That Was A Bit Mental: Volume 1

Reviews of films that are slightly less than sane

Chris Scullion
To my beautiful wife Louise, for putting up with all the shite I’ve made her watch over the past four years.

I love you x
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Introduction

This is not your typical film review book. If you've downloaded this expecting a detailed critique of film theory, cinematography comparisons and complex dissections of Eisenstein's theory of montage as illustrated in Battleship Potemkin, then I can only hope you're reading the free trial version of this ebook because otherwise you've just wasted a few quid. As the title suggests, That Was A Bit Mental offers a collection of reviews that don't really take themselves too seriously.

To put it bluntly, I am an enormous fan of shite horror films. That may sound like a contradiction in terms, but by 'shite' I mean films that are generally slated by more mainstream film reviewers. For years it's been abundantly clear that the films I like are generally ones that are hated by the majority of film publications. The likes of Sleepaway Camp, Troll 2 and Child's Play were never likely to gather a couple of stars between them when reviewed by the likes of the late, great Roger Ebert, because the general consensus was that they were sloppily made, with a depressingly low budget and the sort of performances that made Miley Cyrus's twerking look like something out of Black Swan.

Annoyed by this, I decided to set up ThatWasABitMental.com, a website dedicated to less serious reviews of weird, wonderful and generally odd films: the sort of films that, when the credits end, cause you to turn to your friend, partner, sibling or nurse and say: “Well, that was a bit mental.”

The ratings given in my reviews don't necessarily take into account acting ability, directorial aptitude or cinematic splendour. If I was entertained for the duration of the film – for good reasons or bad – then it's going to score highly. Anyone who's attended a public screening of The Room (said to be one of the worst films ever) will understand the potential joys of a 'so-bad-it's-good' movie, and that's one of the underlying principles of That Was A Bit Mental.

The more perceptive among you will have already glanced at the contents and will be wondering why certain films feature, since they don't necessarily count as bad movies (The Exorcist) or even films that are “a bit mental” (such as the fairly tame Jaws 2). This was due to my pathetic decision to bow to peer pressure and extend the reach of my criteria. As the site began to grow in popularity, a friend asked me to review Jurassic Park. “That's not mental enough,” I told them, fearing the inclusion of a more mainstream film would ruin the point of the site.

“It's a film about an eccentric Scotsman who wants to clone dinosaurs and put them in a big theme park on a tropical island,” my friend replied. “If that's not mental enough I can only imagine what's in the films you put on the site.”

He had a point. With that in mind, I reviewed Jurassic Park (and its sequels) and vowed to widen the net a little. These days, ThatWasABitMental.com contains reviews of all different types of film. Horror remains the main focus (since all horror films are at least little out-of-the-ordinary by definition), but other slightly mad films have featured on the site (even The
Care Bears Movie, another request). The general criteria now for review consideration is that a film must not be a romantic comedy. Unless it has vampires in it.

This book contains freshened up versions of the first 100 reviews featured on That Was A Bit Mental. Each review has been 'remastered', which is just an arsey movie-lingo way of saying I've gone through them and added bits, taken out bits that didn't read well, and generally tidied them up so they're of a higher standard.

I've also added updated information on how to get hold of each film, in case you like what you read and want to see it (all information is correct as of September 2013). Since the majority of people reading this ebook will be from the UK and North America, the information is given for both the UK and US. Apologies if you're French... for multiple reasons.

Finally, each review has an added 'Bits and Pieces' section, where I've added a couple of extra miscellaneous thoughts, trivia and other general tidbits that didn't fit into the review. These are exclusive to the ebook and didn't originally feature on the website.

I hope you enjoy this ebook. If it makes you chuckle, I'd greatly appreciate it if you could head to the Kindle store or Amazon later on and give it a good review. The more people notice and buy the book, the more I can grow That Was A Bit Mental and the more reviews I'll be able to write in the future.

A massive thank you for reading.

Chris Scullion
28 Days Later (2002)

Director: Danny Boyle

Starring: Cillian Murphy, Naomie Harris, Christopher Eccleston

“No, no, see, this is a really shit idea. Know why? Because it’s really obviously a shit idea.”

Jim (Cillian Murphy) awakens from a coma to find that it’s been 28 days since Britain has been exposed to a highly infectious virus known as Rage. He doesn’t know it yet but because he’s been lying in a hospital he’s become one of the last remaining uninfected people in Britain.

I went to see 28 Days Later on its day of release in the UK back in November 2002 and as a result managed to see it without getting swept up in the wave of hype that eventually gathered afterwards. Despite the positive write-ups I’d seen on it, when I first saw it I came out of the cinema slightly disappointed. It was only after repeated viewings that it grew on me and now I think it’s a great film. What can I say, I’m a fickle bastard.

In fairness, this wasn’t the fault of the film itself. It was the fault of those write-ups and the promotional material for the film selling it as a zombie film. The trailer gave the impression it was a zombie film, it was being billed as a zombie film, and as a result I was ready to see a zombie film.

Though a decade later many will look back and say “that was a great zombie film”, let’s get the context clear – at the time of its release, 28 Days Later did not feel like one. At that point we had yet to see the likes of Dawn Of The Dead (2004) and other films that portrayed zombies as fast, dangerous predators rather than the shuffling, stumbling, mindless ghouls they’d always been portrayed as.

As a result, when audiences first saw the “infected” in 28 Days Later, running fast as fuck and ripping people to shreds, they were as far from the common perception of zombies as you could imagine at that time. Yes, the infected may portray zombie-like symptoms (such as scarred flesh and the need to destroy humans... we don’t necessarily know if any are eaten), but the red eyes and occasional violent vomiting of blood make it clear that rather than being the living dead, these are instead normal people infected with some sort of highly contagious virus (speaking of blood, why is there none on the streets?)

The first 15 minutes of the film are amazing for anyone who has been to London before and knows the surroundings. The shots of Jim walking through a deserted Piccadilly Circus are a sight to behold, and it makes you wonder exactly how they managed it (unless you watch the DVD, in which it’s revealed in the extras that they did it by filming the scenes just as day broke and just off-camera was the film crew trying to stop drunken clubbers wandering into the frame as they stumbled home).

Before long Jim begins to encounter the infected and meets up with a small number of other survivors including Selena, the other main character. He is told of the country’s mass
exposure to the Rage virus and its subsequent evacuation. More infected appear. Jim and Selena get running and eventually they meet up with Hannah and her father. Unfortunately for any chairs looking to get their big break in acting, the young actress playing Hannah is more wooden than they could ever hope to be.

The rest of the film is a take-off of sorts on both Dawn Of The Dead (the group raid some shops, have a laugh then make some thoughtful, deep comments on the future of the human race) and Day Of The Dead (the group end up at a military base full of arsehole soldiers who keep some of the infected locked up).

Generally the acting is of a very high standard (with the exception of the aforementioned mahogany girl, of course). Christopher Eccleston appears near the end of the movie as the leader of a military group and more or less steals the show with his performance, which is just as well because the rest of this final act is a bit rubbish. What was before a thought-provoking film about survival and what exactly the end of the world would mean (“you’ll never be able to read a new book or see a new film”), becomes a men-with-guns-versus-zombies blastfest which seems somewhat out of place in a film that has for the most part been human-free.

