Big Brother has been watching us in various guises and through various methods, in various media, for decades now. And as time has marched on since George Orwell first wrote 1984, reality has been catching up to his science fiction, most notably over the last decade. Staying a step ahead is director Richard Clabaugh’s EYEBORGS—but, he cautions, it’s not that big a step.

“Current events” are what Clabaugh cites as the original inspiration for EYEBORGS, now out on DVD and Blu-ray from Image Entertainment. “The best science fiction, to me, takes something that’s real and happening, and extrapolates it out to sometimes illogical extremes,” he explains. “We were looking at traffic cameras going up, the tightening of surveillance following 9/11, the threats of terrorism and wars we were getting involved in. We thought, ‘What if we just expanded that to the craziest extreme, as if it wasn’t enough to have security cameras on every corner; what if they could follow you and make sure you weren’t committing a crime?’ We developed that into the idea of the security cameras killing people.”

The movie’s Eyeborgs—two-legged mechanical creations with large lens-eyes—aren’t supposed to hurt anyone, just monitor the populace on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security. But Detective Reynolds (Adrian Paul), who has stumbled upon a plot to assassinate the President, discovers evidence that the walking cameras are also killing machines, the footage of their fatalities doctored to look like humans were responsible. Reynolds joins forces with reporter Barbara Hawkins (Megan Blake) and the President’s nephew Jarett (Luke Eberl) to expose the conspiracy—which won’t be easy when their enemies are armed with thousands of mobile watchers/killers.

Clabaugh, who scripted the movie with his wife Fran (also the film’s editor), first developed the idea several years ago, and has seen the scenario become only more topical in the intervening period. “Our hardest problem in making the movie was staying ahead of reality,” he says. “Everything we wrote in the movie would come to pass. We’d read articles about millions of dollars being given to a certain city to link all their security cameras into a single network—which is the premise of our whole film! What do you do when, as you walk down the street today, 300 or more video rigs will record and see you pass by? What if they actually had enough AI to recognize and consciously track you, and be specifically aware of you and your actions? That idea isn’t very far away, and that scares me. I wanted to tell a story that I found a little bit frightening.”

And that, he says, was key to EYEBORGS, on which he was always conscious of making sure the political themes didn’t overwhelm the entertainment value. “We wanted it to be a fun killer-robot movie,” he says. “We wanted it to be a good popcorn film, and tried to deliver on all the stuff you’d expect out of that: good confrontations, battles, lots of action. I’ve always felt the best science fiction has a subtle, sugarcoated pill of commentary about the world it was made in. I was very inspired by the films I grew up with, and I’ve always pointed to INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS, which was very subtly commenting on the notion of paranoia, where you can’t trust the people who appear to be your friends; they’re not who they seem to be. So we just plugged into the zeitgeist of today, the idea that we’re constantly under surveillance and accepting it as more and more common. How far can we let that go and still remain causal about it before we realize we don’t exactly know what the full ramifications are? And that provided a basis for a scenario with a little more under the hood than a simple killer-robot story.”

Clabaugh brought that story to life entirely in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where he is now based after many years working in Hollywood. Starting out in the camera department for directors like Anthony Hickox (on the WAXWORK flicks and HELLRAISER III) and William Lustig (on MANIAC COP III), he graduated to cinematographer, with several credits for Dimension Films, including THE PROPHECY and its first sequel, PHANTOMS and a pair of CHILDREN OF THE CORN entries. He made his debut at the helm with the 2000 Sci Fi Channel flick PYTHON, and although he was determined to shoot EYEBORGS in his home town with largely local talent, he did approach the cable network during its development.

“We went to them early on,” he recalls, “just to make sure this film would be viable when we got it made—to find out if we could sell it to them if no one else was interested. Because this was not funded by a studio of any sort, we wanted to make sure there was a place for this movie in the world. Then we went to our investors and showed them we could pull it off and make it work. ‘There will be interest when all is said is done, so trust us, invest in this!’ ”

According to Clabaugh, there were a few reasons beyond expedience to shoot EYEBORGS on his home turf. “There are political debates that occur here every year,” he explains. “Wake Forest University always hosts one of the presidential debates, so there was validity in setting the story here. Also, LA is a very well-photographed town at this point, and it was much easier on our budget to get better production values and access to a lot of fresh visuals and locations that haven’t been used so much. We thought we could give the movie a cool, neat look by turning our cameras on the local scenery and taking advantage of what hasn’t been photographed a million times already.”

Familiar faces on the screen are always an advantage, though, so Clabaugh turned to Paul, whom he had previously directed in the 2005 drama LITTLE CHICAGO, and Danny Trejo, who plays a conspiracy theorist. Having been a fan of Paul since the actor’s HIGHLANDER TV days, Clabaugh says, “I’ve always thought he’s a really talented actor who really isn’t given enough opportunities to showcase his skills, so when Fran and I sat down to write the script, we knew we wanted him for the lead role. As luck would have it, when the time came, he was available. He was the first person we thought of, and the last one we talked to, but it all worked out.”

As for Trejo, “Oh my God, what a peach. He’s an amazing person who brings this tremendous persona to everything he does. The moment he stepped on the set, everyone was wowed, because he has such a huge cult following. It was really intimidating, and then he just made it so easy to work with him—he took his character and made it his own. He had to truly project a strong screen presence to make a role with minimal screen time as important as it was, and he did. I can’t say enough great things about Danny.”

Then there was the matter of bringing the Eyeborgs to life. To oversee the movie’s visual FX, the director turned to Christopher H. Watson, a talented former student at a university where Clabaugh was teaching who had expressed an interest in character animation. As it turned out, Watson was able to handle all sides of the EYEBORGS assignment. “One of the amazing

things about this film is that if you look at any Hollywood movie, you’ve got a department that does the design, one that does the modeling, the texturing, the animation, the match moving, rendering and compositing—and Chris did all that,” Clabaugh raves. “He designed these things, textured them, animated them, rigged them and match-moved the shots. He spearheaded everything regarding the visual effects on this film and did phenomenal work, though we finally realized it would take forever if we didn’t get him some help.” That assistance was provided by Antwon Bruer and his new Flock company as well as a local outfit called Audobon Nine Animation, each of which took on specific sections of the movie.

In Clabaugh’s own eyes, utilizing local talent to pull off this ambitious film was one of his greatest achievements regarding EYEBORGS. “Everyone in the cast, besides Adrian, Danny and Luke, was a North Carolina performer,” says the director, who’s currently developing further genre projects with his Crimson Wolf Productions. “Everyone on the crew, too, with the exception of some stuntpeople who were friends and were brought in for their special skill sets. It was sort of a point of pride, managing to make this movie by strictly pulling people from the area community. There are talented people in every town all over the world. It’s just a matter of making the right connections, and taking advantage of the talented people working with you.”

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