
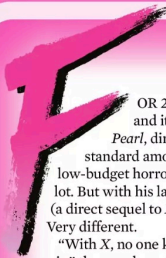


# SLASH STORY



SHOT BACK-TO-BACK,  
X AND PEARL WON WRITER/  
DIRECTOR TI WEST RAVE  
REVIEWS WHEN THEY WERE  
RELEASED IN 2022. NOW, TWO  
YEARS ON, HE'S BACK WITH THE  
LATEST FILM IN THE "X SERIES",  
THE '80S-SET SLASHER  
**MAXXXINE**  
WORDS: STEVE O'BRIEN





FOR 2022 SLASHER FLICK *X* and its same-year prequel *Pearl*, director Ti West did the standard amount of press for a low-budget horror, which is to say not a lot. But with his latest film *MaXXXine* (a direct sequel to *X*), things are different. Very different.

"With *X*, no one knew we made that movie," the man born Timon West tells *SFX* about 2022's surprise horror hit (made for \$1 million, it ended up grossing \$15m). "And then *Pearl* [budget: \$1m; box office: \$10.1m], no one knew we made that movie either. So this one is the only one that everyone knows has been happening since the very beginning."

The consequence of the critical and commercial success of those films is that *MaXXXine* is arriving with considerably more fanfare than its two under-the-radar predecessors, and that's something of a mixed blessing for its writer/director. "What was cool about the other two is no one knew what they were in for," West points out. "For this, the less you know about the movie, the better."

**HOLLYWOOD DREAM**

Before we get to *MaXXXine*, let's remind ourselves of how we got here. Released in March 2022, *X* was *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* by way of *Boogie Nights*, a grindhouse-styled slasher set in 1979 where the cast and crew of a dime-store skin flick find themselves targeted by a psychopathic old woman and her homicidal husband.

Second movie *Pearl* (released in September 2022) told the story of that elderly lady as a young girl, dreaming of a life on the silver screen, at the same time as she's discovering a taste for killing. Although part of the same universe, stylistically *X* was the bastard child of Tobe Hooper and Mario Bava, *Pearl*'s parentage seemed to be Douglas Sirk and Walt Disney, a gloriously demented riff on the Technicolor melodramas of Hollywood's golden age.

*MaXXXine* is something wildly different once more. Taking place six years after the first film, it finds Maxine Minx, the final girl of *X*'s kill spree, now in LA, lusting after a career in mainstream Hollywood. Mia Goth is back, making her the only actor to appear in all three movies: she also played Pearl, under heavy prosthetics as an 80-year-old in *X*, and as a fresh-faced teen in the prequel. New faces include Elizabeth Debicki, Michelle Monaghan, Bobby Cannavale, Lily Collins, Giancarlo Esposito, Halsey and Kevin Bacon. A considerably starrier line-up than either of



Maxine with Elizabeth (Elizabeth Debicki).



"Don't worry, I'm sure this'll be completely fine."

Maxine (Mia Goth) and Tabby (Halsey).

the first two, less generously-budgeted films. It's also, from the look of the trailer, a much more ambitious movie, taking place on a far broader canvas than its tightly-focused predecessors.

"It's much bigger than both of them combined," West beams. "The film is very Hollywood. The environments that Maxine's in are very much the kind of places you come to see as a tourist in LA, so it really leans into the aesthetic of the city. If you've ever come to Los Angeles, people are always trying to sell you stuff like maps to the stars' homes and movie tours and things like that."

West cites Brian De Palma and Italian giallo as inspirations for *MaXXXine*'s gaudy, neon-drenched aesthetic. That constantly shifting cinematic style is one of the reasons why the *X* series has proved so fascinating. Not only are they movies about the movies, but each film's cinematic antecedents are there for fans to pore over.

"Craft is a big part of what binds these movies together," West says. "They're all very different, but they're very

purposeful. Aesthetically, they're very specific and, well, you're aware of the filmmaking, I think, while you're watching these movies. That was a big thing for me because I come to movies very visually, and from the craft of filmmaking – I have a real

reverence for it. So to me, if the camera direction is good, or the special effects and make-up is good, or the way the music is cut to the scene is good, that's part of the enjoyment of seeing films."

Which is what makes these movies not just a feast for cineastes, but so much fun for West. Each successive film brings with it fresh challenges for the director, as he adapts the story to a new style, from the visuals to the editing to the pacing to the score.

"For these movies that are so cinema-focused, any kind of technique or any kind of style is really on the table," West says about his chameleon series. "I just wanted to lean into the filmmaking a lot of movies now shy away from, and it's a lot of just plot and dialogue. Broadly speaking, photography has gotten a little bit better, certainly on TV, but it's the same rhythm of editing and the same kind of music, so whenever something breaks that mould, it really stands out these days."