You see, what makes the scenes with the infected so scary is the fact that the film’s locales are quiet and tranquil for the vast majority of the time (since the towns and motorways are deserted), so when the infected arrive, there’s a clear change in atmosphere – what was once calm and peaceful has been flipped onto its arse, and shit’s about to go down. This is best demonstrated in the excellent tunnel scene where the arrival of the infected is indicated with a fantastic shot where we see their sprinting shadows growing ever larger on a wall near the tunnel entrance. Once at the military base however, it’s constant noise and fast-paced hullabaloo until the credits.

Despite this jarring change of pace, 28 Days Later is an outstanding horror film that comes thoroughly recommended. The soundtrack is superb, the direction is gritty and while it’s slightly scary to think that it’s a decade old now, it’s even scarier to think that not much British horror has been able to rival it in this period.

Four out of five

How to see it
28 Days Later is widely available on DVD and Blu-ray, both on its own and as part of a box-set with its sequel 28 Weeks Later. For the most part it’s fairly pointless getting the Blu-ray if you’re hoping for a better picture because the majority of the film was shot on a Canon DV camera, meaning the DVD quality is more or less as good as it gets. That said, the final act does switch to 35mm film and it’s here that the Blu-ray comes into its own and looks much better than the DVD.

Bits and pieces
• If you get the chance, check out the 28 Days Later: The Aftermath graphic novel by Steve Niles. It consists of four smaller stories taking place at different moments in the outbreak
timeline (a few days before, the day of the outbreak, 29 days later and 38 days later) and is bloody grim stuff.

• When the film was released in US cinemas, it was screened for a month before Fox Searchlight sent an extra ending to cinemas and asked for it to be attached to the end of all 1400 reels. Spoilers ahead, so beware. In the normal ending Jim, Selena and Hannah escape to a small cottage and are found by a Finnish helicopter, but in the alternative ending (the one Danny Boyle says he considers the ‘true’ ending), Jim dies in hospital leaving Selena and Hannah to go on without him. Both endings are on the DVD and Blu-ray, along with a couple others.

• Danny Boyle used the track An Ending (Ascent) by Brian Eno in the film and its trailer. He clearly liked its peaceful, haunting melody because he used it again during the London 2012 Olympic opening ceremony during the memorial wall section.

• There’s a deleted scene on the DVD that’s a bit legally dubious. While Jim, Selena, Hannah and Hannah’s dad are driving a taxi cab, Selena pretends to be a Cockney cabbie. “I had that Michael Jackson in the cab the other day,” she says. “Did he give a good tip?” asks Hannah’s dad. “Yeah,” Selena replies. “Don’t have sex with anyone over 16.” Quite.

Director: Dave Payne

Starring: Maria Ford, Rodger Halston, Lisa Boyle, Bob McFarland

MCKAY – “Jinx is dead, and it’s not a pretty sight.”
PETE – “Ooh, open casket or closed casket?”
MCKAY – “No casket.”

When a movie’s title is simply those of two cult sci-fi classics slapped together, it should hardly shock you to the core to discover that the film itself is essentially 90 minutes of clichés. While it doesn’t really reference *The Terminator* in anything but name alone, *Alien Terminator*’s plot is more or less a direct lift from *Alien* with a bit of *The Thing* thrown in for good measure. It should probably have been called *Alien Thing*, really.

After years working underground in self-imposed isolation, a group of scientists are spending their last day together before their work is over and they get to return to the surface. As is so often the case in these set-ups a spanner is thrown into the works, and this metaphorical spanner happens to be a mutated rat.

You see, one of the scientists is actually working on a secret project, trying to create the ultimate biological weapon. This results in one of his rats going apeshit, killing the other mice in his cage and then escaping through the air vent. It’s a bit like the scene with the dogs in *The Thing*, except on a much smaller scale and off-camera to save budget.

Eventually the rat kills a cat and then infects one of the workers and that’s when everything goes all *Alien*, to the outrageously plagiaristic extent that one of the guys is seemingly killed by a smaller creature then comes back to life, is feeling fine and then has an alien burst out of him at the dinner table. Through his back though, of course, because if it came through his chest you’d actually get to see it and it would have cost money to do.

It’s the low budget that really makes itself most apparent in *Alien Terminator*. The main ‘alien’ is a guy in a ridiculous furry suit, the scientist’s futuristic tools include some Virtual Reality glasses and some hideous CGI animations, and it quickly becomes apparent that most of the budget was blown on the big explosion that takes place near the end of the film.

Meanwhile, the dialogue is as predictable as you can get – it’s not an exaggeration to say that nearly every scene contains at least a few lines of typical sci-fi/action cliché dialogue. There’s the classic “How are you holding out” / “Gee, I didn’t know you cared” interchange, the vintage “I’m going back for her” / “dammit, she’s probably already dead” / “but I need to know for sure” debate, and of course who could forget the classic “we need to stop this thing” / “what do you mean we, I don’t get paid enough to have that thing kill me” argument?
These clichés aren’t solely restricted to the dialogue, mind you – they’re weaved throughout the plot, the casting decisions, and every other aspect of the movie. There’s the faceless organisation boss who orders a controversial decision, the secret double agent and the attractive hard-ass woman who doesn’t have time for men but will ultimately fall in love with one of them by the end. And, of course, you can easily spot a mile off the weaker actress who has clearly just been hired because she’s got the biggest breasts and is willing to get them out (which she predictably does for no reason).

_Alien Terminator_ is goofy fun if you fancy a game of Spot The Stereotype. It’s not a well-made film by any means, but it’s worth a watch for a laugh.

Two out of five

**How to see it**
_Alien Terminator_ is available on Region 1 DVD, so any Americans looking for a cheesy sci-fi fix can find it there. It’s not currently available in the UK though, so any Brits hoping to see it will either need to import the US disc or get their hands on the only Region 2 version, a German disc released by Valial.

**Bits and pieces**
- This is not to be confused with Top Line (1988), an Italian film known as Alien Terminator outside of America. That one actually has aliens in it, not to mention an over-the-top ending with UFOs.
- The aforementioned willing-to-strip actress is Maria Ford, a former Las Vegas showgirl. She was once quoted as saying: “I’m willing to take my clothes off for 10% of a film so I can act in the other 90%.” You know what, this one’s so easy I’ll let you make up your own punchline.
- One of the film’s three credited stuntmen is the tremendously-named S. Hooperman. It seems he never appeared in any other film, so either it was a fake name so he didn’t have to be associated with it, or he died of shame after taking part.
Alien Undead (2010)

Director: Gregory Connors

Starring: Tonia Renee, Bret Kennedy, Ozzie Devrish

Also known as: The Dark Lurking (US), Alien Vs Zombies

“What hell have you unleashed down here?”

Well, this is just bloody silly. In a research facility one mile below the Earth’s surface (aren’t they all?), a team of scientists is working on a batch of genetically mutated humans spliced with the DNA of the devil. Yes, the actual devil. Christ knows how they managed to get a cheek swab from him. Naturally, things go a bit awry and a group of eight survivors try to escape the facility before the newly angry devil-mutants now roaming the corridors manage to get hold of them.

