

KITCHEN SINK CREEPS

WEEK 5.

Amicus Productions

- Formed in 1962
- Based at Shepperton Studios
- Founded by an American producer and an American Screenwriters Max Rosenberg and Milton Subotsky

Amicus Portmanteau Features

- American producers
- American ideas/stories – Robert Bloch/Milton Subotsky – American short stories/EC Comics
- Despite this these productions seemed very British – British casts/locations/stars
- Hammer had a strong sense of morality – Amicus ‘offered a different view – cynical, sardonic, cruel, modern’
- A complete disregard for the ‘family unit’ – wives kill husbands/husbands kill wives/brothers kill sisters etc.

‘Amicus horror preferred to isolate its families from any discernible social context.’ – Peter Hutchings

Amicus Host/Master of Ceremonies Character

- Dr Schreck (Terror in German) – Death
- Diabolo – The Devil
- The Crypt Keeper – ‘a denizen of hell’
- A shop keeper
- Mental hospital doctor
- An estate agent

Amicus Setting

- *Dr Terror’s House of Horrors* – a train
- *Torture Garden* – a circus sideshow
- *The House that Dripped Blood* – a house
- *Tales from the Crypt* – a crypt
- *Vault of Horror* – a basement
- *Asylum* – a mental hospital
- *From Beyond the Grave* – a junk shop
- Each film features a ‘direct concluding address’

‘Come in, I’m sure I have the very thing to tempt you. Lots of bargains. All tastes are catered for. Oh – and a big novelty surprise goes with every purchase. Do come in anytime. I’m always open.’

From Beyond the Grave

Different Approaches

Hammer

- Often relied on ‘classic’ inspiration or material – Dracula/Frankenstein etc.
- Technicolour – gothic, historical fantasy
- Studio based locations – 19th century settings

Amicus

- Turned to other types of inspiration– comic books, obscure stories etc.
- Much seedier, more downbeat
- Often filmed on location in modern day settings

Amicus CONT..

'...many of the portmanteau tales depend for their effectiveness upon a clear awareness of British class divisions...For example note the class tension apparent in the 'Poetic Justice' episode from Tales from The Crypt, in which a middle-class householder terrorizes a working-class man who, he feels, is lowering the tone of the neighbourhood.'

Peter Hutchings

From Beyond the Grave (1974)

- Again, a great cast
- The most consistent set of stories yet
- Some unforgettable sequences
- Peter Cushing and his 'curiosity shop' are the best of all the linking narratives.
- A great use of horror and black comedy – *'I hope you enjoy snuffing it'*
- *From Beyond the Grave* follows the same format as every other Amicus anthology feature, yet there is something creepily squalid about this final push, something earthier and darker as though it's filmed at street-level where fantasy shares the littered pavements with grubby looking tinkers, mad old mediums and a quirky sense of foreboding.
- We can almost smell the carbolic and taste the rolled-up dog ends as the fantastic tales of terror play out against a background of domestic drudgery and suburban disdain.
- This is never more apparent than in the chapter 'An Act of Kindness'.
- It Features Ian Bannen as a hen-pecked failed civil servant, cowering under the shadow of his battle-axe wife, gloriously played by Diana Dors.
- Seeking something other than his tawdry existence, beyond the tea time abuse and burned sausages, he finds it when he stumbles across, war vet match seller Jim Underwood (Donald Pleasence) and more especially when he is introduced to Jim's seductively mysterious daughter Emily (Angela Pleasence).
- It's one of the most memorable of all the portmanteau stories on offer, skilfully combining Ken Loach style grittiness with magic, macabre and cruel sense of fun.
- *From Beyond the Grave*, despite only existing because of two American producers, feels about as British as British horror can be, spattered more by bean juice than blood. Not only that it typifies the era in from which it springs, as something about it suggests that it could not have been created at any other time.
- And while it certainly belongs to the same small window of history which also bought us power cuts, *On the Buses* and the three-day week, its weirdness and otherworldliness allows it to transcend more dated referencing.
- It's grim, gritty, dark and morose but it's also witty, tongue in cheek and ludicrously fantastic. It plays both with our hidden sense of cruelty and our need for more visceral fun and games.