"To some degree, that's what I'm hoping to do with these, which is to have them be in their own lane and have people

remember that you can get a little bit weird and the audiences are smart enough to go with you."

The "smart" thing has, of course, led to West's films being bracketed with other critically love-bombed movies such as *Hereditary* and *Saint Maud* as "elevated horror" (all three *X* films are distributed by A24, that doyen of arthouse terror). While some directors bristle at the mention of the "h" word, West is entirely comfortable describing his movies as horror, and doesn't think it's a reductive term.

"I would definitely say this movie is horror, but my definition of horror is pretty broad," he says. "But with this movie, if you're expecting something like *X*, something very in your face, a horror beat all the time, it's broader than that. At the same time, though, not everybody makes it to the end of this movie, and they die in pretty gruesome ways!"

As with Ari Aster and Rose Glass's films, West's cine-literate movies have found an audience beyond the horror crowd. While they certainly deliver the chills and frights, there's a thematic richness and a love of technique in these films that have helped them not only cross over to mainstream audiences, but endure them to critics who'd normally be sniffy about a slasher series.

"My movies are horror movies, but people who don't like horror tend to like them," the director says. "The big hurdle for me is trying to convince them – You say you hate horror movies, but it's not what you think, give it a try!"

"We showed Elizabeth Debicki the movie the other day at 9am, which is a horrible time to watch it, and afterwards she said, 'I hate horror movies and I was stressed out about watching it,' but then she really had a blast with it. Right from the get-go, she was on board."

As much as these movies are about scares and kills, they're also about fame and the hunger for it. In *X*, every one of the cast and crew of *The Farmer's Daughter* (the porn flick within the movie) thinks they're on the precipice of stardom, from its Fellini-aping cinematographer to the film's stetson-rocking director. In *Pearl*, the titular character dreams of the big time, her drab Texas life juiced up by what she sees on the movie screen. *MaXXXine* continues this theme, with Mia Goth's one-time porn star attempting to break into the world of mainstream horror ("Name five celebrities who got their start in horror movies," she asks her friend in the trailer: see boxout below).

"For Maxine, trying to become famous is a major theme for the character through *X* and through *MaXXXine*," West says. "*X* is a movie about how if you want to be part of filmmaking, but you're not on the inside, then this kind of scrappy do-it-yourself low-budget entrepreneurial way of making a porn movie in the same way you would make a horror that could go to a drive-in, that was your way from the outside to get into the industry. If *Pearl* is

**"I would definitely say this movie is horror, but my definition of horror is pretty broad"**

looking at the glamour of Hollywood in this hopeful way of what your life could be like if you had the kind of life that the people in the movies have, then *MaXXXine* is about once you get to Hollywood, then what happens?

"This trilogy," he continues, "yes, they're about fame and yes, they're three different horror movies, and yes, they should be entertaining and scary, but they're also a celebration of movies and different kinds of moviemaking. I mean, I didn't know I was going to make three movies when I made the first one. The goal of *X* was to really put the craft on display. And now hopefully I've done it three times."

Three times, yes, but what about a fourth? Despite West referring to a trilogy, he's also said before that he's "trying to build a world out of all this", suggesting less a triumvirate of films and more a cinematic universe, a sort of MCU with gore. So what's the future of the *X* series? Will Maxine – or Mia Goth at least – always be at the centre of these stories, or are there plans to spin off any characters?

"It'll be vague about it, but I have an idea that I think would be a cool addition to these three movies," West teases. "But I'm not sure. Having just finished these movies, do I want to wake up on Monday and start doing that, or do I want to give myself a break and do something different and then come back to it? So yes, there is a potential for the *X* universe, as people call it. But I think that Maxine's story is complete with this." ●

*MaXXXine* is in cinemas from 5 July.

**BACON BITS**

Ti West on how Kevin Bacon ended up in *MaXXXine*

In the film's trailer, Maxine asks her friend "Name five celebrities who got their start in horror movies", to which he replies, "John Travolta, Jamie Lee Curtis, Demi Moore and Brooke Shields." Ti West reveals that there was an additional name in the original version of the script – Kevin Bacon, the breakout star of 1980's *Friday The 13th*.

"But then I cast him, so I thought, I've gotta take that out!" the director laughs. Bacon is one of the many marquee-name actors to sign on for the third film in the *X* series, and came to the movie as a committed fan of the director.

"I had always heard that Kevin Bacon had liked my films since [2009's] *The House Of The Devil*. I'd never met him – at one point after *X*, I was meant to have a coffee with him, but it never happened, and after that we were never in the same place at the same time."

"Then when I wrote this movie, I had him in the back of my mind: 'Allegedly this guy likes my movies, so maybe he'd like to be in one.' Then we just sent it to him and then we finally had that coffee and he was like, 'Yes! I like your movies! I'd love to be in this!'"