This being a low-budget Australian horror film, these eight people conveniently fit nicely into their own stereotypical roles. There’s the loudmouth smartass woman who just sits there and says “yeah, reeeeeeal smart idea, let’s just get ourselves killed” without actually contributing any ideas herself, there’s the effeminate wimpy guy who’s terrified of everything, there’s the tough guy, there’s the old scientist lady who plays dumb but really knows what’s going on and of course there’s the ethnic minority chap, who in this is just another Australian putting on an atrocious South American accent of some sort.

And then there’s Lena, the heroine apparent of this piece. We first see her waking up naked in an all-white room in a scene stolen wholesale from the start of the first Resident Evil movie, and throughout the film it becomes clear that while she has no idea who she is and how she got there, these answers are going to reveal a rather dodgy secret.

Given its “people with guns fighting mutants underground” plot it’s not surprising that Alien Undead is packed to the brim with clichés. What makes it entertaining though is that these clichés are exaggerated to a ridiculous degree. The “tough guy” has a voice that’s so low and raspy it just has to have been dubbed on in post-production, and when confronted by a bunch of mutants he always lets out a loud scream while firing seemingly hundreds of shots from his small handgun (without ever reloading, naturally). The “annoying” woman is unbearable and the scared chap camps it up so much he may as well be played by Louis Spence.

In all, it’s fair to say Alien Undead was robbed when it was narrowly pipped to the post by The King’s Speech as Best Picture at the 2011 Academy Awards. Actually, sarcasm aside and to its credit, this is a film that just goes mental and doesn’t give a shit and for that I have to admit I was a little impressed by its balls.
By no means is this a fantastic film, or even a very good one. Is it well-made? Not at all. Is the acting of a greater standard than what you might see from someone dressed as a pirate at Legoland? Not really. But is it fun with a group of people? Certainly.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

_Alien Undead_ is available on DVD in both the UK and US though it’s not as straightforward as that. In the UK it’s known as _Alien Undead_, whereas in the US it’s called _The Dark Lurking_. To confuse things further, it was recently re-released in the UK as _Alien Vs Zombies_ (which still makes no sense), complete with an outrageous cover that blatantly shows a creature nearly identical to those in the _Alien_ movies (you guessed it, nothing of the sort features in the film).

Bits and pieces

• The Japanese title is _Alien In Cube_, which almost makes it sound brilliant. The fact there’s no cube in it apparently isn’t important, but I suppose there are no undead in it either and that didn’t stop them.

• You may be wondering how the scientists managed to get DNA from the Devil in order to create these mutants. Apparently when God kicked the Devil to Earth he left DNA when he landed. That’s the DNA they’re using. I wish I was making this up.
**Amityville 3D (1983)**

**Director:** Richard Fleischer

**Starring:** Tony Roberts, Tess Harper, Meg Ryan

*LISA – “I hear you bought yourself a haunted house, John.”
JOHN – “I just bought the house, not the ghost.”*

(Nota - This review is based on the 3D version of the film supplied on the Region 2 DVD by Sanctuary so any references to the 3D effects may not necessarily apply to the version you watch. The film is also available in a 2D version, which inevitably affects how entertaining the film is.)

Had *Amityville 3D* not been in 3D it would be quite the stinker. As it is however, it’s actually fairly entertaining to watch and some of the scenes of sheer tedium (including the frankly overly-repetitive discussions on whether or not the house is evil) aren’t quite as boring due to the distraction of the 3D effect.

3D aside, this third instalment in the *Amityville* series is a run-of-the-mill, scare-free ghost story which makes little or no sense and never really makes you care for the actors. Indeed, most of the film will be taken up by you either saying how good or bad the last 3D bit was or, if you’re watching the 2D version, guessing which bits would have been in 3D (answer: all of them).

The plot isn’t too different from that of the original film. A couple of fake psychics are kicked out of the old Amityville house by John Baxter (a paranormal scam investigator) for trying to trick people into thinking they can contact their dead relatives. This leaves the house empty for Baxter to buy it and move in. Naturally, strange goings-on then begin to happen to everyone around Baxter (including his ex-wife and daughter), but he’s not having any of it and he’s determined to move in. Cue numerous people entering the house on their own and meeting grisly deaths.

There are, put simply, no scares to be had whatsoever in *Amityville 3D*. The 3D effect may cause you to jump ever so slightly the first time a fly comes towards the screen, but after that it’s ineffective.

There aren’t too many deaths here either, yet what’s there is reasonably inventive. ‘Death By Flies’ is quite good if a little confusing (how can flies kill you?) and ‘Death By Accidentally Setting Your Car On Fire’ is pleasing to watch, but the real star is easily ‘Death By Getting Pulled Into A Hole In The Floor Of The Basement By A Random Monster’.

While *Amityville 3D* was originally released in cinema with polarised (clear) glasses, the 3D technique used in the Sanctuary release of *Amityville 3D* is anaglyph (red-and-blue glasses). While it was originally shot in 3D it still gives the impression of a retrospective 3D conversion with actors still looking 2D on 3D planes, a bit like cardboard cut-outs walking
around in a pop-up book. It’s still pretty interesting, though the closer things get to you the poorer the effect becomes. It’s ironic that the most effective examples of the 3D effect are scenes where very little is happening other than dialogue, because any time it tries to do something crazy things get blurry and misaligned.

If you can get a hold of the 3D version of Amityville 3D, it’s highly recommended if only for the cheesy fun you get watching it with the full 3D effect (even though it’s nowhere near the best 3D you’ll ever see). However, if all you can get is the 2D version, do not under any circumstances expect anything approaching a decent film. The characters are flat and dull, the scares are almost non-existent and the effects are poor at best. In 3D, it’s enough of a distraction to prove enjoyable.

Two out of five

How to see it
UK film-lovers can buy Amityville 3D in a snazzy Collector’s Edition from Sanctuary (the version reviewed), complete with a couple of pairs of red-and-blue 3D glasses. In the US, it’s currently only available in 2D under its alternative title, Amityville III: The Demon. There’s also a nifty box set available in the US featuring the first three Amityville Horror movies and a documentary called Amityville Confidential.

Bits and pieces
• Don’t be confused if you see an American DVD entitled Amityville 3D – it isn’t in 3D. The film was initially released on DVD under this title, despite only containing a 2D version. After a while, presumably due to complaints, it was withdrawn and replaced with copies bearing the Amityville III: The Demon title.

• This was one of 22-year-old Meg Ryan’s first films. She’s got a small role as Lisa, a friend of Baxter’s daughter. She obviously owes all her success to her performance in Amityville 3D (she doesn’t).

• Almost all the scenes shot outside the famous house are shot from one side of it. That’s because by the time filming took place the owners of the real-life house removed the famous round windows from one side and replaced them with square ones. Since the round windows are what make the Amityville house so iconic, the filmmakers filmed all the external shots from the side that still had round windows.
Attack Of The Super Monsters (1982)

Director: Tom Weiner

Starring (voices): Tom Weiner, Cam Clark, Robin Beth Levenson, Joe Perry

“This is a real emergency: the super monsters have sent a triceratops to the outer suburbs of the city.”

