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ROBERT ROSADO

HORROR FEATURE REVIEWER
ROBBY@ROBBYHORROR.COM

WWW.ROBBYHORROR.COM

[INSTAGRAM.COM/ROBBY_HORROR](https://www.instagram.com/robbly_horror)

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THE BABADOOK (2014)

Directed by Jennifer Kent

Cast: Essie Davis, Noah Wiseman, Hayley McElhinney, Daniel Henshall

Seven years after having lost her husband in a violent accident, widow Amelia is nearing the end of her rope. When a mysterious children's book appears on her doorstep, however, life only grows exponentially more horrifying for her and her son, Samuel.

From the title alone, Jennifer Kent's debut feature might seem like a schlocky supernatural yarn, something more akin to ANNABELLE than THE EXORCIST. But in fact, THE BABADOOK is nothing short of a marvel, astutely bridging the gap between visceral and psychological thrills. The title itself refers to the monster in a pop-up book, but we also come to understand it as the manifestation of our protagonist, Amelia's, grief and resentments, which have been unaided and unsupported by those she loves and trusts in the years since her tragedy.

In a performance that should've won her an Oscar, Essie Davis captures Amelia's desperation and inability to face her circumstances, scaling even riskier dramatic heights when her character begins to take on more grotesque traits. Some have called Noah Wiseman's performance as Samuel "annoying", and that is precisely the point. Amelia has never given her son the love he deserves, so he acts out, unable to distinguish play from reality. Through their dynamic, we understand how they have fed each other's toxic cycles.

Kent's affinity for German expressionism bleeds into the film's faultless technical specs. The production design by Alex Holmes corners Amelia and Sam in their gelid home, tinted with charcoal hues, emblematic of the cold, colorless existence they have found themselves in. Radek Ładczuk's cinematography attunes itself to Amelia's growing paranoia, toying with the idea that the titular figure can appear anywhere, and that escape is impossible.

THE BABADOOK is initially presented as a monster movie in the classical tradition, but becomes something richer, and more hopeful, by the end. In order for Amelia and Samuel to overcome their mutual disintegration, they must learn to both understand each other and placate their individual pains. For after all, if we don't take care, we may end up becoming that which we fear the most. (**** out of ****)

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT (1999)

Directed by Eduardo Sánchez & Daniel Myrick

Cast: Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard, Michael C. Williams

In 1994, three filmmakers went into the woods of Burkittsville, Maryland, to explore the Blair Witch, a local legend whose influence on the community seems to stretch back centuries. The group disappeared without a trace. Five years later, their footage was found.

Although pre-dated by 1980's CANNIBAL HOLOCAUST and 1998's THE LAST BROADCAST, THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT was the first found footage to make its way into the pop zeitgeist, with initial audiences believing that the footage they were watching was real. In 2021, we know better, but this does not dull the inherent spookiness and haunting ambiguity of Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's feature debut.

While positioned as a film about the witch herself, the plot is really an examination of our protagonists as they are systemically cut off from resources and any feasible means of escape. The devices that Myrick and Sánchez use throughout conjure an unshakable hold on the viewer. Stick figures, bloody teeth, the disembodied sounds of children laughing, all employed to posit the notion that the woods of Burkittsville are sadistically targeting this group, alienating them from the outside world.

Playing fictionalized versions of themselves, Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard, and Michael C. Williams give committed, blemished performances as the ill-fated trio. Although not necessarily likable at the start, the group gains our sympathy as they emotionally and mentally collapse, making it even more painful when they begin to turn on each other. Donahue is particularly sensational. Her confessional monologue has been parodied to death, but it remains an extremely powerful piece of screen acting.

The finale, set within a dilapidated house as the filmmakers search desperately for safety and answers, is nightmarish in its sheer inevitability. Whatever the objectives for venturing into the forest, they were fated to end here. THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT will always be divisive for beating to its own drummer. There are no visible monsters, no easy solutions to lean on. It discreetly takes you by the hand, leads you to the darkness, and dares you to keep walking.

(**** out of ****)

THE BLOB (1988)

Directed by Chuck Russell

Cast: Shawnee Smith, Kevin Dillon, Donovan Leitch, Joe Seneca, Jeffrey DeMunn, Candy Clark

A hulking mass of corrosive goo strikes a small California town, and it is up to cheerleader Meg and biker Brian to destroy it, while simultaneously thwarting a group of military scientists with dastardly motives.

When the topic of great horror remakes arises, two examples tend to stand out: John Carpenter's *THE THING* and David Cronenberg's *THE FLY*. Rightfully so, these are films which utilize the bare bones of their earlier counterparts and repurpose them with an added depth and social relevance, while also showcasing state-of-art practical effects. And in doing so, they both inarguably supercede the originals. I would include Chuck Russell's *THE BLOB* in that conversation, albeit to a slightly lesser extent.

The screenplay by director Russell and Frank Darabont is sharply funny, satirical in parts while also spiking in some wickedly dark humor (phone booth - all I'm gonna say). And while characterization is not the film's strongest suit, the core ensemble is peppered with details that make them well-rounded and likable, and the order in which they get picked off will undoubtedly surprise you.

Shawnee Smith, who would later go on to play a pivotal role in the *SAW* series, is terrific as Meg, a rather progressive female lead for the time in that she is never sexualized, and she is given competence and autonomy when it comes to the more perilous sequences. Kevin Dillon is also very good as loner Brian Flagg. With his mullet and leather jacket, you'd think at first this character will be a drag, but Dillon plays him with immense charisma.

Perhaps the biggest calculation to work in the film's favor is, for all the gruesome violence and relentless tension, just how buoyant and enjoyable a ride it is. It reminds this viewer of *SCREAM* in the way it juggles divergent tones without compromising narrative integrity. While *THE BLOB* might seem to be just dumb fun, there is something to be said for movies that are smart about how dumb they are. (** out of ***)

THE BOY BEHIND THE DOOR (2021)

Directed by David Charbonier & Justin Powell

Cast: Lonnie Chavis, Ezra Dewey, Kristen Bauer van Straten, Micah Hauptman

THE BOY BEHIND THE DOOR (2021) Preteens Bobby and Kevin are laying in an open field, daydreaming about how they will break out of their small town, when they are suddenly abducted, bound, and thrown into a trunk. The house they arrive at and the people who greet them are beyond their worst nightmares.

With their follow-up to 2021's THE DJINN, writer-directors David Charbonier and Justin Powell have all but solidified their knack for taut, suspenseful stories set within limited locations and with few characters. Whereas their debut feature was a dark fantasy, this second feature is very much set in the real world and deals with some upsetting subject material that plagues all societies. Charbonier and Powell are honed when it comes to keeping these small-scale thrillers visually interesting from moment to moment. They, along with cinematographer Julian Astrada, get tons of mileage out of their primary set, a secluded house with dim lighting and creaky floors.

Ezra Dewey (who was also outstanding as the lead in THE DJINN) and Lonnie Chavis are perfection as Kevin and Bobby, respectfully. Dewey and Chavis are put through emotional and physical wringers, both as actors and characters, and they do not miss a step. Although we do not learn much about them beyond their immediate circumstances, to the film's detriment, the talent and chemistry of these young performers narrowly compensates. Worth noting the fate which befalls our protagonists if they do not escape is more dreadful than a swift death, and it is to the film's credit that such a dicey premise is handled with tact.

It is a shame, then, that the film doesn't end up transcending its cat-and-mouse trappings. Despite some harrowing confrontations between the children and their kidnapers, the film runs on thin narrative ice. There are multiple, predictable lapses in logic which seem to only serve the running time. And ultimately, the antagonist is neither well-written nor particularly well-acted, which reduces the intrigue. THE BOY BEHIND THE DOOR is not without exhilarating sequences or emotional investment. But, same as with THE DJINN, one does wish it took a few more risks. (**1/2 out of ****)

BURN, WITCH, BURN (1962)

Directed by Sidney Hayers

Cast: Peter Wyngarde, Janet Blair, Margaret Johnston, Bill Mitchell, Judith Stott

English university professor Norman Taylor is excelling at his job, on track for a promotion, and has a lovely wife at home, Tansy. Everything seems to be ideal, until Norman begins to notice charms and strange poppets hidden strategically around the house.

Pre-dating the popular television sitcom "Bewitched" by two years, BURN, WITCH, BURN, based on the novel "Conjure Wife" by Fritz Leiber, certainly reminds one of that indelible melding of domestic life and sorcery. But while this film, directed by Sidney Hayers, begins light-heartedly enough, the plot is steered into darker and, for its time, more daring directions than one would expect, not least its equitable depiction of both the positive and negative effects of witchcraft.

As it turns out, Tansy is indeed a witch who has been facilitating Norman's professional success. And soon after he forces her to burn everything and turn away from the occult, he realizes that not only was she helping him, but also protecting him from the destructive spells of another. The various ways that this malevolence manifests itself are inherently disturbing, as only Tansy fully understands what they are up against.

Peter Wyngarde and Janet Blair are terrific as Norman and Tansy, in what is essentially a two-hander screenplay. Wyngarde remains charming and likable, despite his character's hard-headedness and naïveté. Blair is effervescent and radiant, fully selling her love for Norman as one who would sacrifice everything, including herself, to protect him. Also, worth noting, Tansy is not submissive in a way that is customary for the time. She stands up to her husband, forcefully when necessary, which is refreshing to see. The actors are highlighted splendidly by Reginald Wyer's cinematography, which makes great uses of shadow and flame, especially towards the end, when the nefarious party makes themselves known.

Ultimately, the picture moves at lightning speed, and I do wish that a bit more time had been given to Norman and Tansy's relationship separate from all the supernatural hijinks. As stated before, though, the performances of Wyngarde and Blair successfully fill in the blanks for us. The climax, a rapidly escalating series of events, is notable for its onslaught of practical effects, many of which have aged spectacularly well. And, for that matter, so has the film in general. BURN, WITCH, BURN is a curious and delicious concoction that horror fans today might not have heard of, but it is well worth the attention. (**1/2 out of ***)

THE BURNING (1981)

Directed by Tony Maylam

Cast: Brian Matthews, Leah Ayres, Brian Backer, Larry Joshua, Carrick Glenn

After being horribly disfigured by a prank gone wrong, a vengeful groundskeeper stalks the children and staff of a summer camp.

