
AMERICAN GOTHIC: THE ROOTS OF US HORROR

Andrew Graves

Week 6: Urban Fears

Halloween (1978), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *The Howling* (1981)

John Carpenter

Began as a student film maker. He wrote and directed an 8-minute short film called *Captain Voyeur* (1969) - the film contained some of the elements that were later featured in *Halloween* (1978). He also collaborated on a film called *The Resurrection of Broncho Billy* (1970), which won an Academy Award for best live action short

Halloween (1978)

John Carpenter

Halloween was groundbreaking in many senses of the word, it built the foundations for the modern slasher movie. Many of the rules/tropes we associate with late 20th horror films are largely because of this film. It was 'partly' the first time we were introduced to the faceless 'shape' serial killer, the undying, supernatural force. After this, there would be hordes of imitators. The writing was split between Hill and Carpenter – Hill mainly wrote the female dialogue whilst Carpenter wrote the Dr. Loomis's speeches. The script was written like a radio play – *'with boos every ten minutes'*

'...the idea was that you couldn't kill evil, and that was how we came about the story. We went back to the old idea of Samhain, that Halloween was the night where all the souls are let out to wreak havoc on the living, and then came up with the story about the most evil kid who ever lived. And when John came up with this fable of a town with a dark secret of someone who once lived there, and now that evil has come back, that's what made Halloween work.'

Debra Hill

Because of the low budget nature of the film, props and other items had to be sourced cheaply. The Michael Myers 'face' was a Captain Kirk mask painted white with its eyes cut out. The POV (point of view) shots add to the uneasy tension.

Whilst POV shots had been used in other 'horror' films, Halloween takes it to another level – whole scenes are played out through Michael's eyes. This works on three levels:

- Firstly, we are asked to see the world through Michael's twisted lens, creating an unnatural discomfort.
- Secondly, the awkward nature of filming techniques when capturing these shots, help to remind us that Michael is 'inhuman'.
- Thirdly, looking through the eyes of a mask takes viewers back to their own Halloween childhood memories, helping us to identify with his own arrested development.

Halloween (1978) CONT...

Many of the horror rules are created here. Though we have seen the 'final girl' before, from here on the 'Tom Boy' characters or most sexually innocent girls win out in the host of slasher films which followed. The undying 'Bogeyman' is born.

In Carol J Clover's study 'Her Body, Himself: Gender in Slasher Films' she states that after 1978 (the year Halloween was released), in most slasher films, men and women who indulge in illicit sex, die. But as mentioned before women die much more graphically. In Clover's view women are chosen more often as victims because they are permitted a greater range of emotional expression.

'Angry displays of force may belong to the male, but crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling begging for mercy belong to the female. Abject terror, in short, is gendered feminine.'

Carol J Clover

"[critics] completely missed the point there...The one girl who is the most sexually uptight just keeps stabbing this guy with a long knife. She's the most sexually frustrated. She's the one that's killed him. Not because she's a virgin but because all that sexually repressed energy starts coming out. She uses all those phallic symbols on the guy."

John Carpenter

"Carpenter doesn't seem to have had any life outside the movies: one can trace almost every idea on the screen to directors such as Hitchcock and Brian De Palma and to the Val Lewton productions...Maybe when a horror film is stripped of everything but dumb scariness—when it isn't ashamed to revive the stalest device of the genre (the escaped lunatic)—it satisfies part of the audience in a more basic, childish way than sophisticated horror pictures do."

Pauline Kael**Dawn of the Dead (1978)**

George A Romero

When *Night of the Living Dead*, essentially a hybrid of grindhouse and arthouse became an unexpected hit, it allowed young director Romero, who had previously been working mainly in the commercial sector, to explore other cinematic avenues. Temporarily leaving behind his zombies he would go on to tackle other social commentary laden horrors such as the sublime *Season of the Witch* (1972), which used witchcraft to examine patriarchal systems of power, *The Crazies* (1973) which explored the nature of authority and government control via germ warfare and superb blue-collar vampire flick *Martin* (1977) which became a bloody metaphor for class and alienation. But though he would dabble in other genres as with *There's Always Vanilla* (1971), his only comedy, and his later biker movie *Knightriders* (1981), he would always return to the horror fold.