This film is fucking nuts, so let me try to take you through the plot. It turns out that the dinosaurs didn’t actually die out millions of years ago: instead they’ve been living underground. In that time they’ve managed to learn how to speak English by reading humans’ minds and have appointed a leader, the evil Emperor Tyrannus (a T-Rex).

Tyrannus summons Eddy the allosaurus and tells him to go up to Earth to start up some shit. Eddy shoots some beams out of his eyes at some dogs, causing them to turn into evil red dogs and maul their owners. Oh, by the way, the dinosaurs are guys in suits (Godzilla-style) but the dogs and humans are anime cartoons. Think Roger Rabbit in reverse.

Things get even weirder when we’re introduced to the Gemini Squad. They consist of Jim and Gem (who are brother and sister), Gerry (a fat guy) and Wally (a science officer with a weird face). Oh, and a doctor called Carmody who somehow knows everything that’s going on and has an explanation for it all.

Anyway, it’s clear while watching Attack Of The Super Monsters that it’s actually four episodes of some Japanese TV show haphazardly edited together to make a movie. Four different dinosaurs are summoned throughout the film and they’re all defeated in the same way: Jim and Gem merge their energy to form Gemini, a weird genderless robot thing who can somehow pilot a spaceship a bit better, then proceed to kill the dinosaur in question (which then blows up for no reason).

It’s a bizarre mix of live-action kaiju “man in suit” shenanigans, anime-style cartoons and crap model vehicle shots reminiscent of an even lower-budget version of Thunderbirds. Yet despite how rubbish it all looks it’s got a charm that makes it fun to watch throughout. The script is so awful it’s hilarious, the dinosaurs have amazingly hammy voices and it’s all just a good bit of fun.

In all, it’s worth a watch, if only so you can say you’ve seen a pterodactyl command some bats into turning some men into skeletons before said pterodactyl slams into a skyscraper over and over again. And who doesn’t wish they could say that?

Three out of five

How to see it
Attack Of The Super Monsters is only currently available on Region 1 DVD, so if you’re a Brit you’ll need to import.
**Bits and pieces**

- The film is indeed a compilation of four episodes of a Japanese TV show. Tsuburaya Productions, the studio behind popular TV superhero Ultraman, created the show and named it *Dinosaur War Izenborg*. It wasn’t until a decade later that four episodes were joined together as *Attack Of The Super Monsters*.

- The bizarre hermaphrodite android Gemini makes a bit more sense in the Japanese version, where it’s called *Izenborg* (hence the title). In Japan, Jim and Gem are called Ai and Zen, so when they merge they form Ai-Zen-Borg (as in cyborg). Look, it’s not quite Captain Planet but just go with it.
Axe (1977)

Director: Frederick R Friedel

Starring: Leslie Lee, Jack Canon, Ray Green, Frederick R Friedel

Also known as: Lisa, Lisa, The Virgin Slaughters, California Axe Massacre

(a tortured man jumps out a window to his death)
LOMAX: “Why’d he do that? That was twelve floors.”
STEELE: “Nah, it was only nine.”

There’s nothing like the power of advertising. Axe was originally called Lisa, Lisa and was meant to be an artsy-fartsy look at the lengths people under attack will go to, and the disturbing things they’d do to protect themselves and their family. It didn’t do too well so it was rebranded Axe and started doing the drive-in circuit in America under the guise of a horror film. In some parts it was even renamed again, this time to the even less subtle California Axe Massacre, despite the fact there’s no massacre in it and it’s set nowhere near California.

The story is similar to many of the ‘revenge’ movies that were so popular at the time. A gang of three ne’er-do-wells are on the run from the police so after killing a chap by beating him to death with a doll (seriously) and cutting his nose off, then traumatising a woman in a supermarket by shooting a bottle of ketchup above her head (I didn’t get it either), they seek solace in a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere.

The problem is, the farmhouse is the home of teenage Lisa and her fully paralysed granddad. Well, I say fully paralysed, but he’s got a different facial expression in every scene and can sometimes be seen moving his eyes or shaking, meaning instead he just looks like a man sitting there not doing anything.

Anyway, the three decide to take over the house and torment Lisa and her granddad. She’s not having it though, and after one of them tries a bit of illicit fiddling she kills him and cuts him into pieces with an axe. I’d have gone for the pepper spray myself, but I’ve never been in that situation so what do I know.

The rest of the movie consists of Lisa trying to make sure the other two gang members aren’t suspicious while also protecting her granddad from any harm. Yet despite being a brisk 68 minutes long, Axe somehow still has the ability to feel sluggish and boring at times. The acting is beyond woeful – I really hope the ‘actress’ playing Lisa was trying to make her sound a bit mental and that wasn’t her actual acting style – and that goes for everyone including the director, Frederick F Friedel, who stars as Billy, the member of the gang who has a conscience and starts to feel sorry for Lisa. Meanwhile, the poor performances are underlined with a bizarre soundtrack consisting mainly of bongo drums and saxophones.
It’s clear that had Axe kept its original title of Lisa, Lisa it probably would have escaped the DPP’s Video Nasties list and would never been banned in the UK. Everything that could be controversial is actually pretty tame: there are only three killings and they mostly take place off-screen, the attempted sexual assault scene is a fully clothed affair and doesn’t rely on exploitative nudity to titillate audiences, and as a result it’s dwarfed by most of today’s horror films (not to mention many of those released at the same time) when it comes to notorious material.

As a video nasty, it’s not really nasty at all. There’s one scene involving a flick knife, and all the rest of the kills happen off-screen. There’s a fair amount of (unrealistic) blood but it’s rarely seen coming out of anyone, it’s generally just seen as stains on the floor or on the killers’ clothing. It’s no worse than the likes of Halloween and really should never have been banned in the first place, which is why these days it’s once again readily available to buy uncut.

Axe isn’t a completely terrible film: the first fifteen minutes are interesting and the supermarket scene is genuinely memorable, if a little odd. It’s certainly not enough to recommend a film on one scene though, and as a result I’d only recommend watching it if, like me, you’re trying to see as many Video Nasties as possible. In fact, the trailer’s much more fun to watch than the film, so hunt that down on YouTube instead.

One and a half out of five

How to see it
Though it was once banned in the UK as one of the 73 video nasties, Axe is now available fully uncut in the UK on Region 2 DVD courtesy of 4Digital Media. The Region 1 disc released in the US by Something Weird Video is much better though, because it’s packed with bonus features including a second film by the same director, The Electric Chair, which is actually longer than the main feature and arguably more entertaining. It’s yet to see a Blu-ray release.

Bits and pieces
• For those not familiar with the DPP’s ‘Video Nasty’ list (on which Axe was included), it was a list made public in June 1983 by the Director of Public Prosecutions. The list consisted of various movies that were considered offensive and any stores selling them were subject to prosecution. In all a total of 72 films were added to the list, and while the vast majority are now available uncut in the UK, some are either available with cuts or remain banned altogether.

• Blood Feast, The Evil Dead, Night Of The Bloody Apes and The Witch Who Came From The Sea, all of which were also on the Video Nasty list, are reviewed elsewhere in this eBook. I intend to eventually watch and review all 72 films. One day.
Battle Royale (2000)

Director: Kinji Fukusaku

Starring: Tatsuya Fujiwara, Aki Maeda, Takeshi Kitano, Chiaki Kuriyama

“There’s a way out of this game. Kill yourselves together, here, now. If you can’t do that, then don’t trust anyone. Just run.”