It is nearly impossible to imagine Tony Maylam's THE BURNING without Sean Cunningham's 1980 original FRIDAY THE 13th. But whereas F13 had the counselors being picked off while they prepared for the arrival of their attendees, THE BURNING ups the ante by having the vicious killer targeting the campers. Not only that, but it is simply a well-made film in its own regard, with various and typically neglected elements standing in impressive alignment.

A great deal of the tension comes from Harvey Harrison's detailed lensing, framing the camp and the surrounding forests as its own sequestered killing floor, far away from help and safety. A chilling sequence early on is when tomboy Tiger runs into woods to retrieve a foul ball, unaware that danger is slowly approaching. I also should call attention to Rick Wakeman's eerie, eclectically orchestrated musical score, unlike anything that was being done at the time.

Much has been made of the infamous canoe scene, and with good reason. After realizing that their canoes have been cut loose overnight, a group of campers use a raft to recover one that has been spotted floating in the lake. What follows is a sudden and vicious burst of violence, showcasing top-notch makeup effects by the great Tom Savini. Unlike some other American slashers of the time, the majority of payoffs are neither abbreviated nor left offscreen.

But what gives THE BURNING an edge is Peter Lawrence and Bob Weinstein's economical screenplay. By slasher standards, it's near brilliant in that not only are the counselors competent and rational, but the large ensemble of campers is well-drawn, and their dynamics are believable. For those reasons, the stakes feel uncommonly high.

Despite rarely being in the same conversation as similar films released before it and the many released after, THE BURNING is the summer camp slasher of them all. And with its discernibly chosen cast, sturdy technical specs, and methodical pacing, I'd argue it's one of the very best slashers, period. (** out of ***)

CANDYMAN (1992)

Directed by Bernard Rose

Cast: Virginia Madsen, Tony Todd, Xander Berkeley, Vanessa Williams, Kasi Lemmons, DeJuan Guy

Based on "The Forbidden" by Clive Barker. Chicago grad student Helen Lyle begins thesis research on an urban myth: 'Candyman', an imposing figure who wields a large hook for a hand, and supposedly haunts a dangerous, corroded housing project.

Among the finest, most memorable horror entries of the 1990s, CANDYMAN is directed with sophistication by Bernard Rose. In accordance with its grisly subject matter, the film is occupied with arousing the viewer's imagination as often as it is with frightening them.

CANDYMAN is not the lurid gorefest one might expect, but an intelligent and relentlessly spooky piece about urban legends, their origins, and the ways we keep them alive. The famed Nietzsche quote - "if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee." - is perfectly apt to this material, the notion of becoming tethered to that which we recklessly seek.

As a more significant layer, Rose's screenplay addresses the cycle of racial injustice and economic disparity, and how their effects intertwine and ripple across generations. The tragedy of Daniel Robitaille, which spawns the Candyman mythos, is an example of this. And then there is Helen, adorned with privilege, understanding full well that the housing project she wishes to study is plagued with crime and a negligent police presence. Naturally, it is not until she falls into harm's way that the authorities finally step in.

Virginia Madsen is excellent as Helen. Helen approaches her research from a place of skepticism and blithe ignorance, which might be frustrating in the hands of a less alluring actor. Madsen's sympathetic portrayal puts us firmly in her corner from start to finish, especially once Candyman's control places her inexplicably at a series of gruesome crime scenes.

As for Tony Todd, who plays the titular figure, this is not an antagonist who needs grand gestures or makeup to be frightening. Todd's chilling, seductive performance quietly and methodically creeps into your nightmares. Along with Philip Glass' indelible score, he is CANDYMAN's greatest special effect. (**1/2 out of ***)

CANDYMAN (2021)

Directed by Nia DaCosta

Cast: Yahya Abdul-Mateen II, Tenoyah Parris, Colman Domingo, Vanessa Estelle Williams, Nathan Stewart-Jarrett, Tony Todd, Virginia Madsen

A sequel to the 1992 classic. Anthony McCoy is a burgeoning visual artist, living in the now-gentrified Cabrini-Green apartment complex with his girlfriend Brianna, an art curator. When Brianna's brother playfully discloses the legend of Candyman, a vengeful spirit who haunted the once-derelict housing project, something awakens inside Anthony. Through this new rush of creative energy, he finds himself hurtling towards a dark destiny he was never aware of.

It shouldn't be controversial to claim that Bernard Rose's CANDYMAN remains one of the finest horror films of the 90s, and of the last thirty years, for that matter. And it also shouldn't be controversial to claim that its two sequels – 1995's FAREWELL TO THE FLESH and 1999's DAY OF THE DEAD – were nowhere near approaching in terms of quality, soulless and gaudy where the original was thematically rich and genuinely disquieting.

So when it was announced that director Nia DaCosta (of the stellar neo-noir LITTLE WOODS) and co-writer Jordan Peele were collaborating on a "spiritual sequel", I for one was thrilled. For all its positive attributes, the original CANDYMAN was a story pertaining to the black experience but told through the prism of a white English director and through the eyes of a white protagonist, Helen Lyle. How refreshing to have a team like DaCosta and Peele to reinvigorate the legend and bring something new to the table. Very sadly, the execution is more muddled than I could've anticipated.

Aesthetically, CANDYMAN delivers. Some unfortunate CGI aside, the film looks absolutely incredible, with John Gulesarian's cinematography perpetuating the series' motif of mirrors, reflections, and appearances just barely disguising what is underneath. The lighting is also noteworthy, indicative of modern art with its sharp contrasts and neon glow. There is nothing particularly natural about the look of the film, which is appropriate for a piece that's initially about the objectivity of art and storytelling versus the real-life horrors they stem from.

In fact, it is an ingenious direction for this sequel to go, as art and urban legends are both informed by the present moment, and both are conduits meant to make trauma and pain accessible for someone else to experience. For the first half of CANDYMAN, the conversation it raises is nothing short of enthralling. Halfway through and until the end, however, Peele and DaCosta's screenplay bites off more than it can chew, with allusions to police brutality and other loaded topics that could easily fill their own movie. By piling on the allegory, and so late into the narrative, the film paints itself into a corner where it can't satisfyingly complete what it started.

Yahya Abdul-Mateen II and Teyonah Parris are exceptional in what were surely emotionally and physically exhausting roles. As Anthony, Abdul-Mateen displays a good nature that sours once he learns of the titular myth. His art is quickly reinvigorated, becoming his sole focus, but he becomes selfish and obsessive. Those familiar with the original will probably pick up on why the Candyman resonates so deeply with him. Parris is charismatic and emotionally available as Brianna, heartbreaking in her confusion at what is becoming of her partner. A flashback showing the extent of her father's mental illness is an interesting touch, but it doesn't do much to advance her character.

In spite of their terrific performances, however, the perspective of the film switches at a key moment and never corrects course, leaving both of their arcs feeling incomplete. The same goes for a pair of memorable supporting turns: Colman Domingo, as a former Cabrini resident with his own traumatic link to the legend, and Vanessa Estelle Williams, reprising her role as Anne-Marie McCoy from the 1992 original. Domingo and Williams are superlative, and their roles clearly hold great significance to the story, but their screentime is too brief and the lack of payoff is discernible.

CANDYMAN is a superbly mounted and complex film, bursting with subtext and ideas. We need more like it. But in the end, frankly, it can be argued that there are too many ideas. While the original managed to be layered yet still tell its story succinctly, this sequel can't seem to attain that same clarity of intention. The cast is wonderful, there are some great setpieces and standalone moments (a school bathroom, an elevator encased in mirrors, and an art gallery after hours provide some of the best chills), the innovative score by Robert A. A. Lowe all but matches Philip's Glass's iconic compositions, but it disappointingly never coheres into something greater than the sum of its elements. (**1/2 out of ****)

CARRIE (1976)

Directed by Brian De Palma

Cast: Sissy Spacek, Piper Laurie, Amy Irving, William Katt, Nancy Allen, John Travolta, Betty Buckley

Carrie White is your average high school student, dealing with the confusion of her burgeoning womanhood, yet she faces additional obstacles. While at school, she is tormented relentlessly by her classmates. At home, she is abused by her religious zealot mother. However, unbeknownst to anyone, she also possesses the ability to move things with her mind.

Directed with bold, spellbinding style by Brian DePalma, CARRIE is one of the genre's all-time classics. There has been some debate over whether it can even be classified as "horror", but I'd argue that it can. A fiery third act notwithstanding, the horror comes not only from the supernatural facets, but from the abject cruelty that is shown to our protagonist through no fault of her own.

In her most iconic role to date, Sissy Spacek is marvelous as the put-upon Carrie, instantly sympathetic as a meek, intelligent girl who cannot find safety anywhere she turns. But Spacek doesn't play her as bitter or as a victim, but rather a young woman of depth and altruism, one who could easily realize her potential if only she were treated with dignity.

Towering over the exceptional supporting cast is Piper Laurie as Carrie's mother, Margaret, whose own past colors her view of Carrie as the essence of sin. By imbuing this role with pathos, frightening credibility and just the right amount of theatrical panache, Laurie has given us one of the screen's most haunting villains. A monologue where Margaret tearfully discloses the baseness of Carrie's conception is a showstopper.

Everyone knows of the classic prom scene, and it is imaginatively conceived, shot, and edited, awash in deep red tones and wisely never gratuitous. But even until this point, CARRIE is as compelling as it is harrowing, putting us squarely in the title character's shoes and imploring that we side with her, even when her retribution takes a tragic step towards imprudence.

Minor changes were made to the original text, but this adaptation remains true to the essence of Stephen King's debut novel. CARRIE is a superior example of how to translate a story from one medium to another without losing any of its heartbreaking power. (**** out of ****)

THE CONJURING: THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT (2021)

Directed by Michael Chaves

Cast: Patrick Wilson, Vera Farmiga, John Noble, Ruairi O'Connor, Sarah Catherine Hook, Eugenie Bondurant

Paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren take on the case of a young man who has been arrested for a murder he doesn't remember committing. While their first conclusion is demonic possession, they come to suspect that a curse was deliberately summoned by someone among the living.

After the enormous success of the first two CONJURING films, a second sequel was inevitable and, eight years later, we finally have one, though without the directorial finesse of James Wan. This time, Michael Chaves, who directed 2019's regrettable THE CURSE OF LA LLORONA, takes over, and it is to this film's slight detriment.

