Compared to today, you wouldn’t recognize New York City in the ’70s. Back then, drugs, poverty and urban decay ruled the streets, especially in the economically depressed Lower East Side. This gritty environment gave birth to an underground group of experimental filmmakers, including Jim Jarmusch, Richard Kern, Charlie Ahearn and Nick Zed, whose bizarre GEEK MAGGOT BINGO (top) featured former Fango editor Bob Martin. These transgressive films, dubbed No Wave, took no prisoners just from some of their titles alone (GO TO HELL, SUBMIT TO ME NOW, THEY EAT SCUM, etc.) and soon began gathering a cult following in grungy dive theaters and through VHS bootlegs.

This Cinema of Transgression is celebrated in filmmaker Celine Danhier’s exhaustive and fascinating documentary BLANK CITY (opening April 6 at NYC’s IFC Center from Insurgent Media), which offers revealing interviews with Jarmusch, Kern, Zedd, actor Steve Buscemi (who made his acting debut in these movies; see below), John Waters, Debbie Harry, Thurston Moore, Lydia Lunch and many more. Fango spoke with Danhier about her debut film.

FANGORIA: What inspired you to tackle this documentary?

CELINE DANHIER: I was still living in Paris then, and I happened to see this film called ROME 78 from James Nares during a No Wave film retrospective at Beaubourg. This film was starring Lydia Lunch, James Chance, John Lurie, David McDermott, Eric Mitchell, etc. I thought, ‘Wow, what a cast!’ I was familiar with the No Wave music like Teenage Jesus and the Jerks and the Contortions, and I knew the movies of Jim Jarmusch, but was not really aware of the No Wave films or many of the other filmmakers from NYC in that period. Seeing this film made me curious what else was out there. I realized there were almost no films available or accessible in France.

I had this idea that I wanted to try to track down these filmmakers and find out what they were up to now.

When I later moved to New York, I realized that it was the same in the U.S., and these films or even information about these filmmakers was difficult to find. In 2006 in New York you did have Kim’s Video on St. Mark’s Place where you could find a huge selection of films on VHS. Sometimes local filmmakers would even just put their film in the rental collection themselves. But there were few copies and often the tapes were damaged and eventually Kim’s actually closed completely. So I really felt that it was a great idea to make this documentary before these films disappeared.

FANG: Do you think these filmmakers have received the recognition they deserve?

DANHIER: No, I don’t think so, and there are actually a lot of reasons for that. It was a different era for sure and you did not have the Internet or other ways of putting your work out there for a wider audience. It was not easy to get exposure outside of New York. Also, the film world in general was different. Indie film as a genre didn’t really exist in the way it does now. But also, at the same time, it was part of the attitude of that period in New York. No one was really thinking about “making it” or starting a career. It was more about the energy or the passion and the creative process.

FANG: Was it difficult to track some of the people down and was everyone receptive?

DANHIER: It sort of unfolded organically and it helped that so many people were still in New York. You met someone, who connects you to someone else who makes a call to someone else, etc. What was amazing was the help that we got from the whole community. It was our first film, we did not have any real connections or experience and we were just driven by our enthusiasm and a sense of the adventure. And maybe that helped because we never heard the word “no”—when we got a “no,” we heard “maybe” and we would work until that “maybe” turned into a “yes.” In the end, I am so happy and thankful to everyone in the film and that we were able to interview so many people from the period.

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