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# I WAS A TEENAGE SURFER ZOMBIE FROM MARS

## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CULT CINEMA

Andrew Graves

### Week 5: The Psycho Effect

#### Amicus Productions

- Formed in 1962
- Based at Shepperton Studios
- Founded by an American producer and an American Screenwriters

#### Amicus Portmanteau Features

- American producers Milton Subotsky/Max Rosenberg
- 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'

*'...the punishment for sin is so ridiculously excessive that the moral message – honesty is good – becomes meaningless. In this sense, the joke is on us and our values.'*

**Peter Hutchings**

- 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***

### Milton Subotsky

- Rejected by the Hammer House of Horror, so he decided to build his own

### Different Approaches

#### Hammer

- Often relied on 'classic' inspiration or material – Dracula/Frankenstein etc.
- Technicolour – gothic, historical fantasy
- Studio based locations – 19<sup>th</sup> 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

*It's a version of horror which is more unpalatable, more raw because it's closer to the truth.'*

**Reece Sheersmith**

*Amicus films were typically brooding and claustrophobic; they were far darker, and much less camp, than the horror films of the same period produced by the more famous Hammer studios. The scripts tended to reflect Subotsky's obsessions. I, Monster, its Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde adaptation, is stuffed with Freudian theories because Subotsky's wife happened to be studying psychology at the time.'*

**Will Hodgkinson**

*Hammer was a business set-up. Had it dealt in garbage disposal, it would have been just as successful. Milton Subotsky from Amicus, on the other hand, was a real horror buff.'*

**Freddie Francis**

- Many of its scripts were adapted from Robert Bloch (author of Psycho) stories
- The films would often offer an odd mix of heightened fantasy and the down beat
- There is a dinginess coupled with fantastic and disturbing ideas

### Amicus and Class

*...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**

### The City of the Dead (1960)

- Directed by John Llewellyn Moxey
- Screenplay by George Baxt
- Story by Milton Subotsky
- Cinematography by Desmond Dickinson
- Edited by John Pomeroy
- Music by Douglas Gamley and Ken Jones (jazz)

### British Horror and The Occult

#### First Phase (1957-1964)

*"...it emerges as a counter-tradition to the dominant Hammer Gothic in its play on the unseen and unrepresentable."*

**Leon Hunt**

*...the tide has turned in Crowley's favour. The doctrine of 'Do What Thou Wilt' with its encouragement to trample the gods under foot and to take one's fill of love, wine and 'strange drugs', has seized the imagination of this restless world."*

**John Symonds**

#### Second Phase (1966-1976)

- *The Witches* (1966)
- *The Witchfinder General* (1968)
- *The Devil Rides Out* (1968)
- *Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971)
- *The Wicker Man* (1973)
- *To the Devil a Daughter* (1976)

- Whilst there had been examples of British Horror films depicting ‘magic’ as being from ‘somewhere else’
- *Plague of Zombies* – Haiti
- *Night of the Eagle* – Jamaica
- By the 70s the magic/witchcraft/occult was planted firmly in British (usually English) rural settings

*“Within the British occult film, there are three strands of particular significance”*

**Leon Hunt**

1. ‘...the way the figure of Crowley translates into popular representations of the libertine and ‘black magician’
2. ‘...the figure of the female witch’
3. ‘...the conflict between old and new religions’

### ***The City of the Dead (1960)***

- It has the Psycho ‘feel’
- It also taps into the witchcraft vibe
- It has a very proto-Amicus atmosphere
- It also feels heavily ‘Lovecraftian’

### ***Carnival of Souls (1962)***

#### **Herk Harvey**

- Directed by Herk Harvey
- Produced by Herk Harvey
- Story by Herk Harvey
- Screenplay by John Clifford
- Cinematography by Maurice Prather
- Edited by Dan Palmquist, Bill de Jarnett and Herbert L Stock
- Music by Gene Moore

#### **Herk Harvey**

- *Carnival of Souls* would be his one and only feature film
- He would make over 400 short educational films for Centron.

### ***Carnival of Souls (1962)***

#### **Herk Harvey**

- Whilst out on a road trip Harvey came across Saltaire Pavilion

### ***Carnival of Souls* (1962) CONT...**

- The Saltaire pavilion was part of a Mormon run theme park
- By the time Herk Harvey discovered it had gone to rack and ruin
- The place had burned down and been rebuilt three times
- Then the lake began to recede
- It was derelict and littered with debris
- Inspired by the dilapidated look of the place, Harvey decided to make a film there.
- Working with writer John Clifford, a script was written and Harvey took two weeks off the shoot the film
- Only one member of the cast was a professional actor (Candace Hilligoss)
- It's strangely off-kilter and disjointed
- The dialogue is stilted and unnatural
- The pervasive use of church organ music adds to the strange atmosphere
- The weird placement of dubbing and Foley sound help heighten the experimental feel
- It is extremely dreamlike
- It is as if we are watching a waking nightmare

### **The Plot**

- A young church organist, Mary, is involved in a car crash and becomes the only survivor
- After the crash, she moves to another town
- When she arrives there, things start to feel very strange – she seems to drop in and out of reality
- Her existence becomes a woozy, nightmarish shadow play

### **Themes/Motifs**

- The pervasive church organ music is an aural reminder of death and funerals
- Mary's character seems to be in a confused state both wanting to be noticed and left alone
- She seems to tap into pre-feminist concerns about being sidelined or made to feel invisible in a larger male-dominated society
- On a wider level, it taps into human fears of being ignored or lost within the crowd

*"Unlike most of today's horror movies, "Carnival of Souls" has few special effects - some wavy lines as we pass through various levels of existence, and that's it. Instead, it depends on crisp black-and-white photography, atmosphere and surprisingly effective acting... But in the way, it shows the horror beneath the surface of placid small-town life, it suggests Blue Velvet and a shot of dead souls at an abandoned amusement park reminded me of the lurching undead in "The Night of the Living Dead."*

**Roger Ebert**

- Hark Harvey would not make another feature film
- *Carnival of Souls*, at the time failed to make an impact
- Distributors didn't really know what to do with it
- It was an arthouse film, not a schlocky horror film
- 25 years later the film began to pick up more recognition, George Romero has praised the film and acknowledged its influence on *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)

### ***The Haunting (1963)***

- Directed by Robert Wise
- Produced by Robert Wise
- Screenplay by Nelson Gidding
- Based on *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson
- Cinematography by Davis Boulton
- Edited by Ernest Walter
- Music by Humphrey Searle
  
- Gidding, came to believe that the novel was not a ghost story at all, but rather a compilation of the insane thoughts of the lead character, Eleanor Vance.
- He saw to see the story of that of Eleanor's nervous breakdown
- He saw the house as the asylum with all the supernatural elements being a result of the treatments she is being subjected to
- However, when Gidding met with Shirley Jackson, she insisted that the story was a supernatural one
- But though the film offers more physical paranormal activity the ambiguity which remains in Gidding's script is arguably what makes the film work