The problem is that, unlike the first two films, we don't get much time with the "victim" Arne Johnson and his fiancée, Debbie. Whereas we got to know the Perron and Hodgson families very well, the supporting characters here are kept at an arm's length, as solid as Ruairi O'Connor and Sarah Hook are in their performances.

Moreover, director Chaves doesn't have Wan's patience or gift for staging scares, over-relying on rapid editing rather than allowing the scenes breathe and the scares to sneak up on the viewer. Nearly every jump is telegraphed. The film might move faster than the occasionally draggy CONJURING 2, but tension is sacrificed.

This isn't to say that the film is without merit. In keeping with the series' tradition, screenwriter David Leslie Johnson takes a pre-existing case and embellishes it to movie scale, and the details are certainly interesting, with the Warrens seeking to prove the existence of Satan in order to keep the apparent murderer, Arne, from receiving the death penalty. This entry is the darkest of the three, with little room for humor or levity. And in fairness, there are a handful of effective scenes, especially one set in a morgue, and another in an underground lair, where Ed and Lorraine find themselves pitted against each other.

But what makes THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT worth seeing, what ultimately makes all of them worth seeing, is Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga as the Warrens. Even if you don't quite believe what's happening on-screen, the love that Ed and Lorraine share, and the chemistry of Wilson and Farmiga, is always palpable and entirely convincing. (**1/2 out of ***)

THE EXORCIST (1973)

Directed by William Friedkin

Cast: Ellen Burstyn, Jason Miller, Linda Blair, Max von Sydow, Lee J. Cobb, Mercedes McCambridge

Regan, the young daughter of film actress Chris MacNeil, begins to display violent, abnormal behavior that psychiatric and physical evaluations fail to explain. Father Karras, a priest with his own crisis, reluctantly agrees to help, along with the eventual assistance of the elderly Father Merrin, in what seems to be an occurrence of demonic possession.

Many horror films can provide a few sudden jolts, yet few hold the ability to haunt the viewer after the closing credits have rolled. Even works such as 1976's *THE OMEN*, which draws upon similar themes, does not have the weight that William Peter Blatty's story so effectively conveys. But these are the very reasons why this particular piece was greeted with both acclaim and outrage in its 1973 release and continues to endure today.

With its unmatched combination of a superior acting, ingenious filmmaking (as credited to director William Friedkin), and harrowing confrontations, *THE EXORCIST* is a rare film whose cultural significance and iconography is matched only by its pedigree. The memorable scenes within are plentiful: the vomiting on Father Karras, Regan's self-mutilation with the crucifix, the Ouija board introduction to "Captain Howdy", the infamous spider-walk down the stairs. All of the action accumulates in the titular practice, an intense final battle between good and evil, with Father Karras and Father Merrin attempting to concentrate whilst the demon inside Regan hurls out insults both grotesque and personally invasive.

Ellen Burstyn imbues the role of Chris MacNeil with a fierce, motherly devotion. It is clear from the beginning that she loves her daughter unconditionally and finds it difficult to reconcile the fact that her daughter is now a vessel for hatred and decay. Jason Miller is excellent as the tortured, introspective Father Karras, whose disbelief in the supernatural is turned on its head once put in front of Regan for the first time. Linda Blair is sweet and affable as Regan before she is possessed, but the cast member who perhaps leaves the biggest impression is not seen in the film nor in the ending credits. Academy Award winner Mercedes McCambridge plays the deranged voice of the demon(s) inside Regan, giving the audience an unsettling taste of what Hell, itself just might sound like.

The Oscar-winning sound design effectively draws the audience into the middle of the horrific voices and chaos that abound the proceedings. Once the demon's acidic presence manifests itself on Regan's skin and face, the astonishing make-up is appropriately horrific. Filmed well before the age of advanced CGI effects, the creators of *THE EXORCIST* used ingenuity to come up with simple yet groundbreaking mechanics. One particularly head-

spinning moment is a great example of this. The tasteful production values and on-location setups of DC only serve to reinforce the realism of the events being shown.

The timelessness of THE EXORCIST is due in large part to the universal fear it examines: torment by an inexplicable, evil force. It taps into these themes with emotion and humanity, preying upon deep-seated religious beliefs in the most visceral, entertaining ways possible. A great film can make the audience accept the fantastical. A great horror film can scare them within that same framework. But THE EXORCIST is a rarity: a masterpiece that swiftly accomplishes both. Terrifying, gut-wrenching, and ultimately redemptive, THE EXORCIST will remain a standard by which all other horror movies are judged for generations to come. (**** out of ****)

THE FOG (1980)

Directed by John Carpenter

Cast: Adrienne Barbeau, Tom Atkins, Jamie Lee Curtis, Hal Holbrook, Janet Leigh, Nancy Loomis, Charles Cyphers

On the eve of its centennial commemoration, the coastal burg of Antonio Bay is approached by an inexplicable fog bank, moving against the wind. Concealed within is a group of phantoms with a score to settle, a grievance tied directly to the town's origin.

John Carpenter's follow-up to his successful (but not, at that time, iconic) HALLOWEEN is something that we rarely see in American cinema: an old-school, no-frills ghost story. THE FOG may be tonally quite different to the 1978 slasher, but the filmmaker's command of style and mood is ever-present.

The screenplay is, to be honest, not its strongest aspect. The motivation of the specters makes sense, but the way this information is disclosed clashes with the film's otherwise more ambiguous nature. And because the ensemble of characters is so large, very few of them are drawn with much nuance.

This leaves the superbly qualified cast - including Tom Atkins, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Janet Leigh - to bring a human element to the horror. Best of all is Adrienne Barbeau as radio DJ Stevie Wayne, able to see the fog approaching from her lighthouse studio and attempting to warn the town. The way Barbeau transitions back-and-forth between her sultry airwaves personality and simply being a mother, who then becomes desperate to save her son, is flawless.

In terms of atmosphere, very few can match THE FOG. Filmed in 2:35:1 aspect ratio, Carpenter takes delicious advantage of the location, framing Antonio Bay with great detail in both the day and especially nighttime scenes, which casts unnatural, spine-tingling splashes of blue and green across the proceedings. Finally, the practical effects used to bring the fog to life are impeccably subtle and well-judged, as even the more theatrical flourishes work to give the "villains" (they are right to be angry) more personality.

Bookended with a campfire story narrated by the great John Houseman, THE FOG certainly has the aura of a spooky tale that one would recite in that exact scenario. As the title suggests, the film is intoxicating and deliberate, gradually enwrapping the viewer before they even realize it. (** out of ***)

FRIDAY THE 13th (1980)

Directed by Sean S. Cunningham

Cast: Adrienne King, Betsy Palmer, Harry Crosby, Peter Brouwer, Jeannine Taylor, Laurie Bartram, Kevin Bacon, Mark Nelson, Ari Lehman

Decades after a pair of unsolved murders and other incidents at Camp Crystal Lake, Steve Christy and a band of enthusiastic counselors arrive on-site to restore the camp to its original condition and welcome a new generation of campers. But someone has been watching them, and they have other plans for the group.

It is fascinating to put the massively successful, worldwide phenomenon that is the FRIDAY THE 13TH franchise into perspective, and to realize that it all began with a rather modest slasher that didn't involve the exceedingly recognizable, hulking mass of destruction Jason Voorhees at all.

After the success of independent horror films like 1978's HALLOWEEN, Sean S. Cunningham - who had, until that point, primarily directed comedies and domestic dramas - took it upon himself to take out an ad in Variety with the titular date blazing across it. No plot concept, no objectives, the title alone was enough to sell it. Once Cunningham collaborated with screenwriter Victor Miller, the pieces began to fall into place.

So, stripping away the many years and millions of dollars that this franchise has seen, how is this original film? It's not bad. Again, it's surprising how quaint and unwilling to take risks the original was. It is about as adherent to the formula we now know as any film that followed it and, although it did help define said formula, it is a body count movie and never appears interested in being much more than that. Which is completely fine with us, I might add.

Unlike HALLOWEEN, which took some time to find its legs at the box office, FRIDAY THE 13TH was a massive hit right out of the gate. Go figure, because the movie isn't particularly scary or exhibit much nudity. What it does have is a straightforward simplicity and some of the best, most graphic makeup effects this side of Mario Bava. Indeed, much of the film's impact is owed to Tom Savini, who took his cues from classics like BAY OF BLOOD and delivers the film's outrageously entertaining gore.

Cunningham's background as a theatre director comes in handy when dealing with dynamics between Steve and the counselors. The exception of jokester Ned notwithstanding, there's no obnoxious character in the bunch, and they all seem like people worth following for ninety minutes. As Alice, almost instantly pegged as the heroine due to her tomboyish nature and added depth, Adrienne King projects a grounded sensibility that is easy to root for. Jeanine Taylor is also fun to watch as vixen Marcie. Her monologue about a recurring nightmare is sensitively delivered, and she also pulls off a delicious Katharine Hepburn impression.

That is, unfortunately, where the positives for the craft of the film end. The cinematography by Barry Abrams is frustratingly two-dimensional and manages to make the beauty of rural New Jersey fall flat. In fact, there are numerous instances where a shot will contain nothing but the blackness of night and perhaps a white dot representing a flashlight. Harry Manfredini's string-laden score has moments of inspiration (ki-ki-ki, ma-ma-ma), but he's quoting Bernard Hermann for most of the running time.

Capping off on a positive note, veteran actress Betsy Palmer enters in the final act with, inarguably, the film's most enduring and gutsy performance. As Mrs. Voorhees, mother of a child named Jason who drowned at the camp many years ago, Palmer hissingly gives the roles everything that she has. And despite the climax's choppy pacing, Palmer and King are a worthy pair and the movie, not to mention the series, is all the better for their participation.

FRIDAY THE 13TH may not be the most original or savvy slasher out there - owing much to Carpenter, Bava, and DePalma, among others - but it is impossible not to acknowledge its place in genre history. And, lest we forget, the final minutes contain the frightening, spring-loaded introduction to a character we all know and love, and that definitely counts for something. (** out of ***)

HEREDITARY (2018)

Directed by Ari Aster

Cast: Toni Collette, Alex Wolff, Gabriel Byrne, Milly Shapiro, Ann Dowd

When their matriarch passes away, Annie and Steve, along with their children Peter and Charlie, are barely given room to grieve before it becomes clear that the family are part of a larger plan, a possibly sinister fate left behind by the grandmother.