Teenagers are pricks. That’s what Japan thinks in Battle Royale, and that’s why the film starts with the passing of the Millennium Educational Reform Act. A tricky piece of legislature, it basically sees one class of 15-year-old pupils (chosen by random lottery) being taken to a remote island each year and forced to kill each other. And to think we Brits rioted over tuition fees.

This year it’s the turn of Nanahara Shuya’s class, so as he and the rest of his unwitting fellow students set off on what they think is a class trip they don’t realise the bus is actually heading to Clusterfuck Island (which is unfortunately my name for it, not the film’s). Naturally, they’re a bit shocked to find out they’re all marked for death, and are equally surprised when their old school teacher, Kitano (of Takeshi’s Castle and a million other Japanese films fame) turns up to tell them the rules.

Kitano essentially tells the pupils that because the nation’s teenagers are arseholes they’re being taught a lesson. Each kid will be given a bag with supplies and a random weapon. It could be something really handy (like a crossbow or an Uzi) or it could be a load of pish (a frying pan, which might as well just be a shovel so they can dig their own grave in advance). They have to kill each other until one child remains, at which point that child will get to go back home... no doubt complete with the jaded, listless expression of a Soho madam.

The natural reaction in a situation like this would be to think of ways to get out of having to kill your mates, so Kitano goes on to explain (via a darkly comic instructional video) that the students can’t pull a fast one because of the steel collars around their necks. These collars track the students and monitor their pulse rates (so the organisers can tell if they’re dead). More importantly though, they’re also armed with powerful explosives which can be triggered at any time causing the wearer’s neck to explode, killing them.

These collars are a clever plot device because they explain away all the “what if they do this” questions with the simple answer “their neck will explode”. What if they try to remove the collar? Their neck will explode. What if they try to leave the island? The collar’s tracking them, so their neck will explode. What if everyone decides to call a truce and spend the rest of their lives on the island? Bit pointless, because the game has a time limit of three days, after which point everyone’s neck will explode. Basically, they can’t get out of it without their throat turning into a Disneyland firework.

Considering Battle Royale has the difficult task of introducing a cast of 42 characters and trying to make them all interesting, it actually does a very good job of this. While some
pupils only get a few seconds of screen time or are already found dead, the vast majority (even the bit-part characters) still feel like individual characters with their own personalities, which keeps things interesting as each pupil tries to play the game their own way.

The classroom slut uses her sexuality to seducing male pupils until they drop their guards and she can kill them, while deep down she just wants attention. The loving couple decide they can’t take it and jump off a cliff hand-in-hand. The virgin, in an act of desperation, threatens to rape the athletic girl (played by Chiyaki Kuriyama who later played GoGo in Kill Bill), but gets what he deserves. The shy girls try to call a truce but only draw attention to themselves from the more dangerous pupils. The geeks try to hack the military network to bring the system down. The constant sideplots and different methods make the film immensely engaging and while you may think you know who’s going to survive at the end, you’re never really sure until the film’s conclusion.

Everything about *Battle Royale* oozes class. The music is a powerful mix of classical music and dramatic “DA DA DA DUM” stings when something shocking happens. The occasional appearances by Kitano keep a vein of dark humour flowing throughout the film. The death scenes are realistic enough to shock, but not too gory to disgust. And the ending, while a little ludicrous (featuring one of the oddest death scenes you’ll ever see), is still fitting.

*Battle Royale* is a film you really should see. It makes you consider an interesting question (could you kill all your friends if it was the only way to stay alive?) and is handled with a surprising degree of tact given the subject matter.

*Five out of five*

**How to see it**

*Battle Royale* is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in the UK and US. The best version is the UK Blu-ray from Arrow Video, which is a three-disc edition featuring both the Theatrical Cut and Special Edition of the films. US movie-lovers should get the *Battle Royale: The Complete Collection* Blu-ray set, which contains both *Battle Royale* movies. In 2010, the film was also re-released in Japan in 3D to celebrate its 10th anniversary, so a 3D Blu-ray can be bought from there. It’s region-locked though.

**Bits and pieces**

- If you’re intrigued by *Battle Royale*, I recommend you buy the novel the film was based on, written by Koushun Takami. As is usually the case with books later adapted as movies, there’s a hell of a lot more plot in there and each character is given a more detailed background.

- If you prefer your stories with pictures, there’s also an excellent 15-volume manga series which was translated to English and sold by Tokyopop. Being a manga though, it’s much more sexually explicit than the film, so bear that in mind if you’re not too keen on seeing schoolkids getting it on. And why would you be?

- It’s difficult to decide whether the Theatrical or Special Edition version of the film is best. The latter is eight minutes longer and consists mainly of flashbacks and epilogues intended
to flesh out the characters a little. It also adds a little CGI blood to make the deaths look more brutal.
Battle Royale II: Requiem (2003)

Directors: Kinji Fukasaku, Kenta Fukasaku

Starring: Tatsuya Fujiwara, Ai Maeda, Riki Takeuchi

“The thing people fear most isn’t dying, it’s being forgotten.”

I went into Battle Royale II desperately worried that I wouldn’t like it. All I’d heard from the (limited) number of reviews by the lucky people who had seen it at film festivals and the like was that it was a terrible film that embarrassed the honour of the original. As I love the first film to bits, a shit sequel would have devastated me. As it turned out however, there was no need to worry: while it’ll never be as good as its predecessor, Battle Royale II is an enjoyable film from start to finish.

Set three years after the first movie, the survivor (I won’t spoil who it is in case you haven’t seen it) has set up the terrorist group Wild Seven, in an attempt to bring down the adults of Japan. Wanted for a large-scale terrorist attack (suspiciously reminiscent of September 11) in which two towers in Japan are blown up, the Wild Seven terrorist group escape and take refuge in an offshore island. The Japanese government quickly passes the ‘Battle Royale II’ Act, and another class of ninth graders is randomly selected to take part. This time the rules are different: instead of killing each other, the class of 42 must travel to the island where Wild Seven are hiding and kill the previous survivor. Once he dies, the game is over.

I was glad that they kept a number of key qualities and properties from the first film that made it so appealing: the dramatic orchestral soundtrack, the innocence of the children, the evil teacher that explains the rules while killing some slackers at the start to show it’s not a game, and the famous death count (the message at the bottom that comes up after a death saying, for example, “Boy #7 Yoshitoki Kuninobu dead. 41 to go”).

Instead of taking away many of the original’s qualities then, Battle Royale II instead builds on them with new rules. The boys are now paired with their correspondingly-numbered female classmates on the class register, and their explosive collars are linked. So if Boy #1 (Aoi Takuma) dies, Girl #1 (Asakura Nao) will find her collar starts to beep. After 30 seconds or so, as in the first film, the collar will explode and she’ll be forced to say a rather prompt farewell to her windpipe as it flies across the room. This also happens when partners stray 50 metres from each other so if a student and their partner don’t stick together they’ll be sticking to the walls instead.

