

# Poster Exhibit:

# HORROR IN THE 1970's

The 1970's were a very fruitful, even innovative time for films in general and Horror films in particular. The genre itself was getting something of a shaking up. The old-style Gothic horror, so popular during the 60s, was beginning to go out of fashion – The Edgar Allen Poe cycle ended in the early 70's with *CRY OF THE BANSHEE* and *MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE* - and become replaced by more visceral, more graphic horrors. Like citizens of ancient Rome attending the Colosseum, audiences wanted to see more blood, and not just in horror movies (look at a movie like *THE GODFATHER*, for example). Horror movies were becoming split between up-market (*THE EXORCIST* being a prime example of a horror movie given a big budget and produced by a Hollywood studio) and down-market (the many films that were shown only in drive-ins, which were hugely popular venues in the 70's). The horror hits of the 70's were cultural phenomena that entered the public consciousness, like *THE EXORCIST*, *THE OMEN*, *THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE*, *HALLOWEEN*, *CARRIE*, *DAWN OF THE DEAD*, and *ALIEN*. These key films not only spun off numerous sequels and/or remakes, they were frequently imitated by others looking to get on the bandwagon, setting off long-lasting trends, most notably the Slasher Movie Trend, The Demonic Possession Trend, and the Zombie Trend, which continue even to this day! And let's not even get started on all the *JAWS* rip-offs, which also continue to this day. As proof of this longevity, we even have a new *EXORCIST* movie being released this October. Happy Halloween!

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### Extra Note:

The 1970's were a time for horror directors to shine: Among those who did some of their best work in the 70's , or at least began to make a name for themselves, are:

DAVID CRONENBERG

JOHN CARPENTER

TOBE HOOPER

DARIO ARGENTO

BRIAN DePALMA

DAVID LYNCH

GEORGE ROMERO

WES CRAVEN

## THE EXORCIST (1973)

One cannot underestimate the impact of THE EXORCIST. It was extremely shocking when it first came out, with widespread reports of people fainting and vomiting during screenings. On a bigger scale, you could make a claim that it reinforced beliefs that there are Satanic forces out there. It became an ultimate challenge of *"Can you take it?"* and for someone like me, who was too young to see it at the time, it all had the air of The Forbidden about it. Author William Peter Blatty based it on an actual case, but of course it was all embellished to the nth Degree. Actress Shirley Maclaine had to fend off rumours that it was something that had happened to her and her own daughter (Blatty had said that he based the character of Chris, a famous actress, on Shirley Maclaine, but that was the extent of it). It was a huge hit, and was one of the few horror films to be nominated for numerous Academy Awards. It has been imitated and parodied countless times since, so that has a way of diluting the effect of the original when we see it today. But taken on its own terms, it's still very effective. An alternate version was released in

the year 2000, titled “The Version You’ve Never Seen” which reinstated certain scenes, like the infamous “spider walk” scene, but also some dialogue which Blatty felt reinforced the more positive, spiritual aspects of the story. Friedkin had deleted those scenes because he felt it was like “stopping for the commercial”. The newer version was also needlessly goosed up with superimpositions of images of the demon appearing on walls and drapes.

## **THE OMEN (1976)**

Another movie that could not have existed if THE EXORCIST had not come along first, tapping into fears about Satanic influences (and evil children), but also into free-floating anxiety about the End of the World (the 70’s were a very anxious time), signalled here by the birth of the Anti-Christ. Looking at it today, it seems like the kind of thing that conspiracy theorists would go ape over, with all the clues that the Anti-Christ has arrived. The movie’s highlight and biggest shock (which got everybody talking) was the scene where David Warner gets decapitated by a sheet of plate glass. 70’s horror films very often had downbeat endings, in keeping with the pessimistic spirit of the times, but it also meant the door was open for the studio to churn out sequels, which they definitely did with THE OMEN.