Like a dark and destructive hurricane, Ari Aster's debut feature HEREDITARY leaves the viewer feeling empty and shocked as they reflect on the events that lead to the final seconds. A considerable part of Aster's impact as a filmmaker, further demonstrated in his 2019 follow-up MIDSOMMAR, is how the psychological truth of his characters informs and amplifies the story's more outlandish elements.

Acclaimed actress Toni Collette gives her finest performance to date as Annie Graham, a tour de force that should've merited an Oscar nomination, perhaps even a win. Annie is a deeply flawed woman, with a traumatic past that is divulged with clever precision, but Collette never lets us forget her humanity. Emmy Award winner Ann Dowd gives a memorable supporting performance as Joan, another woman in grief who purports to help Annie. The final standout is Alex Wolff, as tormented son Peter. The emotional range that Wolff's character is required to go to matches Collette's, scene for scene, and he is nothing short of exceptional.

Additional praise must go to cinematographer Pawel Pogorzelski and composer Colin Stetson, who work in tandem with Aster's vision to conjure up palpable tension and dread from start to finish. The characters are consistently framed in a manner akin to a dollhouse, the construction of which is Annie's pastime and coping mechanism. But it serves a larger thematic purpose, trapping the characters from the opening frames and manipulating them as pawns in a grander design.

The tragedy of HEREDITARY is that, though their communication does not cohere, the Grahams deeply love each other. It is why we fear for them as they head further into oblivion. But try as they might, this is a family that does not understand how to comfort or listen to each other. And that is before they are besieged upon by an evil force that they can't comprehend yet has been woven into the very fabric of their past, present, and grim future. (**** out of ****)

THE INNOCENTS (1961)

Directed by Jack Clayton

Cast: Deborah Kerr, Martin Stephens, Pamela Franklin, Megs Jenkins, Michael Redgrave

Kind-hearted governess Miss Giddens is tasked with caring for young Flora and Miles in their isolated family estate. Miss Giddens, herself the child of a minister and the product of a strict upbringing, means to connect with the children and earn their trust, but is soon overcome with the idea that the children are possessed by the spirits of their previous caretakers.

It's impossible to discuss ghost stories and psychological horror without mentioning Henry James' sparse yet thematically rich novella, "The Turn of the Screw". Over the years, this piece of gothic literature has been adapted for dramatic theatre, radio, opera, television (most recently Netflix's "The Haunting of Bly Manor") and film (2020's woefully misguided THE TURNING).

But for the finest cinematic adaptation, we need not look any further than Jack Clayton's 1961 masterpiece, THE INNOCENTS. Though Clayton's filmography up until this point was primarily romantic dramas and B-movies, THE INNOCENTS finds itself in a class of its own, faithful to James' original text while utilizing every aspect of the cinematic language to expand on its deeper meanings and tantalizing equivocations.

The screenplay, by William Archibald and Truman Capote, maintains the elegance and literacy of a stage play, the proceedings carefully crafted from Giddens' perspective. It is strictly through her eyes, and Deborah Kerr's marvelous performance, that we view the events, both mundane and frightening. Once she learns of the fervent, tragic affair of the now-deceased Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, Miss Giddens experiences an assortment of supernatural activity that seems to affect the children's behavior. Are the children possessed, or is this all merely projection on Miss Giddens' part, due to her own sexual repression? By design, we are left to question the validity of what we are seeing.

As mentioned before, Kerr is exceptional as the governess, and her performance is theatrical in the best sense. Matching her scene for scene, however, is Martin Stephens as Miles. His task is a great one, as he must constantly toe the line between threatening and innocuous, and Martin pulls this off with a dexterity far beyond his years.

When it comes to horror in the classic sense, very few can measure up to THE INNOCENTS, the troubling layers of the story done justice by Clayton's stellar direction. Freddie Francis' cinematography captures every shadow and candle flicker with astonishing precision. The musical score by George Auric and aggressive sound design work in tandem to heighten the atmosphere even further, while also exercising restraint when necessary. A game of hide-and-seek, for example, arrives to a terrifying payoff that all the more startling because of how

hushed it is. From start to finish, THE INNOCENTS is a trenchant and unnerving classic, rising in intensity before collapsing to the ground in utter despair. (**** out of ****)

IT FOLLOWS (2014)

Directed by David Robert Mitchell

Cast: Maika Monroe, Keir Gilchrist, Daniel Zovatto, Jake Weary, Olivia Luccardi, Lili Sepe

After having sex with her boyfriend, teenager Jay is drugged and bound. It is explained that she has now been afflicted: a shape-shifting entity will slowly follow her, and only her, until it can reach her. The only hope is to pass it on to someone else. Jay, with the help of her friends, must find a way to circumvent the curse before time runs out.

Coupling the suburban milieu of John Carpenter with the savage dismantling of innocence of Wes Craven, David Robert Mitchell's IT FOLLOWS offers a refreshing, thought-provoking take on the slasher formula which dusts off the cobwebs and repurposes the essential ingredients.

For decades, the modus operandi of this type of film was that sex equaled punishment. And with his clever screenplay, Mitchell turns subtext into the text, observing these age-old tropes while offering something entirely new. The notion of a killer who is not only invisible to everyone but the cursed, but can change appearance at will, is terrifying, and it's to Mitchell's credit as a director that he is able to exploit this concept for all its worth, right from the jarring, bone-snapping prelude. The only misfire is a too-elaborate climax.

When we first meet Maika Monroe's Jay, we see her floating in a pool, drifting aimlessly, passively allowing the world to gaze upon on. Monroe exhibits a youthful, carefree nature, which takes a sharp turn when she is cursed and has to start making decisions that could save her, or at least prolong her demise. As the character faces escalating adversities, Monroe's performance grows in complexity.

Mike Gioulakis's inspired cinematography keeps the shots wide enough to have the viewer constantly looking in the background, sympathizing in fear for the characters. The art direction combines fashion and technology from decades past, establishing a setting that feels familiar yet alien. Disasterpiece's synth-based score oscillates brilliantly between nostalgic beauty and nerve-shredding terror.

While the plot might seem like an obvious allegory for STDs, I think there is a larger point. It is no accident that the script seems to deliberately cut our young characters off from helpful resources, including their parents. The title doesn't simply refer to the persistent demon following Jay, but to the inevitability of her encroaching adulthood, and the many, fitful anxieties that will come as well. As both a tribute to and progression of the films that inspired it, IT FOLLOWS is nothing short of an uncanny, immersive experience. (**1/2 out of ***)

JAWS (1975)

Directed by Steven Spielberg

Cast: Roy Scheider, Richard Dreyfuss, Robert Shaw, Lorraine Gary, Murray Hamilton, Susan Backlinie, Jeffrey Voorhees

Based on the novel by Peter Benchley. After a series of grisly shark attacks centralize upon the coastal town of Amity, NY, it is up to police chief Martin Brody, marine biologist Matt Hooper, and vengeful shark hunter Quint to go it alone and stop the menace before more people die.

There is not much to be said about JAWS that hasn't already been said. It is among the tightest, most engaging and suspenseful horror films in history, and was almost single-handedly responsible for the conception of what we now know as the "summer blockbuster". But what's even more interesting is how close the film came to disaster. Wrestling with a twenty-five-foot animatronic that refused to work, burgeoning filmmaker Steven Spielberg made the creative choice during production to withhold the titular shark until the final act, when it was absolutely necessary. What resulted is a monster movie of the highest order, in large part because the "monster" itself is not shown too often.

This should not suggest, however, that Spielberg didn't know what he was doing. Coming off the modest success of his first two features, 1971's DUEL and 1974's THE SUGARLAND EXPRESS, Spielberg had already finely honed his skill for inducing anxiety and heightening the viewer's anticipation for an indefinable amount of time, which is put to exceptional use in JAWS. The opening scene is an iconic example of his craft, the wistfulness of a romantic tryst at dusk becomes nightmarish when free-spirited Chrissie rushes into the vast ocean alone.

JAWS is a masterpiece of storytelling, plain and simple, with a large portion of the credit going to editor Verna Fields for keeping the action taut and cutting around the logistical issues so that the seams never show. John Williams' score - with its low, rumbling strings to portend an oncoming attack of the shark - is one of the most recognizable and indispensable in horror history, alongside 1960's PSYCHO and 1978's HALLOWEEN.

As Chief Brody, a respected member of his community who must circumvent Amity's elected officials in their effort to downplay the danger at hand, Roy Scheider gives one of his finest and most relatable performances. Brody is a finely written protagonist that does not fall into any stubborn clichés. He is fallible and human, and an understated scene where his younger son, Sean, lovingly matches his expressions and movements further exposes his vulnerability.

It must be noted, the back half of the film is a three-person show and the other two actors in the triad are Scheider's equal. Richard Dreyfuss is terrifically funny as the bookish, logic-bound Hooper. Perhaps finest of all is Robert Shaw as Quint, a performance which deserved at least an

Oscar nomination. Arriving well into the running time, Shaw's impeccable drawl and brooding physical choices bring the character to life, and the monologue about his experiences aboard the USS Indianapolis during WWII is one of the finest and most haunting scenes ever put to celluloid.

This is to say nothing of Lorraine Gary as Martin's devoted wife Ellen, or Murray Hamilton as the criminally negligent Mayor Vaughn, or the rest of the ensemble who believably fill out the locale of Amity. Bill Butler's expert cinematography makes terrific use of not only the location shooting (Martha's Vineyard doubling for Long Island), but some of the most vibrant and attractive nautical footage, both above and below the water, including novelty shots where the camera represents the POV of the shark.

These disparate elements bring us to an extended, unbearably tense climax, where the three men must put aside their personal differences and work together to destroy their mutual adversary. JAWS may have been one of the first films that Spielberg ever made, but it was and remains an indisputable classic of the horror genre, and handedly established him as a master of his craft. After all, it's no accident that generations after the film's release, to this very day, beachgoers are afraid to put even a single foot into the water. (**** out of ****)

JOY RIDE (2001)

Directed by John Dahl

Cast: Paul Walker, Steve Zahn, Leelee Sobieski, Jessica Bowman, Michael McCleery, Jim Beaver

While on a road trip across the Midwest, estranged brothers Lewis and Fuller decide to play a cruel prank via CB radio on a loner truck driver, known only by his handle, Rusty Nail. When the prank goes horribly wrong, and Rusty Nail discovers who they are, the brothers find themselves driving for their lives.