This addition to the rules is cleverer than one would initially think. Not only does it allow for spectacular set pieces and forced teamwork, it also kills the “nameless” characters twice as quickly, leaving us with the important ones earlier on in the film, therefore giving us more time to relate to them and find out more about their personalities. While the original film had a wide variety of interesting characters, most of the pupils in the sequel are fairly generic so their swift removal is no big loss.
Despite the similarities to the original however this is a very different film, which becomes clear about 25 minutes in when the pupils storm an island on a boat Omaha Beach style, at which point 12 of them are killed in one go. There’s no methodical one-at-a-time chipping away of the pupil list here, and by the half-way stage of the film the whole concept of the Battle Royale game has been practically abandoned and it becomes more of a war movie with the students teaming up with the Wild Seven terrorist group and swarms of adult special forces soldiers coming in and getting gunned down in huge numbers. The whole second half has a feel very different from that of the original film, and though it may not be to everyone’s tastes, it cannot be denied that Battle Royale II is far more action-packed than its predecessor.

Many were worried by the death of director Fukasaku shortly after production began and the decision to hand the rest of the film over to his inexperienced son. However, much as I hate to say it (because I respected Fukasaku’s work) this film blows the original out of the water in terms of visual style and camera work. The battle scenes are fantastic, with erratic camera movements perfectly conveying the confusion of war. These scenes have a gritty, almost documentary-like feeling to the action, putting the viewer right in there with the terrified students.

It even outdoes the original in the ‘mental school teacher’ role, thanks to Takeuchi Riki and his over-the-top performance. In any other film this guy would be considered ridiculous (see Takashi Miike’s gangster film Dead Or Alive, in which he pulls a gem out of his chest and causes the world to explode), but in this he seems suited to the role as a teacher gone mad. Add to that cameo appearances from the first film including Takeshi Kitano (the original teacher), the girl who played Noriko and even the little smiley girl with the doll from its prologue and you’ve got enough nods in there for Battle Royale fans without resulting in a bewildering experience for newcomers.

I warn you though that, from what I can tell by online opinion, I’m very much in the minority when it comes to this sequel. Many others say this is a dismal film and a weak follow-up to a classic original. Whether that’s because they were expecting more of the same or it just didn’t click with them isn’t known, but it’s worth bearing in mind that just because I like it doesn’t mean it’s any good. I do like some proper shite, after all. All I’m saying is watch it, but don’t spend a lot of money to do so.

Three out of five

How to see it
Because it isn’t quite as iconic or as well-loved as its predecessor, Battle Royale II doesn’t have the same lavish three-disc Blu-ray treatment in the UK as Arrow Video gave the first film. There is a three-disc Region 2 DVD but it’s out of print now, meaning the bare-bones effort from Tartan Video is the best you’ll get in Britain without having to undergo a lengthy search. In the US, it can only be bought in a Blu-ray or DVD boxset along with the original film.

Bits and pieces
• Quentin Tarantino (a vocal fan of the first Battle Royale) was originally due to appear in the film in a cameo role as the President of the United States, but couldn’t make it due to a scheduling conflict. Shame, that would’ve been interesting.

• Every now and then someone threatens to remake Battle Royale with an American cast. I don’t see it ever happening, because school shootings still happen too regularly in the US to make this an acceptable subject for an American film. Mind you, they sort of already did remake it, as The Hunger Games. That’s right, I went there.

Director: Scott Glosserman

Starring: Nathan Baesel, Angela Goethals, Robert Englund

“Never hang out with a virgin. You got a virgin in your crew, either get somebody in her pants or get the hell away from her.”

*Behind The Mask* is a clever movie. It fools you into thinking it’s only pretty clever, then completely turns things upside down in the final act to show you that, in fact, it’s more than just pretty clever. It’s actually very clever, maybe even ruddy clever.

At first it’s a fly-on-the-wall documentary, with a crew following Leslie Vernon (the oddly appealing Nathan Baesel), an up-and-coming slasher villain who one day dreams of being as famous as Freddy Krueger or Jason Voorhees. Leslie takes the crew round his local haunts, introduces them to his parents and shows them his target girl, the one he’s chosen to stalk.

Leslie plans to attack this “hero girl” in typical slasher style, by breaking into the house during the party she’s set to throw with her friends and killing them off one by one. He’ll use every trick in the slasher book to get them, from cutting the power off so one of them goes into the basement, to hiding the bodies in such a way that they’re found at just the right time.

Every scene had me smiling with its numerous nods to previous horror films and an overall attention to horror cliche detail. Leslie shows how many of the typical horror set-pieces are really done — when a girl’s on her own and the door slam shuts behind her, it’s because the killer has already set up the door and pulled it shut with fishing wire.

It’s all darkly comic and entertaining until the night of the party, when the camera crew and presenter are forced with a moral dilemma — do they allow Leslie to go ahead with his plan and actually kill all these kids, or do they try to interfere and risk pissing him off? The resulting final act is gripping stuff with a fantastic twist that, while one you’re likely to figure out five minutes before the characters do, is still smartly handled.

*Behind The Mask* is a surprisingly original movie with a strong cast. A notable mention should go to Robert Englund as he performs his best professor-who-knows-the-killer impression in the style of Donald Pleasance in *Halloween*. I strongly recommend this if you fancy something different.

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**

*Behind The Mask* is available on DVD in the UK, and both DVD and Blu-ray in America (Region B only). If you live in the UK and desperately need to see it in HD, there’s a German Blu-ray available (the audio is still undubbed English).
**Bits and pieces**

- Both Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger) and Kane Hodder (the definitive Jason) appear in this film. Since Kane Hodder didn’t play Jason in *Freddy Vs Jason*, this is one of the few movies that both horror legends appear in. It isn’t the first, mind – that was *Wishmaster*, which also starred *Candyman* star Tony Todd. Englund and Hodder also teamed up for a web series called *Fear Clinic*, which is well worth a watch.

- There are loads of very subtle horror film references dotted around the film. Keep an eye out for the puzzle box from *Hellraiser* (sitting on a table during an interview). Also, when Leslie is putting on his makeup, listen out for the song that plays at the end of *The Shining* during the shot of the hotel photo.

- This was the last film appearance by Zelda Rubenstein, aka the little squeaky-voiced woman from *Poltergeist*. She died a few years later.
Bless The Child (2000)

Director: Chuck Russell

Starring: Kim Basinger, Jimmy Smits, Christina Ricci, Angela Bettis, Rufus Sewell

“The devil’s greatest achievement is that people don’t believe he exists. Nowadays, the concept of evil is politically incorrect.”

I had Bless The Child on my DVD shelf for years and never really felt the need to watch it. The front cover made it look like a cheap Exorcist rip-off and the only thing that really appealed to me was Christina Ricci (what can I say, I went through a brief Ricci phase at Uni before developing my more serious Kirsten Dunst phase). On at least five or six separate occasions I actually put it in my DVD player then changed my mind as it loaded and took it out. Finally, one night I thought “better get this over with”, slammed the bastard in and refused to turn it off no matter how bad it was going to be. I wasn’t exactly pleasantly surprised (as you were perhaps expecting me to say after that build-up), but it wasn’t quite as bad as I’d anticipated.