And so, his sequel *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), from an artistic point of view, at least, seemed inevitable. However, to get the project off the ground it required more than good intentions, and so to secure the budget needed for such an ambitious undertaking. Romero turned to the Italian director of *Suspiria* (1977) and host of excellent Giallo features, Dario Argento. In exchange for much-needed financial backing, Romero promised Argento, his brother Claudio and producer Alfredo Cuomo a deal that essentially gave them international distribution rights and the option to recut a version for the Italian market.

Dawn of the Dead (1978) CONT...

This they did, releasing it in fact before the American version under the name of *Zombi*. When that version of the film as well as the Romero cut became a huge hit, the need for another sequel became too much of a temptation. (See *Zombi 2/Zombie Flesh Eaters*)

Dawn of the Dead (1978)

The Plot

- The zombie apocalypse is in full throw – society is collapsing
- A small group of survivors including two police officers and a couple escape in a stolen helicopter
- They decide to take their chances in a shopping mall

“If you can see beyond the immediate impact of Romero's imagery, if you can experience the film as being more than just its violent extremes, a most unsettling thought may occur to you: The zombies in "Dawn of the Dead" are not the ones who are depraved. They are only acting according to their natures, and, gore dripping from their jaws, are blameless. The depravity is in the healthy survivors, and the true immorality comes as two bands of human survivors fight each other for the shopping centre: Now look who's fighting over the bones!”

Roger Ebert

The Hollywood Werewolf

The glory days of the thirties and forties saw the silver screen littered with an array of be-whiskered maniacs, from Fredric March in *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1932) to Henry Hull in *The Werewolf of London* (1935), through to Glen Strange in *The Mad Monster* (1942). But the eighties also saw a slew of lupine heavy features bursting their way into western picture houses.

Cinema-goers were treated to fare like *The Return of the Wolf Man* (1980) starring the legendary Paul Naschy, *Teen Wolf* (1985), *Wolfen* (1981), *The Company of Wolves* (1985) and Michael Jackson's world-beating fifteen-minute music video *Thriller*. But the real game-changing potential of the ageing sub-genre was realised in two films which jockeyed for attention in the same year, one was John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) and the other was, of course, *The Howling* (1981).

The Howling (1981)

Joe Dante

While Landis's counterpart felt, despite its dowdy English setting, like a more forward-thinking pic, there is something strangely historic about Dante's production. Its early eighties release date contrasts its seventies-style quality, for all its campier moments in essence it has more in common with the bleaker paranoid thrillers of the Nixon era. Not that it is necessarily a celebration of that decade, more an observation of what had just happened and the hangover that it left us with. The famous poster image depicting a half exposed female face with mouth agape and a set of vicious claws tearing at the fabric of reality in some nightmarish vision, seems to hark back to *Psycho* (1960), *Deep Throat* (1971) and *Halloween* (1978) as though the it and all it represents is unsure whether it is on the attack or merely trying to escape its cultural baggage.

The Howling (1981) CONT...

Being a close former protégé of trash king Roger Corman, it should have come as no surprise to anyone that Joe Dante's second solo directorial effort would deliver some highly camp elements and obvious nostalgic nods to earlier lycanthropic vehicles like Universal's *The Wolf Man* (1941) or Hammer's *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961). Yet, whereas Dante's later efforts such as box office smash, *Gremlins* (1984), *The Burbs* (1989) or *Matinee* (1993), were peppered with endearing levels of knockabout fun, the humour in his early eighties tale of shapeshifting wild men and women, is arguably wrought with darker shades and a cold, edgy cynicism.

From the opening sequence which sees TV anchor Karen White (Dee Wallace) almost murdered by a serial killer in the back of a pornographic book store, while a decidedly seedy snuff video plays along in the background, to its unexpected live news broadcast denouement, it's clear that what Dante offers is no mere creature feature. Though werewolves may provide a monstrous distraction, the story's focus seems to be America's love affair with the media and new age cultism.

Much of *The Howling* sallies forth in mercilessly satirical fashion taking a blackly comic swipe at televisual aggrandisement and the public's blurred perceptions and inability to separate unspeakable acts of real violence from fictional horrors.

As a production it certainly feels uneven, its tonal shifts and lack of visual consistency with its mix of animation and more physical effects, in hindsight, give the film a disorganised veneer. It has a more European feel, a certain 'oddness' not present in many other home-grown features. Despite it arguably being a critique of the more unpleasant aspects of US culture, like unchecked masculine aggression, the me, me, me therapy revolution and celebrity obsession, there is something very un-American about *The Howling*

It feels more at home with the likes of Italian filmmakers like Lucio Fulci, Dario Argento or Lamberto Bava. But none of this should detract from its overall ability to deliver a hugely entertaining slice of scary fantasy, crammed with interesting concepts, superlative special effects and creeped out tension.