At first glance, one might think that JOY RIDE is a remake of Steven Spielberg's debut feature DUEL, and the comparisons are apt. But I'd argue that this is just as much a unique spin on the babysitter/"call is coming from inside the house" formula, ditching the phone for a CB radio and a suburban house for the open road. Meticulously crafted by director John Dahl, JOY RIDE takes this simple premise and fleshes it out in creative, memorable ways.

While J.J. Abrams and Clay Tarver's taut screenplay doesn't hold back on the twists and wry humor, our protagonists are developed more through their actions and reactions rather than expository dialogue. Steve Zahn and the late Paul Walker are terrific as hotheaded Fuller and his more sensible brother Lewis, respectively. While the prank they indulge in is deeply foolish, we are assuredly on their side throughout.

The airtight editing by Glen Scantlebury and Eric L. Beason scarcely gives the viewer a chance to catch their bearings, as Marco Beltrami's riveting score quotes Bernard Hermann with the best of them. Jeffrey Jur's cinematography expertly takes advantage of the expansive midwestern scenery, always concealing possible threat behind the glow of the sporadic neon signs.

Speaking of threat, while the actor who plays the voice of Rusty Nail won't be revealed here, horror fans know him well, and his menacing line deliveries are unquestionably the most memorable in the film.

While JOY RIDE begins as a road movie then covertly transitions into paranoia noir, the gears shift once more when the brothers pick up Lewis's longtime friend Venna, played by a luminous Leelee Sobieski. From there, the film's identity as a horror film is firmly etched, as the characters endure a more lethal wave of terror and escalating stakes. JOY RIDE never pretends to be high art, but hits the target repeatedly with precision, confidence, and nerve-wracking tension. (**1/2 out of ***)

THE LOVED ONES (2009)

Directed by Sean Byrne

Cast: Xavier Samuel, Robin McLeavy, John Brumpton, Victoria Thaine, Richard Wilson, Jessica McNamee

High school senior Brent is in a depressed, self-destructive state following the accidental death of his father. After he rejects an invitation to the senior prom by wallflower Lola, Brent is kidnapped by her and her father, and must now find the will to survive.

A quirky, suspenseful blend of 1986's PRETTY IN PINK and 1990's MISERY, THE LOVED ONES is an entry with quite a bit on its mind, and more pathos than one would expect. By distilling the plot to its essentials, and not bogging things down in unnecessary exposition or explanation, Australian writer-director Sean Byrne has crafted a taut and perversely funny debut.

The film is violent, to be sure, but just when it seems that things may become excessive, a judicious use of restraint or an inspired stroke of dark comedy will circumvent the action. THE LOVED ONES recalls the fearless, rowdy spirit of the 80's, a time in which a committed group of filmmakers and actors pushed boundaries with the intent of taking the audience along for the ride. But at the same time, it is strikingly modern, forging its own identity with no aspirations of being a throwback.

Xavier Samuel is stellar as Brent, his eyes and physicality carrying the weight of the performance, as his character is bound and unable to speak most of the time. As lethal Daddy Stone, John Brumpton is credibly fearsome while also uncomfortably hilarious at times. By and large, though, the film belongs to Robin McLeavy, who embodies the deranged Lola. Though she appears mousy and submissive at first, do not be fooled. She deserves to join the pantheon of great horror villains, and that is not hyperbole.

Byrne's sensibility as a filmmaker propels the story with thoughtfulness and efficiency, while Simon Chapman's cinematography makes great use of prolonged takes, particularly those that contrast blood with the glow of a disco ball. There are few contemporary horror movies - let alone of the B.T.K. variety - that have something empowering to say about the juxtaposing extremities of human nature. THE LOVED ONES is one such example, and among the most satisfying films the genre has seen in years. (**1/2 out of ***)

MALIGNANT (2021)

Directed by James Wan

Cast: Annabelle Wallis, Maddie Hasson, George Young, Michole Briana White, Jake Abel

After the brutal murder of her husband, Madison finds herself under intense scrutiny when it appears she can see other murders happening as they occur. With the authorities closing in, and caring sister Sydney as her only ally, Madison must look back to her traumatic childhood for the shocking truth.

With iconic works like *SAW*, *THE CONJURING* and *INSIDIOUS* under his belt, James Wan has secured his place as one of the most important and successful horror filmmakers of our time. In the midst of his stint with the DC universe and big-budget superhero projects like *AQUAMAN*, Wan had stated that his intention was to go back to his spooky, straightforward, thrill-ride roots. *MALIGNANT* is the result of this objective, the most audacious horror wide release of this year, but also the most exasperating.

MALIGNANT opens with a bang: a seaside hospital in chaos as someone or something tears its way through the staff. The scene is rife with screaming, screeching strings, dramatic camera flourishes, and declamatory line readings. It's a lot, but the hope is that the tone will settle down as the story unfolds and the pieces start to connect. Not quite the case, as most of what follows is set to 11, with very little modulation. *DEAD SILENCE*, one of Wan's lesser-known efforts, might have been silly as well, but it also crept under the skin in surprisingly effective ways.

A couple of sequences - such as when Madison's husband inspects the living room for an intruder, or when a seemingly immaterial surgeon is stalked in his apartment - scratch the itch for taut suspense and satisfying payoffs. By and large, however, the restraint and tonal elasticity that Wan is known for is nowhere to be found. Technical specs are solid yet unremarkable, save for Michael Burgess's opulent cinematography, paying affectionate homage to DePalma and Argento with its complex setups and highly contrasted bursts of red.

Annabelle Wallis, previously seen as the lead in 2014's *ANNABELLE*, is serviceable here as Madison, her expressive eyes reflecting the horror of her dire circumstances. The role isn't written with any specificity, perhaps by design, which keeps her at arm's length from the viewer. Wallis is easily the finest in the cast, which isn't saying much when the rest of performances range from adequate to amateurish, as if they've just received the script and are reciting the lines phonetically.

And then, the climax. *MALIGNANT*'s linchpin, its ace in the hole. Revelations of Madison's past are disclosed, and her present situation plunges to its nadir. Then, with little warning, Wan and screenwriter Akela Cooper unleash a torrent of gonzo violence and kinetic insanity that the film only hints at up to this point, abandoning the phantasmic giallo influences and landing squarely in the world of Verhoeven and Wachowski. If there is any reason for me to recommend

MALIGNANT, it is the sheerchutzpah of the final thirty minutes. The journey to get there, unfortunately, is every bit as loud but only a fraction as compelling. (** out of ****)

THE MOTHMAN PROPHECIES (2002)

Directed by Brad Anderson

Cast: Richard Gere, Laura Linney, Will Patton, Alan Bates, Debra Messing

Loosely based on the novel by John Keel. Mary Klein and her husband John, a Washington Post reporter, are driving one night when Mary is startled by something that results in a car accident, killing her. Two years after, John awakens to find that he has somehow driven to the town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, six hours west of his intended destination. There, he discovers that numerous townspeople have seen something tall, dark, and ominous in and around their homes, whispering to them.

Between 1966 and 1967, the people of Point Pleasant did indeed report sightings of a man-sized creature who would relay to them cryptic messages that corresponded to newsworthy catastrophes yet to come. This public frenzy cumulated in the collapse of the Silver Bridge on U.S. Route 35, and although many of these accounts have been debunked in the years since, the fascination with the case continues to this day.

With THE MOTHMAN PROPHECIES, director Mark Pellington crafts a spine-tingling fictionalization that pirouettes around the inexplicable. It is true that in the 60's, people claimed to have seen this figure. And free from the constraints of having to offer explanations or even conjecture about what happened then, this story - scripted by Richard Hatem - centers on John and his examination of what could be described as a shared psychosis, or what could perhaps be supernatural. Either resolution is chilling in its sociological implications. The film is shrouded in dread, aided by ominous cinematography and truly unforgettable sound effects. Fred Murphy's camerawork aptly captures the isolation of Point Pleasant, framing traffic lights and beams of moonlight as if they were malevolently watchful eyes.

A part of John's investigation brings him to the home of Alexander Leeds, a conspiracy theorist, played by the inimitable Alan Bates. Leeds claims to have once heard voices that precipitated disasters, similar to the people of Point Pleasant, and explains how his obsession has cost him everything over the years. Bates only gets two scenes, yet his disturbing performance keys into the inherent dangers of prying too deeply into things we aren't meant to understand.

The suave and charming Richard Gere might not be an obvious choice to play the withdrawn, inquisitive, grief-stricken John Klein, but he embodies the part very well, and it's one of his finest performances. Laura Linney is predictably good as Sgt. Connie Parker, initially skeptical when listening to John's experiences, only to find herself in a deadly mystery of her own. As the ill-fated Mary Klein, Debra Messing's screentime is brief but memorable, and her presence is felt throughout the rest of the film like an apparition.

The centerpiece which brings the film's cosmic horror to new levels is a sequence where John receives a call from a distorted voice named Indrid Cold, purporting to be the Mothman itself. Through John's measured yet increasingly frightened questioning, it becomes apparent that Cold can not only identify objects around the motel room that John is staying in, but that it knows John is plagued with questions about his wife's untimely death. Cold reassures John, he will see her in time. "What do you look like?", John asks. "It depends on who is looking."

Far be it for me to surmise whether the Mothman exists or existed. Such things are impossible to prove, I have no interest in broaching that topic, and neither does this film. What makes THE MOTHMAN PROPHECIES so effective is precisely because it only shows you glimpses of the possibilities and explains even less than that. As for the title creature itself, it is only seen in drawings and in silhouette, described by the people who have seen it. Through sound and suggestion, Pellington astutely captures the tenacious, troublesome feeling we all experience on occasion: that the horrible thing in the corner of your peripheral vision isn't just a trick of the mind. (**1/2 out of ***)

MULHOLLAND DRIVE (2001)

Directed by David Lynch

Cast: Naomi Watts, Laura Elena Harring, Justin Theroux

A beautiful woman survives an attempt on her life, only to wake up with no memory of who or where she is. She stumbles into an apartment to seek refuge. Meanwhile, Betty has just arrived in Los Angeles to become an actress when she finds the woman - now calling herself 'Rita', in reference to a framed Rita Hayworth poster she noticed - hiding in her aunt's home. At first skeptical, Betty decides to help Rita discover who she is, and why someone would try to kill her.