Maggie O’Connor (Basinger) is a bit pissed off when her sister Jenna (Bettis) suddenly turns up at her door one day with her newborn baby, dumps the baby in her house then fucks off. With Jenna eventually presumed dead, Maggie reluctantly decides to become baby Cody’s unofficial mother. It soon becomes apparent that Cody’s autistic but what isn’t so noticeable is the fact that she has special powers – she can make things spin, light candles with her mind and the like. If you ask me, what that child needs is a bloody good blessing.

Maggie copes for a few years until the very much not-dead Jenna comes back for her daughter with her new man, Eric Stark (Sewell). Not quite the killer catch, Stark is a devil worshipper who’s been killing children left, right and centre trying to find the one with the power to save mankind, or (by joining Stark and the devil) destroy it. Guess who that is then? No, not Kim Basinger. The girl.

Despite its Exorcist-aping DVD cover (in the UK at least), Bless The Child is not a scary film. With the exception of one scene in a subway this is a plot-driven horror film rather than one that relies heavily on ‘boo’ scares or moments of lengthy tension. As a result it never really has you on the edge of your seat but that’s not necessarily a bad thing because it was never trying to in the first place.

Despite how far-fetched the plot is, the film is played well enough to suspend the audience’s beliefs for a while and accept the goings-on as real possibilities. Holliston Coleman is excellent as little Cody, and the way she uses her powers can make you feel slightly uneasy whenever she’s on-screen. Basinger plays it as you would expect, with plenty of “I WANT THE GIRL BACK” screamfests and ample helpings of tears throughout, while Jimmy Smits does the job as the detective (even if he does seem to accept the many odd and paranormal occurrences far too easily, essentially believing anything Basinger tells him no matter how out there it seems).
In all though, my initial concerns about this being a load of old arse were unfounded. *Bless The Child* isn't the greatest film ever made and the special effects are pretty poor (with the exception of one decapitation scene), but it’s enjoyable enough. It takes itself very seriously but not enough to be considered boring or pretentious, and it should manage to keep your attention for an hour and a half.

*Three out of five*

**How to see it**

*Bless The Child* is available on DVD only, in both Region 1 and 2 formats.

**Bits and pieces**

- If you’re something of a reader (and you’d bloody better be if you’re grasping a Kindle at this very moment), then get your mitts on the *Bless The Child* novel, on which the film was based. It’s written by Cathy Cash Spellman, is apparently very good and can be bought in eBook format through the Kindle store.

- The US DVD cover is far more acceptable than the UK one, sporting a fairly generic flaming cross to emphasise the whole devil angle. The UK one, with its eerie green glow and a picture of a child floating, is what made me shun it for so long thinking it was an *Exorcist* rip-off.

- I feel duty bound to tell you that it seems I liked *Bless The Child* more than most others. It got a rating of 3% on Rotten Tomatoes and was considered by them to be the 29th worst movie of the 2000s as a result. I didn’t hate it that much.
Blood Car (2007)

Director: Alex Orr

Starring: Mike Brune, Anna Chlumsky, Katie Rowlett

“Puppies... you killed that girl with puppies.”

It is the near future – a few weeks from now, to be exact. Due to a crumbling economic framework the oil market has collapsed, making petrol as rare as gold dust and turning the roads entirely car-free. Nerdy vegan Archie Andrews (Mike Brune) thinks he’s got the solution to the problem and is working on a car that runs entirely on wheatgrass, but it isn’t going so well. Until he cuts his finger.

When just a drop of his blood gets into the fuel tank, Archie’s custom-built car suddenly springs to life. He quickly realises that not only does his car run on blood, it works far more efficiently than if he was using petrol.

Owning a car that actually runs makes Archie the cock of the walk, and he soon starts getting chatted up by the slutty Denise. This pisses off Lorraine (My Girl’s Anna Chlumsky, only about 15 years older), who works at the wheatgrass stall and is Archie’s secret admirer. Thus begins a battle for Archie’s heart while he tries to keep his blood-based secret to himself.

Driving the only car in town? Having two women fight over you? Sounds like a good situation for Archie to be in. What’s the problem, you may wonder. The problem is that Archie’s car starts running out of fuel again, and he can hardly keep draining his own blood to fill it up. He’s going to need more fresh blood, and the best way for him to do that is to start killing random people. Of course, being a vegan, that’s easier said than done.

Blood Car may be decidedly low-budget but that’s part of its charm. You forgive the cheesy special effects and the hammy acting because the cast seem like they’re having a ball and you don’t want to rock the boat by saying “um, no offence, but you’re shit Chlumsky”. While many of the jokes are iffy, there are some real winners in there and the film’s generally quirky mood will eventually win you over.

The only real problem with Blood Car is the ending, which just gets so ridiculous it stops being the funny little horror film it is and instead becomes a film trying too hard for attention.

Blood Car is cheesy, it’s eccentric, it’s low-budget and it’s funny. It’s not the greatest film of all time and it’s not exactly packed with memorable, show-stopping moments but it’s an entertaining enough way to spend an hour and a half.

Three out of five

How to see it
Blood Car is available on DVD in both the UK and America. There’s no Blu-ray release to date.

**Bits and pieces**

- Maybe I’m just incredibly ignorant, but I had no idea what wheatgrass was when I watched this film. Apparently it’s some sort of green drink extracted from wheat, which sounds like the most horrendous thing ever created.

- If you haven’t seen Anna Chlumsky (AKA ‘her from My Girl’) for a while, that’s because Blood Car was her first film in twelve years. Her last one before that was the 1995 ‘classic’ Gold Diggers: The Secret Of Bear Mountain. Don’t lie, you remember it well.
Blood Feast (1963)

Director: Herschell Gordon Lewis

Starring: Mal Arnold, William Kerwin

“Have you ever had... an EGYPTIAN FEAST?”

Herschell Gordon Lewis is often referred to as the Grandfather of Gore. He was the first filmmaker to make a truly bloody movie, at a time when the likes of Psycho and The Birds were shocking mainstream audiences with their relatively bloodless terror. While nowadays we’d think nothing of a horror film where someone dies a gory death, in 1963 it was a shocking sight.

It’s surprising then to see just how far Blood Feast goes, considering many credit it as the first ever gory movie. Eyeballs are stabbed, tongues and hearts are pulled out and heads are bashed in, leaving brains scattered on the floor. The effects aren’t very convincing (the blood is the brightest, reddest substance you’ll ever see) but it’s probably a good thing because it makes the film more entertaining. Had it had the realism of something like Saw or Hostel it would have been disturbing rather than chucklesome.

The plot’s fairly kooky. Ramses is an Egyptian caterer who has been asked by a wealthy woman to provide an Egyptian-themed feast for her daughter’s birthday party. Ramses is happy to help, mainly because he’s been killing lasses left, right and centre to prepare for an ancient Egyptian ritual in which he wants to bring an Egyptian goddess to life, and he reckons the party will be a great time to finish the job.

Despite the gore effects, the most entertaining aspect of Blood Feast is the bad acting. And when I say it’s bad I mean it’s absolutely atrocious. From the killer’s terrible accent and seeming inability to say a sentence properly (not to mention his laughably bizarre silver hair and eyebrows) to the mother of one victim who sounds like she’s laughing when she cries, the performances are laughably terrible. By far the worst/best of the bunch though is the chap playing one victim’s boyfriend, whose abysmal attempt at showing hysterical grief will lead to hysterical laughter from the viewer instead.