Vampyres (1974)

- Surely the words 'don't go into the cellar' have never felt more necessary than in the case of the Jose Larraz blood-sucking sex romp, *Vampyres (1974)*.
- Replacing some of the more obvious Hammer Horror style gothic trappings with a disturbingly bleak take on those famous creatures of the night, the Spanish-born director was able to offer a nastier version of the British chiller by simply casting a Foreigner's gaze over the kind of proceedings which by that time, to some, had started to become a little stale.
- And part of that foreign viewpoint, also came with added un-redemptive sleaze and titillation.
- New comers to his work would do well to examine *The Coming of Sin (1978)*.
- With its seductions, nightmares and dark secrets, it provides a handy template that can be followed in almost all of his films.

***Vampyres* (1974) CONT...**

- However, what gave the movies that he made in England, their more distinctive flavour, was not born out of his desire to overly 'European-ise' them but to accept and seemingly revel in the elements which made them unmistakably the products of this dull, rainy island.
- You can almost smell the dampness or the tang of HP Sauce.
- As with UK filmmaker Nicolas Roeg or the Canadian Ted Kotcheff, when they ventured into Australia to make *Walkabout* (1971) and *Wake in Fright* (1971) respectively, they too were able to examine a country and its environs with fresh eyes, understanding its devastating scale and small-town claustrophobia to unpick its character via savagery and sexual awakening storylines.
- There is scant regard for over-the-top theatrics or supernatural guff, instead we get an edgy and sexually explicit dive into the seedier side of 70s Britain.
- Here is an enclave of English-set horror which is decorated not by swirling velvet cloaks, dry-ice, or crass Victorian villainy, but with bubbling pans of baked beans, shitty caravans, and an overwhelming sense of grot.
- This is not to say that he doesn't also lean toward the more established tropes particularly in his use of specific locations, as with Harefield Grove, a shambling 19th-century pile which he featured in two of his productions.
- But there is no escape from the never-ending downward spiral which his films seem to illicit.
- It's the kind of tense cruelty that claws at you long after the reels have stopped spinning.
- It's the blood spatter across the chest of the pasty-faced, pock-marked male victim, it's the horrid clothing choices, it's the ground in feel, the murderous kitchen sink scenarios, the smoking, the endless smoking and it's the knowledge that while some will get out of here alive, they will never be the same.
- *Symptoms*, for instance, arguably his most deliberately nightmarish effort, often feels like the horrid ending to one of the grislier Public Information Films we were forced to watch as kids.
- Its lakeside setting and inclusion of Angela Pleasance leads us to believe that any minute her father Donald will provide the voiceover giving it his best *Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water* tones.
- And yet another key aspect of his work is that it creates deeper wounds than more familiar films from that period because they play with our (fading) grasp of decency.
- There are no answers here, no true villains or heroes, just victims. Victims of time, circumstance, or the growing delusion in another character's mind.
- It's a cold ambiguity that will tend to take the words out of your mouth as you try and fail to make sense of it all.
- It's simple, complex, lurid, and subtle or all that same moment. His work is brutal, casual awkward, and occasionally 'of its time' but it's unmistakably his.

***Black Christmas* (1974)**

- Directed by Bob Clark
- Screenplay by Roy Moore
- Produced by Bob Clark
- Cinematography by Reginald H. Morris
- Edited by Stan Cole
- Music by Carl Zittler
- Based on an urban legend
- Originally developed by screen writer Roy Moore
- Clark felt the script was a little generic and added more dialogue and humour
- He had a desire to present students as more rounded, intelligent people
- Despite its humorous elements, its dark (literally) and grubby
- Tense, with whip smart dialogue
- It's an intelligent 'slasher' movie and somehow feels more 'solid' than the later 80s films of the same ilk
- Carpenter's *Halloween* was clearly inspired by its look and feel and the POV shots