## **THE SENTINEL (1977)**

Another in a line of “Catholic Horror Movies” that followed the success of THE EXORCIST. More Satanic doings, this time set in an old apartment building in New York. The new tenant, Alison, moves in and after being haunted by the ghosts of dead murderers, finds out that the building contains the

entrance to Hell itself, and she has been chosen by the Catholic Church to guard that entrance. Some rather bold ideas here, and some gore, but it also contains a stellar cast comprised of old veterans (Ava Gardner, Eli Wallach) and some up-and-comers in small parts who would quickly become famous (Jeff Goldblum, Tom Berenger, and there's even a walk-on from Richard Dreyfuss, of all people. You wonder why he was doing this after JAWS.). This movie is most notorious for director Michael Winner's choice to use actual deformed people to play the lost souls from Hell.

## **DAWN OF THE DEAD (1979)**

It took eleven years for George Romero to make a sequel to NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (1968). Romero single-handedly invented the Zombie movie formula as we know it today. The 3 main rules he established were 1) Zombies are cannibals and 2) anyone who is bitten by a zombie will die from the infection and become a zombie himself and 3) Zombies can only be killed by destroying the brain, either by a gunshot wound, piercing the brain with a sharp instrument or setting them on fire. These rules have been followed in every zombie movie since. DAWN was significant in that it featured state-of-the-art special effects by Tom Savini, which were a big factor in its popularity. Add to that some fine performances from the small cast, along with some doses of humour and a bit of social commentary about consumer culture from Romero, and you have a real crowd pleaser, as long as your crowd doesn't mind all the gore (and would you even be going to see this movie if you did mind?). NIGHT had become a classic, but when DAWN was released, it brought about a deluge of imitators, with titles too numerous to even list. The long-running TV series THE WALKING DEAD (and its spin-offs) owed its existence to Romero's films. Romero himself would become somewhat trapped by his own legacy, since it seemed that the only films he would make that would be profitable would be in the LIVING DEAD series. The Zombie myth as put forth by Romero has become so much a part of our culture that there is a segment of the population that believes a Zombie Apocalypse is something that can

possibly happen, or WILL happen, in real life. Just the fact that we have a term “Zombie Apocalypse” and people know what it means, signifies how influential this movie has been.

## SUSPIRIA (1977)

Dario Argento made a string of fantastic, sometimes surreal horror movies (usually referred to as “Giallo” in his native land of Italy) in the 70’s, beginning with *THE BIRD WITH THE CRYSTAL PLUMAGE* (1970). After *DEEP RED* (1975), he was looking for a new direction to follow, and this was the result: a phantasmagorical tale of the Supernatural, where the title isn’t even explained. The plot can be summarized very simply: murders surrounding a ballet school in Germany turn out to be committed by a coven of witches. But it’s how the story is presented that makes all the difference. Using the last of Technicolour film stock, the entire film is shot with vivid, vibrant colours that seem to glow off the screen. It feels like every single shot is composed and coloured so distinctly that it’s fascinating just to look at. And the avant-garde rock score by Goblin is designed to shake you in your seat. When it was first released, most reviewers were somehow able to ignore its visual beauty, and treated it as just another shock-fest. But this is a case where style triumphs over content. If not for the high levels of violence, it would feel like a fairy tale come to life, but on the other hand, Grimm Fairy Tales in their original form contained pretty gruesome moments. Many writers have put it in their lists of “All-Time Best Horror Movies”. An ill-advised remake was done in 2018, but it couldn’t hold a candle to the original.

# **HOUSE OF EXORCISM (a.k.a. LISA AND THE DEVIL) (1974)**

One of many, many movies meant to cash in on the success of THE EXORCIST. Originally, the story had nothing to do with possession, but was more of a haunted house/lost soul story, filmed by horror maestro Mario Bava, under the title LISA AND THE DEVIL. Satan was one of the characters in the story, played by Telly Savalas. But producer Alfred Leone thought the film's commercial chances would be increased if it followed the model of THE EXORCIST, so new scenes were written and shot, involving Lisa becoming possessed by an unknown entity, and doing all the expected things: writhing around while talking in a different voice, cursing, behaving violently, and vomiting green puke and live frogs! At the end, the priest character (who was one of the additions to the film) performs an exorcism in the haunted house and gets zapped by a bolt of lightning for his trouble, which is meant to remind you of Father Karras' sacrifice at the end of THE EXORCIST. Both the original version and the altered version are available on DVD. I confess that I'm fond of both.

