of the film, where the characters are going through the tunnels and caverns…I dreamt those locations. In the middle of the night, I'd jolt up from my bed gasping for breath because I was just frantically running around there. When I finally found the locations in everyday reality they were beautiful.

We shot at an underground mine in Ogdensburg, New Jersey and an old underground military base in Fort Totten Queens, New York. Both locations allowed for lots of atmospheric lighting and striking photography. The caverns of hell. I remember back to when I was in college in a psychology class by an instructor named Judith Kuspit at New York School of Visual Arts. There was something about the course that would release serotonin in my brain. She was a fascinating, inspiring lady and soon had us creating dream diaries. I really got into that. I did the same thing while dreaming **Torture Chamber**. I'd visit places. I was studious about it. I'd get out of bed, turn on the light, and transcribe….

MRH: Although called **Torture Chamber**, the film does not fall into the torture porn genre, and I wonder if you have any thoughts on that particular genre – in terms of its viability, and limitations in almost exclusively showcasing details of physical trauma?

DT: I really have no interest in torture porn. I cringe at the thought of it and not in a good way. I avoid movies with that kind of sterile sadism. I crave atmosphere. Gothic horror. I realize it's a double edged sword, the title, **Torture Chamber**. Maybe it sounds ugly and harsh but the film is actually candy-colored and painterly. It's really about a family in deep psychic pain… a metaphysical bond between a mother and her two sons. **Torture Chamber** is a place, a state-of-mind. I'm not interested in actual torture for the sake of torture.

MRH: How has the distribution of **Torture Chamber** differed from your prior films, in terms of the legal / financial complexities and exhibition venues available? (I'm curious if, from your stance, it's become harder to market a film and reach a specific target audience, or whether there are venues which give more power to the filmmaker, and enable him / her to recoup some of the expenses and be able to begin a new production much sooner than compared to prior years.)

DT: Well, so far it's similar to my other films but more promising. I worked with Image, Elite and AnchorBay in the past and they were helpful and nurturing. One thing I learned is to never ever rely on another filmmaker for financial assistance. Never place your hopes on one person. I'm not talking about my independent filmmaker comrades from the east coast. They're warm and caring. It's when you start dipping into so-called Hollywood. Anyone who's waiting for a Hollywood producer to fund your low budget horror film is sorely misguided. You'll wait forever. You just have to do it yourself. Find investors who believe in you. It's not easy but there's no other way.

Just recently, my entertainment lawyer wanted me to contact Oren Peli, you know the director of **Paranormal Activity** (2007), and offer him a copy of my new film. He forwarded me an article where he talks about horror directors who work on low budgets or something like that. Micro budgets. My lawyer said, "That's you." I thought nothing of it but followed through and contacted him and offered him my new film. I got a response back from Oren that read, "Thanks, but I'm already overwhelmed with screeners which I frankly never get around to watching." And that was it. My lawyer was surprised, I wasn't.

Torture Chamber's sales agent, Shoreline Entertainment premiered **Torture Chamber** at Sitges Film Festival in Spain and recently it was released on DVD in USA and Canada. Vivendi Entertainment purchased the rights and then Vivendi was bought by Cinedigm. The film seems to be in good hands.

MRH: All of your films currently exist on DVD – Are there plans to release any titles on Blu-ray, especially **Torture Chamber**, which was shot on Red?

DT: Yes, **Torture Chamber** will be released on Blu-ray in Germany next month. It should start popping up in different territories. To me Blu-ray is the only way to screen the film but I realize not everyone owns the players. There will be an English language Blu-ray, I would assume, at some point. [*Ed.- the Region B Blu-ray was released by Ascot Elite Home Entertainment September 23, 2014.*]

MRH: Some directors involve themselves in crafting detailed special features for the home video release, and I wonder if that's an aspect of a film's publicity which you're comfortable in fulfilling, or do you feel in your case less apocryphal information about the technical and creative processes is better for the filmmaker, and perhaps the viewer?

DT: I don't really like that side of making films, the salesman side. I never did. To me, the film should feel like a magic trick. Not a sales pitch. I'd rather take myself out of the equation. I push cameras away for any kind of behind-the-scenes thing. I don't like to talk too much because often times it diminishes the spirit. I like to communicate almost telepathically. There's a power in stillness, in the presence of the film itself. At the same time, I know it's a necessity… Behind-the-scenes materials. There is a featurette, a making-of piece on **Torture Chamber** and I did record a commentary. A very stream-of-consciousness commentary. You'll hear and see them when the film is re-released with the extras intact.

MRH: You've shot on video, film, HD, and had your films released in various formats, and I wonder what form and viewing stream represents the best venue to experience your work – the cinema, a home theatre, or the intimate relationship some viewers have in watching movies on laptops or tablets?

DT: I despise the idea of watching a horror movie on a tablet or home computer with thin speakers. The viewer is missing out on so much. First of all the screen is way too small! And the sound! Awful. So thin. I feel so out of sync with this generation. I was shocked to discover that many critics requested **Torture Chamber**, the finished film, as a computer link. Eeek. I just don't understand that. If I had my choice, my films would only be watched in a theatre environment or on a TV set with surround sound speakers.

MRH: Lastly, the CD release of **The Doll** contains some of the sonic concepts in your next film. How close will the film be in comparison to the various aural effects, music, dialogue, and textures, and will the CD function as reminder of a project's original, pure concept, so that if you find yourself straying or losing focus, the album will rekindle those primordial ideas, and realign your focus?

DT: The demo or conceptual soundtrack will probably be very close to the finished film's score…The spirit of it. On all my films, I never stray too far from my original sound demo. I have a history of sleep problems, nightmares, sleepwalking.

When I'm composing these preliminary soundtracks it feels like I'm sleepwalking. **The Doll** is about a violent haunting at a family owned wax museum in Salem. Wax museums scare me. And the Salem Witch Trials. I have a connection to that unsettling period, with its emphasis on purity, damnation and hell. **The Doll** is set in the 70's with flashbacks to 1692. Michael Gingold is co-writer. I'm an avid lucid dreamer and lately I've been entering the world of **The Doll**.

For example, before I go to bed at night I'll stare at my hands, visualize them. I'll tell myself that I want to find my hands in my dream. I say it to myself over and over. I make it my intent. Once that happens, I'm conscious in the unconscious. I can navigate the dream. I can visit places from the past or conjure new landscapes. And that's what I do. **The Doll** script is coming at me in that way. I'm tinkering with a draft while experimenting with soundscapes at my home studio. I've been doing more composing than writing but they flow into each other. At the moment, I'm marinated in **The Doll**. This demo allows me to explore what kind of movie I really want to create.

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A lengthy interview with Tomaselli from 2007 regarding the DVD releases of **Horror** (2002) and **Satan's Playground** (2007), and pre-production on **The Ocean** is also available. (The Q&A also includes a link to a demo track of sound design and the film's MySpace page.)

Those interested in a taste of the visuals being conceived for **The Ocean** can view a water montage on YouTube:

The director also produced a mini-bio featurette tied to the production of **Torture Chamber**:

Tags: Dante Tomaselli, Nightmare, Scream in the Dark, The Doll, The Ocean
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