In the early 1990s, auteurist filmmaker David Lynch made the jump to television with a wildly successful first season of the murder-mystery "Twin Peaks". Unfortunately, Lynch's relationship with the network ABC soured during season two. This resulted in a highly compromised string of episodes, culminating in the show's cancellation until its sensational revival in 2018.

With all of that in mind, it comes as a surprise that in 1999, ABC again offered money to Lynch to collaborate on another show, a Los Angeles-based thriller. The series didn't get picked up, but Lynch took the pilot footage, produced over an hour of additional scenes, and what was delivered to cinephiles at the turn of the 21st century is nothing short of an astonishing feat. A self-described "poison Valentine" to Hollywood, MULHOLLAND DRIVE is a twisty, terrifying ride, beginning with that most irresistible of plot hooks: who am I, and how did I get here?

Tremulously scored by Angelo Badalamenti, the film begins as an old-fashioned noir, but with some intriguing, seemingly unrelated detours. A man nervously discloses a nightmare he had about a monster residing behind a 1950's diner, and he summons up the courage to see if his visions are true. Simultaneously, Adam Keshner, a hotshot movie director, is being intimidated by criminal forces to cast a lead actress that he doesn't want. As Adam, Justin Theroux nails the smarmy attitude of a man who can't help but laugh at the utter lack of control he has over his life and career, until it becomes clear that his lack of cooperation might come at the greatest price of all.

However, it is the kinship between Betty and Rita, lensed by Peter Deming's superbly opulent cinematography, that emerges as the core of MULHOLLAND DRIVE. In her first major role, Naomi Watts is nothing short of astonishing as Betty Elms. Initially, her characterization seems overly enthusiastic and artificial, but this is all by design. Betty is headstrong, cunning, talented, and attended by nearly inconceivable good fortune. She has come to Hollywood with one purpose: to be a star. Her long-anticipated audition for a production team is a tour de force, the rawness of her delivery in sharp contrast to the cornfed girl we met earlier. And when the enigma of Rita falls into her lap, she cannot help but try on the persona of sleuth as well. Betty and Rita's investigation leads to some precarious answers, allowing the women to find safety in one another.

The labyrinthine mystery comes to a head when Betty and Rita attend a late-night cabaret at Club Silencio. Shrouded in an undulating blue light, accompanied by the sounds of dissonant jazz, the master of ceremonies proclaims "No hay banda" ("There is no band")... and yet, we hear a band. Out of the darkness of the wing space, singer Rebekah Del Rio saunters to the microphone and delivers a pleading, mournful rendition of Roy Orbison's "Crying". Her torch song is so wrenching that the two women hold each other and weep. But the gut-punch is yet to come. Several, in fact.

Then, nearly two hours into this invested narrative, something happens. Character names change, their personalities and dynamics shift, the superficiality of the performances roughens, and the plot as we knew it dissolves to make way for a new one. How, you might ask, could these two divergent halves form a cohesive story? They do indeed cohere, and the final third is what imparts the deeper meaning of MULHOLLAND DRIVE's spine-tingling, hypnotic artistry. Half of the thrill in revisiting it over and over again is deducing how all of these tantalizingly crafted pieces fit together.

David Lynch's mastery of his craft is on full display here, focused and purposeful in a way that rewards attentive viewers, and then some. There is an uncanny, hallucinatory facade to the proceedings that we can all relate to on some level, when elements from our reality are repurposed to convey far more uncomfortable truths. The verities of this film promulgate the corrosive nature of jealousy, the guilt of irreversible decisions, and the tragedy of shattered dreams, all exposed under the garish sheen of Hollywood glamour. After all, when one's life is but a waking nightmare, where better to seek commiseration than in the movies? MULHOLLAND DRIVE is a cinematic masterpiece for the ages and, in my humble opinion, the best film of the 2000s. (**** out of ****)

THE OAK ROOM (2021)

Directed by Cody Calahan

Cast: RJ Mitte, Ari Millen, Martin Roach, David Ferry, Nicholas Campbell

During a raging blizzard, drifter Steve goes back to his hometown to retrieve his father's cremated remains from bartender and family friend, Paul. Angered by Steve's callous return, Paul is not about to let him disappear again without a debt being paid first. Steve, however, offers to tell him a story as compensation.

"I've got a story for you," a provocative invitation that can yield many disparate outcomes and consequences. It is typically meant to include the listener in a humorous anecdote, or for telling tales out of school. But in Cody Calahan's sinister thriller, THE OAK ROOM, it is the hook with which to lure the viewer in, layering one twist after another, not allowing the tension to abate until the closing shot.

With a razor-sharp screenplay by Peter Genoway (based on his stage play) and directed for maximum tension by Calahan, THE OAK ROOM begins with a deadly confrontation, devoid of context, and heads off from there. Although we don't know who is involved or why this is happening, the opening seconds ignite a threat of violence which hangs like a specter over each interaction that follows. Calahan is aided in this regard by cinematographer Jeff Maher, composer Steph Copeland, and certainly editor Mike Gallant. For a film with multiple inherent restrictions, and stories within stories being told at times, it is never boring or confusing for a second.

RJ Mitte, of "Breaking Bad" fame, is the most recognizable face in the cast and he is quite fine as the mysterious Steve, but his role is essentially a narrative conduit for other, more intriguing figures. Peter Outerbridge is exceptional as Paul, the years of resentment and anger - at Steve, and perhaps himself - boiling over in surprisingly varied ways. But it is Ari Millen who viewers will probably remember most, portraying another bartender, Michael. Millen played this role onstage for its theatrical incarnation, and his performance here is indelible to the film's success.

As with many good stories, the power of perception plays a vital role in THE OAK ROOM. Not just the perception that the characters have of each other, but the perception we have of the characters, and how it shifts as the events continually unfold. And sometimes, the true horror comes not from what is seen or said, but what has been omitted until the time is right to reveal it. Sometimes, the devil really is in the details. (***) out of (***)

PET SEMATARY (1989)

Directed by Mary Lambert

Cast: Dale Midkiff, Denise Crosby, Fred Gwynne, Blaze Berdahl, Brad Greenquist, Andrew Hubatsek, Susan Blommaert, Miko Hughes

Based on the novel by Stephen King. The Creed family relocates from a midwestern metropolis to the small town of Ludlow, ME, once their patriarch, Dr. Louis Creed, accepts a role as physician at the local university. While exploring the land they now call home, friendly neighbor Jud opts to show them a pet cemetery, where generations of children have laid their beloved animals to rest. The topics of death and grief incite different reactions from the family members. Not soon after, one tragedy strikes the Creeds, then another, and then another, until Louis and Rachel - along with their children Ellie and toddler Gage - are lowered deep into a hellish spiral.

Once the family has settled in and learned of the pet cemetery (innocently spelled "sematary" in this case), it isn't long before the family cat, Church, is run over by a semi. While Louis is not sure how to explain what happened to his daughter, Rachel is happy to ignore the topic altogether, for reasons we've yet to learn. Surmising that Ellie is too young to lose her cat, Jud tells Louis of a cursed burial ground, beyond the cemetery, which holds the power of reanimation. Jud has firsthand knowledge of what happens when an animal is buried there, but he helps Louis complete the deed anyway. It is that consequential decision which sets their mutual downfall into motion.

One of King's earliest works, PET SEMATARY is also recognized as the novel that King dropped in the middle of writing because it scared him so much. Considering he was already a father of three at the time, his apprehension makes perfect sense, for this story is nothing if not the wrenching destruction of a family. More specifically, of a man who loses everything he holds dear, and whose hubristic decisions all but bury him along with it. Director Mary Lambert, one of the very few women at the time to helm a major horror release, does not shy away from the novel's pitch-black heart, but embraces it and gives this adaptation (scripted by King himself) a steadily increasing dread, with tilted shots, uncomfortable close-ups, and thick blankets of fog to enhance the nightmarish unease.

If there is a discernible flaw in PET SEMATARY, it is the lead performances. Dale Midkiff has some good moments as Dr. Louis Creed, but he strikes me as wooden when he should be soulful, and over-the-top when a more subdued approach might have been more impactful. The role of Louis is rich with nuance, and his arc is among the most tragic in King's catalog, but Midkiff seems out of his depth at times. Denise Crosby fares a bit better as Rachel, a woman whose traumatic past prevents her from looking death in the face, let alone discussing it. Midkiff and Crosby, for all their effort, share little chemistry with each other.

Rachel's character is further defined by a loss she experienced as a child, when her older sister, Zelda, was diagnosed with spinal meningitis. Her recollection of how her sister painfully died,

surpassed only by the guilt of not seeking emergency care as it was happening, comes back to literally haunt her. Portrayed by male actor Andrew Hubatsek, Zelda is a truly horrific specter, not just visually but in what she represents. Brad Greenquist is also memorable as Victor Pascow, the ghost of a patient that died on Louis's watch, and whose appearances to Louis portend a dark ending for the Creeds.

Miko Hughes, barely two years-old when this was filmed, is unforgettable as Gage. He is sweet and unaffected in the first half, but a blend of performance, clever cutting, and keen direction make him a credible threat by the climax. Blaze Berdahl is fine in a tricky role as Ellie, but also has a tendency of overstating her more emotional scenes. And finally, Fred Gwynne is simply excellent as Jud Crandall. Gwynne successfully harnesses the affable, comforting aura he exuded as Herman Munster on television, but adds a tormented quality to it as well.

The thematic layers of PET SEMATARY are too numerable to outline in an abbreviated review, no surprise that it is one of King's most enduring works, as gruesome and dire as it is. And while the film cannot possibly match the novel in terms of detail, the collaboration between Lambert and King assures that this adaptation comes awfully close. PET SEMATARY may be a sterling work of supernatural horror, but the topics it explores, and the difficult questions it asks, stem from our human fascination with fate, mortality, and playing God, even when logic tells us to run the other way. (**1/2 out of ***)

RELIC (2020)

Directed by Natalie Erika James

Cast: Emily Mortimer, Bella Heathcote, Robyn Nevin

When Kay is told that her mother Edna has not been seen by the neighbors in a few days, she and her daughter Sam travel to Edna's house to initiate a search. Edna finally shows up, but her dementia prevents her from disclosing where she has been all this time. Something, however, has returned with her.

Many of the best, most impactful horror movies reveal thematic layers that extend beneath the superficial, and beyond the genre conventions. In recent years, films like HEREDITARY, THE BABADOOK, and GET OUT made such a strong impression because they not only fulfilled expectations of the audience, but they keyed into uncomfortable aspects of the everyday human experience.