# **HALLOWEEN (1978)**

Little did John Carpenter know that when he made HALLOWEEN, a modest little film on a low budget, he was creating an instant classic. Not only did it become the most successful independent film ever made (up to that point), it became so widely imitated that it established a whole new set of tropes/cliches that would serve as the template for the Modern Slasher Movie: the masked killer, the use of subjective camera to put the audience in the killer's shoes, and maybe regrettably, sexually active teenagers that become murder victims. It made it seem

that these movies were adopting a more severe conservative point of view than Carpenter ever intended. These movies would also become known as “Dead Teenager Movies”. Carpenter’s aim was simply to create a suspenseful movie, with little or no gore (the Friday the 13th movies would go the opposite route). The whole premise is simplicity itself: an escaped homicidal maniac prowls a small town on Halloween night, looking for victims. And that’s all there is to it. Like many directors in the 70’s, Carpenter was a film buff, so his movie contained certain in-jokes/references to other movies, in particular Hitchcock’s PSYCHO. He cast Jamie Lee Curtis in the lead, who was the daughter of PSYCHO’S Janet Leigh, and he named the psychiatrist character “Sam Loomis” which was the name of the Leigh’s boyfriend in PSYCHO.

## **CARRIE (1976)**

Everyone can relate to a good revenge tale, and CARRIE delivers the goods in spades. In case you don’t know, it’s the story of a high school girl who’s relentlessly bullied both at school and at home, but who finally gets her revenge on everybody when she discovers she has the power of “telekinesis” -the ability to move or alter objects by using one’s mind. Telekinesis was once an esoteric term understood only by those who studied psychic phenomena. After CARRIE was released, everyone knew what it was. One is tempted to describe CARRIE as “an after-school special gone horribly wrong” but it’s much more than that. You could also say that, without even meaning to, it foreshadowed such tragedies as Columbine.

The movie was good for everyone’s careers. It put both director Brian DePalma and author Stephen King on the map, jump-starting both their careers. Both had already achieved some degree of success in their chosen fields, but the effect of CARRIE was explosive. It was based on Stephen King’s first novel, and the success of the movie meant a big bump in sales of the book, and soon Stephen King would become an industry by himself. And of course, there have been a ton of movies “Based on the novel by Stephen King” since. DePalma’s keen sense of visual style

made CARRIE one of the stand-out movies of the 70's, and both Sissy Spacek and Piper Laurie were nominated for Oscars. One final note: DePalma's addition to the story – the shock ending – is one the earliest examples I can think of of a Jump Scare. It was a real crowd-pleaser, and of course, would get copied again and again.

## ALIEN (1979)

ALIEN, when it first came out, felt like an utterly unique film. Of course, there had been plenty of science fiction movies before, some of them with monsters, but those were usually aimed at an audience of kids, with dialogue being very much on the same level as comic books, and the monsters were usually not entirely convincing (you had to use your suspension of disbelief) or even ridiculous (see THE GREEN SLIME, for instance). With ALIEN, director Ridley Scott was going more for a feeling of realism in all departments. Much thought had gone into the conception of the Alien itself, so that it felt biologically accurate as it progressed through various stages of its growth. The spaceship, where most of the action takes place, was designed to look realistic, like it was a workspace that was well-used and lived-in, unlike the usually all-white, super-clean, anti-septic look that sci-fi movies usually adopted. And there was an attempt to make the characters like real, normal people. Scott's conception was that they would be like “truck drivers in outer space”, working class, but in a futuristic setting. And unlike astronauts in any other movie you've seen, these people cursed and used four-letter words. But everyone went to see it because they wanted to see the monster! As a bonus, the film contained one of the greatest shocks ever filmed, occurring at about the half-way point. Scott seemed to have learned a lesson or two from DePalma and CARRIE, because there's a second shock near the end of the film which is very similar. And of course, this movie is significant for making a star out of Sigourney Weaver, who would appear in 3 of the sequels, but made a very nice career for herself outside of the ALIEN movies.