The Howling was inspired by Gary Brandner's book. The novel was a pulpy potboiler, centring on the crumbling domestic set up of a recently raped housewife who discovers the town where she lives is populated by werewolves. Schlocky and undoubtedly written with the *Jaws/Carrie* audience in mind, it was more plodding than edgy. A throwaway bit of monster exploitation.

Nonetheless, it shifted enough units for production companies AVCO Embassy, International Film Investors, and Wescom Productions to assert more than a passing interest in a possible cinematic interpretation.

Initially Jack Conrad was bought in to oversee directorial duties but following disagreements with Embassy Pictures, he walked and was replaced by Dante. However, there were numerous issues with the screenplay which had been originally drafted by Conrad and writer Terrence H Winkless, so at the request of the new director, John Sayles was employed to rework the whole idea. The new script gave more agency to the female protagonist, making her a TV anchor and journalist, and by shifting the focus from a whole town to an isolated colony, the story plays out in a deliciously claustrophobic manner. But while the actual rape of the lead character, is left out of the screen adaptation, the movie makes much of the hostility aimed at women within the context of accepted societal norms.

The Howling (1981) CONT...

Karen may be a modern-woman, and the star of a prime-time show, but throughout the narrative, she is referred to as 'little lady', and is beset by macho misogyny. Though there is no physical assault, as in the novel, the 'violation' she suffers at the hands of Eddie Quist (Robert Picardo) in the opening moments of the story with its after-effects of post-trauma, including nightmares and waking flashbacks, are consistent with those of real-life survivors of sexual violence.

However, Dante never lets us forget that this is also a groovy looking werewolf flick. Not a moment goes by without some sort of in-joke referring to its lycanthropic intentions, whether it be Three Little Pigs cartoons, Wolf Chilli cans or a desk-bound copy of Allen Ginsberg's Howl.

The Howling on many levels works too as a slasher, it's gorier episodes feel closer to Friday the 13th (1980) than say, The Legend of the Werewolf (1975), which had been made less than a decade earlier, but it's also not afraid to wear the cloak of a more traditional horror film. Dark enclaves, misty moonlit surrounds and ominous-looking woodlands dominate the impressively eerie mise-en-scene, which harks back to the days of Karloff, Lugosi, Lee and Cushing.

Dante packs the screen with nods to his misspent youth where he voraciously poured over well-thumbed copies of Forest J Ackerman's *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine. Not only do we get hints of Universal and Hammer in the form of vintage clips and the use of character names like Fred Francis, but there is also a prevalence of older silver screen horror stars at play either in the main cast or more fleetingly in cheeky cameos. Dick Miller (*Bucket of Blood* 1959), Kevin McCarthy (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* 1956), and Roger Corman himself all appear, as does forties bogeyman, John Carradine.

Just as Rick Baker (originally drafted in as effects man for this film) had created iconic scenes in *An American Werewolf in London*, so did Rob Bottin for *The Howling*. And while praises have often been heaped on the creations rendered in the former, it has to be said that there is something perhaps more disturbing about the monsters on offer here. Bottin gives us something more mythic, more bestial, the werewolves certainly carry an outlandish quality, distorted visions of a child's fairy-tale gone wrong.

While the animal placed at the centre of *An American Werewolf in London* was a fantasy, it felt strangely believable within the context of the story, Baker's biological detailing and onscreen anatomy lesson-like transformation enabled this effectively, but the creatures on the prowl in *The Howling* follow no such direction. They twist and pervert the rules of science becoming skin bubbling hellions born of curse and magic, hairy devils plucked from a Boschian landscape. Not only this, given the film's early fixation with the seedier side of American culture and its neon pornographic theatres and 'Sleazorama' levels of unease, Bottin's lycanthropes become not just bloodthirsty hunters but slaving sexual predators.

Perhaps though, what *The Howling* does best, separating it most effectively from the Landis production, is how it not only creates an entertaining werewolf picture it also presents us with another classic horror trope, that of the secluded, mysterious colony. It's an idea which has fascinated filmmakers for years, taking cues from nineteenth-century authors like Wells and Conrad, studios have examined that idea of 'ordinary' interlopers stumbling upon the practices of an isolated cult or commune, on dozens of occasions.