That trajectory is continued with RELIC. In this case, it deals with the heart-wrenching realities of dementia, not just from the perspective of the person living with it, but also the family who bear witness. RELIC gets this absolutely right and goes one step further to imagine the gradual loss of memory in clever, cinematic ways, like a creature always hidden in shadow, or mold that slowly envelops a generational heirloom.

Emily Mortimer and Bella Heathcote are excellent as mother and daughter, but the clear standout is Australian stage actress Robyn Nevin as grandmother Edna. Nevin is able to show us remnants of the character as she may have been before her decline, and it is poignant to watch her navigate between those states, but all the more unsettling when she gives in to occasional fits of rage.

Credit must be given to writer-director Natalie Erika James for artfully crafting this impressive debut. While the first and second act are deliberately slow, they succeed in both involving and disorienting the audience, giving only hints to where the plot may go, but not tipping the hand until horrific revelations become imminent. RELIC is a rewarding experience that is unsettling, mournful, and ultimately profound. (**** out of ****)

RETURN TO HORROR HIGH (1987)

Directed by Bill Froehlich

Cast: Lori Lethin, Brendan Hughes, Alex Rocco, Scott Jacoby, Richard Brestoff, Andy Romano, Maureen McCormick, George Clooney

RETURN TO HORROR HIGH (1987) Several years after the 1982 massacre at Crippen High School, wherein no suspects were apprehended, a micro-budget film crew opts to mount an exploitative dramatization of the ghastly events within the very building that the murders took place. Amid creative differences and general on-set confusion, a killer begins to pick off the team, and it seems to be the same person who committed the initial crime years before.

Whereas 1996's SCREAM is commonly known as the ultimate in meta-horror, this is a formula which began to take shape with 1981's all-out parody STUDENT BODIES. Following behind it is 1982's SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE, 1986's APRIL FOOLS DAY, and then we arrive at 1987's RETURN TO HORROR HIGH, a high-concept slasher which attempts to juggle numerous tangents at once, unsuccessfully executing any of them. The film has maintained a cult status particularly due to a couple of terrifically performed supporting roles: Maureen McCormick ('Marcia' from the "Brady Bunch" TV series) as a perpetually horny officer, and George Clooney as a foppish day player.

There is knowing humor to the screenplay insofar as it understands the inherent difficulty of making a film, let alone one based on real events and without a substantial budget. One funny exchange has an extra veiled with prosthetics asking what his motivation is, only for the director to respond with "What motivation? You're a corpse." That kind of comedy works in the film's favor, it is simple, direct, and anyone can appreciate the punchline. Where things get murkier is the total lack of internal logic that becomes even more apparent when police - actual police, not actors - are brought onto the set and all credibility goes out, for multiple reasons that head into spoiler territory.

In spite of admirable narrative ambition, director Bill Froehlich lacks the dexterity to handle the multiple layers and clashing tones of his own script. Attempting to retroactively parse what happens within the "real" world of the plot uncovers a plethora of plot holes, some of which might be forgiven if the film managed to be funny or scary with any consistency. Furthermore, there is no aesthetic difference between the thread of the film crew, the film within the film, and the sporadic flashbacks which purport to show us glimpses of what actually happened in 1982. This is an issue when the viewer is left more confused than enthralled by the proceedings before them. RETURN TO HORROR HIGH is noteworthy in ways it tries to bend the format, but it seems to simultaneously be trying too hard and not hard enough. (*1/2 out of ****)

SAINT MAUD (2021)

Directed by Rose Glass

Cast: Morfydd Clark, Jennifer Ehle, Lily Frazer

Maud, a hospice nurse and devout Catholic with a traumatic past, is hired to take care of Amanda, a former ballerina now living with terminal cancer. As Maud and Amanda bond, Maud is overcome with the notion that her life's purpose is to save Amanda's soul.

The term "elevated horror" has been met with some derision by genre fans, and understandably so. It implies a sense of superiority and pomposity that isn't necessarily called for in horror. However, it is suitable for independent film distributor A24. The company has made it a priority to select works that acknowledge genre conventions while at the same time offer a bolder, more challenging vision.

SAINT MAUD, the debut feature of writer-director Rose Glass and A24's latest, is an intoxicating entry of the "religious horror" subgenre, joining the likes of ROSEMARY'S BABY and THE EXORCIST. But unlike THE EXORCISM OF EMILY ROSE, which straddled the line between perception and reality with ambiguity, SAINT MAUD is extremely clear in what it says about a devotion to faith unbalanced by a lack of human connection.

Over the course of the film, we learn the origin of Maud's trauma and about her unshakable belief in a greater salvation. Her increasingly warped and unreliable perspective is made more tangible by Glass's expert direction and Ben Fordesman's foreboding cinematography.

Morfydd Clark gives an extraordinary breakthrough performance in the title role, downplaying Maud's inherent madness and accentuating her vulnerability. Tony Award-winning stage actress Jennifer Ehle is beguiling as Amanda, the object of Maud's fixation and a complex figure in her own right. It is rare when a screenplay consists mostly of a deep, philosophical dialogue between two female characters, let alone with this level of nuance.

The more discernible horror elements do not reveal themselves until the third act, where Maud's convictions take her to places we'd rather not be privy to. It is, indeed, difficult to watch. SAINT MAUD is a thought-provoking, haunting film, and arrives to us already feeling like a modern classic. Despite the appearance, it is not a condemnation of religion, but instead, an examination of religious delusions which psychosis can, and does, take to far more harmful extremes. (**** out of ****)

SESSION 9 (2001)

Directed by Brad Anderson

Cast: Peter Mullen, David Caruso, Stephen Gevedon, Josh Lucas, Brendan Sexton III, Jurian Hughes

When a group of union workers are hired to clear an abandoned psychiatric hospital of asbestos before its demolition, they are immediately preyed upon by a malevolent force etched into the walls and floors of the building.

Horror films don't get much more atmospheric than SESSION 9, which was filmed at the sprawling, defunct Danvers State Hospital in Massachusetts. The dilapidated appearance of the hospital wasn't embellished much by the production team, down to the predominantly natural lighting, and this authenticity proves essential in the film's ability to creep under the skin.

In addition to the main plot of this blue-collar team trying to execute their job, further complexity is introduced when Mike, one of the crew, uncovers a box of audio recordings that exhibit a deceased patient named Mary Hobbs. Exactly how the layers intersect doesn't click until the final seconds, and it's worth the wait. Director Brad Anderson paces the film for maximum effectiveness, not letting the viewer have a second of relaxation once the story begins to proliferate and characters start to turn on each other.

Led by an outstanding Peter Mullen and a never-better David Caruso, the ensemble cast is faultless. The characters feel blemished and relatable, which only enhances our investment in what happens to them. Mullen is especially affecting as Gordon, the ostensible leader of the group, whose professional and personal strains are arduously concealed from the group.

Uta Briesewitz's cinematography casts this already intimidating building in an even more unnerving stance, where even the sunlit moments don't feel safe. Adding to that is a jarring sound design that evokes ghosts of the past, and tragedies that may not have occurred yet.

Despite being styled as a ghost story, the slow-burning horror of SESSION 9 is not inexplicable at all. The darkness doesn't come from a desolate basement, or a hospital room that is only occupied after nightfall. This descent into madness is very human, and that dreadful thought is what remains with the viewer when the tape runs out and the credits roll. (**** out of ****)

SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT (1984)

Directed by Charles E. Sellier, Jr.

Cast: Robert Brian Wilson, Lilyan Chauvin, Gilmer McCormick, Britt Leach, Toni Nero, Danny Dagner, Linnea Quigley

5-year-old Billy witnesses the murder of his parents at the hands of a man dressed as Santa Claus. After which, he and his infant brother, Ricky, are sent to a Catholic orphanage, where they are raised by kind, empathic Sister Margaret and the domineering Mother Superior. Now a teenager, Billy is sent out into the workplace, where unexpected circumstances stoke his trauma and incite him to a murderous rampage.

On November 9, 1984, two slasher films opened which would suggest a rift in the trajectory of the American slasher. Wes Craven's *A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET*, with its imaginative, forward-thinking concepts; and Charles Sellier Jr.'s *SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT*, a synthesis of the more festive and explicit pleasures that audiences had come to expect. With its marketed allusions to a murderous Santa, conservatives were up in arms, calling for the film to be banned. Despite this, and not to mention critical lashings from the likes of Siskel and Ebert, the film went on to succeed in spite of - most likely even because of - its controversies.

What makes this film so compelling is that the protagonist, Billy, ultimately becomes the heralded villain, dressed in a Santa suit and wielding an axe. Furthermore, the opening half is dedicated to explaining precisely how he got to that point. We see what becomes of his parents, we observe the cruel treatment he endures growing into adulthood, we witness his emotional triggers being built and laid out for him. While working at a toy store, he stumbles upon a female coworker being sexually assaulted, after which he experiences a mental collapse and lashes out in violence.

From here on, the already dark picture grows dimmer as Billy literally hunts the town for people to "punish", whether they are bullying others or merely having sex. One particularly memorable scene features an attack on the charismatic Linnea Quigley, already a fan favorite but still on the cusp of her most famous roles. This stretch of the plot is admittedly a comedown from the tense lead-up, but the primary downside is that the gore effects aren't very convincing, even by the standards of the time.

As the teenage version of Billy, who the film follows to the character's ultimate destiny, Robert Brian Wilson is likable if not terribly exciting, making it even more difficult to watch when his psychopathy takes over. Unfortunately, Wilson is given the short end of script, with Billy's younger iteration, played very effectively by Danny Wagner, doing most of the heavy lifting. The second half of the film is Wilson's strongest, where a "naughty or nice" query with a young girl or his face-off with Mother Superior can elicit chills with his physicality and vacant glares alone.

Gilmer McCormick is compassionate and maternal as Sister Margaret, the one figure of Billy's upbringing who sees potential in him. Best of all, enhancing the film entirely, is celebrated French actress Lilyan Chauvin as Mother Superior. Despite her pious manner and sadistic methods, Chauvin communicates that her character deeply cares for the well-being of the children under her supervision, making her an ideal foil for Billy. Both are troubled, misguided individuals who enforce punishments to those they deem deserving, and both are drawn with their own shades of moral ambiguity.

SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT is not the most artful, or artfully told, horror film out there. What it does have is a solid dramatic core that pays off by the end, even disregarding the more gratuitous detours. On the major scale of slashers, particularly those from the '80's, SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT is comfortably nestled in the middle. It lacks the filmmaking prowess of the best but is also too confrontational and psychologically intriguing to write off. (**1/2 out of ****)

THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE (1974)

Directed by Tobe Hooper

Cast: Marilyn Burns, Gunnar Hansen, Jim Diedow, Paul A. Partain, Allen Danziger, William Vail, Teri McMinn, Edwin Neal

After hearing reports of pervasive grave robbery, Sally Hardesty, disabled brother Franklin, and a van of friends set out to the heartland of Texas to ensure that her grandfather's resting place has not been tampered with. Once situated at the now-abandoned Hardesty home, the group systematically meet their ends at the hands of the Sawyer family, particularly a hulking figure known as Leatherface.

1974 was the world's proper introduction to Tobe Hooper, an experimental filmmaker whose debut, 1969's EGGHELLS, disclosed a taste for rebellious and rule-breaking horror. This would come to fruition with THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE, one of the first films to earnestly lay down the blueprint for what would become known as the "slasher formula." Although he went on to direct several well-received features, 1982's POLTERGEIST for one, this is unquestionably Hooper's best and most iconic. Much has been made of the production's grueling shoot in the Lone Star state, with long hours in 100°F temperatures, and this strain only helps the film's cumulative effect. Through Daniel Pearl's leering camerawork, you can feel the heat of the pavement, you can smell the sweat of the actors. In those ways, and others, THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE can best be described as a sensational experience.

Set during the disgraced conclusion of the Nixon era, Hooper and Kim Henkel's economic screenplay interpolates both flower-child hippies and a pullulating nationwide decrease in manual labor, the country and western civilization at large taking a decisive step towards industrial automation. This context cleverly provides the backdrop necessary to demonstrate the inherent tension between our protagonists and the Sawyer family, a clan of butchers that very much beat to their own perverted drum and feel justified in that regard. Having said that, the story is exceedingly simple, distilled to only the finer points.

The cast is nearly faultless, each actor's energy bouncing off the others to create a unique ensemble. Edwin Neal indelibly portrays a hitchhiker that the van picks up early on, a scene which does not play out in any predictable fashion. Neal's work is so deliciously twisted, his presence looms over the rest of the film. You simultaneously want him to reappear but find yourself dreading that he just might. As Leatherface, Gunnar Hansen provides the requisite physical menace, fleshed out with a childlike sense of confusion and curiosity. Leading lady Marilyn Burns gives her all to role of Sally, and then some. The character is not the most resourceful or likable of final girls, but when Sally finds herself in grave danger, Burns pulls out all the stops to deliver a searing portrait of unbridled terror.

For a time, THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE garnered reputation as a gratuitously bloody, violent affair. This is barely half true. Abrupt and gruesome as the fates of the lead characters

may be, very few visible drops of blood are shed, and Hooper's skill as a filmmaker ensures that the goopy red stuff is not missed. By the maelstrom conclusion, as Leatherface frustratedly hurls his chainsaw against the coming dawn, one is left pondering whether the sanity of our surviving character can ever be fully salvaged. While the credits roll, the viewer is left shaken, as if they too had survived this exact ordeal, a verifiable mark of this film's dominating, unrelenting power.

(**** out of ****)

TITANE (2021)

Directed by Julia Ducourneau

Cast: Agathe Rousselle, Vincent Lindon, Laïç Salameh, Myriem Akheddiou, Garance Marillier

Alexia, a serial killer with a titanium plate in her head from a childhood accident, finds herself pregnant the morning after she has sex with a vintage Cadillac. While on the lam, she decides to hide in plain sight, posing as a runaway boy returning home to his father, steroid-addicted firefighter Vincent.

I know. What is this plot, and how could it possibly work in any serious fashion? Therein lies the marvel of writer-director Julia Ducournau's talent. Her debut feature, 2016's RAW, utilized cannibalism as an allegory for female empowerment and sexual awakening to great effect. TITANE, her follow-up, is even more succinct and emotionally rich, and her commitment to these outlandish premises cement her as a passionately original voice in contemporary horror.

TITANE is off-putting at first because the opening act does not portray Alexia as anything other than a murderous sociopath, killing those who try to forge an intimate connection with her. But again, this is part of the grander design. When she takes to the streets and decides to cut her hair, alter her appearance, and further conceal her lithe body to masquerade as a missing teenage boy, she soon realizes the onus is on her to comfort his grieving father. The stakes are immediately heightened because we know what she is capable of, we know what triggers her, and with her pregnancy developing at an alarming rate, she can only keep the secret for so long.

Agathe Rousselle gives a stunning breakthrough performance in what is essentially a dual role, her steely gaze and initially unflappable demeanor betraying a complete absence of humanity, a lifetime lost to inexplicable rage. Vincent Lindon is every bit her match, outstanding in the embodiment of Vincent's grief, his yearning for vitality, and the utter desperation to have his son back, even if it is in the form of a lie. With the final act, we see the culmination of Alexia and Vincent's relationship, how the tension between them is wrought, and the resolution feels honest, earned, and shocking in its ramifications.

The compelling thrill of TITANE finds two people harboring their own battles, both with the bleak voids that have come to exemplify their souls, and the diametrically opposed needs that have caused their separate fates to interlock. Between RAW and now TITANE, Ducournau is well on her way to becoming the next Cronenberg. I do not mean this in a way that trivializes the artistry and daring she brings to the table, but that she also has the impulse for repurposing body horror as a means to peel away the fascinating layers of her narrative. TITANE is the kind of invigorating, psychological loaded horror that I cherish. (**** out of ****)

WHEN A STRANGER CALLS (1979)

Directed by Fred Walton

Cast: Charles Durning, Carol Kane, Tony Beckley, Colleen Dewhurst, Ron O'Neal

While babysitting two children, teenager Jill Johnson is terrorized over the phone by a maniac and ends up narrowly escaping with her life. Her assailant, Curt Duncan, escapes captivity seven years later, and it seems that Jill is his target yet again.

As one thinks of *WHEN A STRANGER CALLS*, the impulse is to consider only the first twenty minutes, and that's entirely justified. The prologue, a fully realized dramatization of the "Babysitter" legend, is a masterclass in sustained tension. From the first instance that Jill picks up the ringing phone, only to hear a calm, collected "Have you checked the children?", the viewer is on edge because we know what she doesn't: we know where he is.

Even with that awareness, writer/director Fred Walton has the patience to allow this harrowing situation to slowly intensify, and Carol Kane's performance as Jill is nuanced enough that our reactions mirror hers. Largely known for her comedic work, Kane is in terrific dramatic form here, never overstating what her eyes can acutely convey.

Unfortunately, what follows this brilliant opening is a rather boilerplate thriller, abandoning Jill entirely and following the man who killed the children she was watching. Tony Beckley is menacing as the disturbed and dangerous Curt, when the role requires him to be. It's when the screenplay means to elicit sympathy for him that Beckley faces an uphill battle, as the character isn't nearly as compelling within that context.

Stage and screen veterans Colleen Dewhurst and Charles Durning appear in substantial roles, Durning as a private detective tracking Duncan, and Dewhurst as a woman caught in the crosshairs. Their work here is solid but, again, it's hard not to feel like this middle section is unnecessary.

Things improve once Jill, now a wife and mother of two, is brought back into the mix for a denouement that feels almost like an abridged sequel. However, while all the pieces of a top-notch thriller are there, *WHEN A STRANGER CALLS* feels irreparably disjointed. But then, there is that opening sequence, a classic even to those who haven't seen it. Frankly, it's worth the whole thing. (** out of ****)

WHEN I CONSUME YOU (2021)

Directed by Fred Walton

Cast: Evan Dumouchel, Libby Ewing, MacLeod Andrews

Indie director Perry Blackshear is firmly coming into his own as a distinct voice in contemporary horror. His feature debut, 2015's *THEY LOOK LIKE PEOPLE*, was a tense yet affecting look at a young man who either may be living with schizophrenia or may be seeing some for the hellish beings they really are. Although Blackshear's follow-up, 2019's *THE SIREN*, was less potent in terms of provocation and suspense, 2021's *WHEN I CONSUME YOU* displays his craft in extremely refined form.

When tragedy befalls two adult siblings, they must go out into the night and hunt a demonic force that has been following and devouring them, piece by piece, since childhood. Libby Ewing and Evan Dumouchel give poignant, lived-in performances as Daphne and Wilson Shaw, whose lives to this point have been poisoned by addiction, depression, suicidal thoughts, and perhaps something more calculatingly sinister. Ewing and Dumouchel anchor the supernatural proceedings with their palpable connection, lending significant emotional weight to the film overall.

Wilson, prone to severe social anxiety, has never grown up. Well into his thirties, he is struggling to find a steady job and the motivation to better himself, not to mention still learning how to properly iron a shirt and arrange his necktie. Daphne, though several years younger, has been his ardent protector since childhood. Amid her own battle with drugs, she is also yearning to be a foster mother, as taking care of those more vulnerable has been her unspoken creed. The film opens with Daphne rushing into the bathroom, her mouth bleeding because of a tooth that has been knocked out. We do not understand yet what has happened to her, but this brief instance adds a more threatening context to her already dire conflicts.

As a filmmaker, what Blackshear excels at is intimacy. With that, he opts to film most of the siblings' conversations in raw, tranquil medium shots, allowing the familial warmth of the actors and meditative power of the dialogue to come through. In contrast, Blackshear – also serving as cinematographer and editor – shows us a side of New York City that we rarely see in horror: the dimly lit bodegas, gated parks, cramped apartments, and foreboding back alleys of Brooklyn. These settings come off as safe and amicable in the daytime, but in the dark transform into an aerie for evil to hide.

The threat which follows Daphne and Wilson is drawn in imagery both familiar and abstract, innately chilling yet mysterious in its origins and motives. MacLeod Andrews, perhaps best known for his excellent performance in *THEY LOOK LIKE PEOPLE*, is fantastic in a supporting role as a drunken cop who comforts Wilson at his most imperiled moment. Where this exchange leads is a harrowing turning point. In spite of the plot's occult leanings in the final act, *WHEN I*

CONSUME YOU is ultimately about learning to stand on your own, separate from those who embolden you, no matter how destabilizing and scary it may be at first.