The script’s great too. From the unfortunate euphemisms (while discussing the murder case, one detective tells his partner “well Frank, it looks like one of those long, hard ones”) to some truly bizarre reactions (“Ramses was the killer we’ve been looking for, Mrs Fremont.” “Oh dear, the guests will have to eat hamburgers for dinner”) there are plenty of chuckles to be had.

Blood Feast is well worth seeing for a laugh, and at a brisk 67 minutes it won’t take up too much of your time. The gore is satisfying if unrealistic, but the acting is so bad that you’ll be laughing too much to care.

How to see it
Though it was once banned as a video nasty Blood Feast was released uncut in the UK on DVD by Tartan Video, though it’s currently out of print so you’ll need to try to find a second-hand copy. There’s an uncut American disc from Something Weird Video which is region-free (so it plays on UK players), is around a fiver from Amazon and has loads of great extras (as is the Something Weird way).

**Bits and pieces**

- I do like a good publicity stunt and Blood Feast’s producer David Friedman came up with a couple of crackers. The act of giving theatre-goers sick bags before they went in to see the film was clever enough, but he actually took out an injunction against the film in Sarasota, which of course meant everyone in Sarasota ended up wanting to see it.

- Reckon you’ve seen Mal Arnold, the chap who plays Ramses, before? Well, he was only ever in a couple of other films, most of which were pornos (including Goldilocks And The Three Bares), so I’m afraid that makes you a filthy bastard.
The Boneyard (1991)

Director: James Cummins

Starring: Ed Nelson, Deborah Rose, Norman Fell, Phyllis Diller

“The bodies... the bodies we saw? They’re not dead.”

This one’s a little off the wall. Alley Cates (Rose) is a psychic who’s been asked by the police to help them figure out what’s happened to three young children whose naked, rotting bodies have been found. When she gets to the morgue (which, conveniently, is underground and difficult to leave quickly) she realises that the ‘children’ are actually zombies who were afflicted with an ancient Chinese curse and are ready to wake up and munch on some human.

Typically the morgue’s exit is blocked, trapping Alley, an experienced police chief, his young deputy, a mortician and a suicidal young woman who was pretending to be a corpse (as you do). They need to figure out a way to get out of the morgue while also killing the three zombie children and any other monsters that turn up. And trust me, they do.

The first 25 minutes of The Boneyard are among the most boring I’ve seen. Literally all that happens during this period is the police chief asking the psychic to come and have a look at the bodies, but for some reason this is strung out to nearly half an hour of needless chat about their past that it’s impossible to give a shit about. If you were to switch the film off during this tedium, I wouldn’t blame you for a second.

Stick with it though, because once they get down into the morgue The Boneyard becomes a hilarious gem. The zombie child monsters are funny to watch, their bizarre little zombie bodysuits dripping with green ooze and gore. The dialogue is delightfully bad, the ‘chemistry’ between the rookie cop and the young suicidal lass is GCSE-level at best, the closing credits features one of the cheesiest ‘80s rock ballads you’ll ever hear (despite this being a ‘90s film) and there’s a genuine laugh-out-loud moment later in the film where 74-year-old Phyllis Diller calls Alley a “fat bitch”.

Speaking of which, there’s no denying that the heroine of this film could only be described as unconventionally-sized. While it’s nice to see a female star in a horror movie that isn’t just there to provide eye candy for once, perhaps it would have been slightly less off-putting if the casting director hadn’t chosen a woman who looks exactly like the bizarre lovechild of former WWF star Greg ‘The Hammer Valentine’ and Meat Loaf. It’s incredibly difficult to watch the whole film without being distracted after coming to that conclusion.

Despite the crushingly slow start and the casting of a female lead who looks like a 270-pound WWF mid-carder, The Boneyard’s back half more than makes up for it. When things get progressively worse for our protagonists and more monsters emerge, including the largest killer poodle you’ve ever seen (seriously), you can sit back at the end satisfied you’ve
seen something that was, if you’ll forgive the predictable usage of my own catchphrase, a bit mental.

*Three out of five*

**How to see it**
The *Boneyard* was released on DVD in the UK by Screen Entertainment though it’s currently out of print. There’s also a German DVD (which is still in full English) which can be bought through Amazon fairly cheaply. Americans have an easier route to it since it’s still readily available on DVD there.

**Bits and pieces**
• Speaking of Greg ‘The Hammer’ Valentine, he still has the odd independent wrestling match despite being into his 60s now. Meat Loaf’s still on the go too, apparently.

• Here’s a fun fact. When *The Boneyard* first came to video rental stores, it came with a box selling it as a horror film. As well as that, the stores were also given a different slip cover selling it as a comedy, allowing them to put it in the comedy section if they preferred.
Bruce Lee Fights Back From The Grave (1976)

Director: Doo-yong Lee

Starring: Jun Chong, Deborah Dutch

WONG: “Your threats don’t frighten me one little bit.”
SUZUKI: “You should be.”

Many martial arts films cash in on Bruce Lee’s name despite having little to do with the great man. Bruce Lee Fights Back From The Grave is obviously one such film, though you’ve got to applaud a movie that goes so far as making the outlandish claim that not only does Lee star in it, he actually does so after his untimely death.

Of course, this claim is complete bollocks. In reality the only thing this film has to do with Bruce Lee is a hastily cobbled-together intro showing a hilariously fake-looking gravestone with “BRUCE LEE” printed on it, which then explodes and is followed by some hideous fan art of Bruce Lee punching a dragon. Then the actual film, the one that has nothing to do with the legendary martial artist and was seemingly chosen at random to have this intro slapped onto it, properly begins.

The film tells the tale of Wong Han (played by Jun Chong – though the film credits him as “Bruce K.L. Lea”, no doubt to cover the filmmakers with a good “what? Oh you thought we meant THAT Bruce Lee” excuse). Wong is a Hong Kong man who comes to LA to meet his kung fu teacher friend who he hasn’t seen for three years. When he gets to his friend’s dojo, Wong finds that his chum’s been murdered by five men – “a Japanese, a white man, a black man, a Mexican and a cowboy”. Yes, a cowboy.

Wong vows revenge, and sets out on a Kill Bill-style mission to take down the five evil-doers. Don’t ask me how he goes about tracking them down, because this film is all over the place.

As he wanders around LA (while carrying his pal’s bones in a sling around his neck, naturally), Wong encounters a woman called Susan who’s being attacked. He saves her and gets talking to her, and as luck would have it she knows how to find all the men who killed his friend. What are the odds?

It’s difficult to put across how bad Bruce Lee Fights Back From The Grave is. The dubbing’s among the worst I’ve ever seen in a film, the fight scenes are laughably basic and poorly lit, and seriously – what the fuck is going on with him carrying those bones around?

The final ten minutes, in which Wong encounters the “cowboy” shortly before finding out a horrible secret, try to provide a clever twist but in reality just open up far more questions. Such as “why did these actors never make the big time?”

Despite the above you should still see this film, preferably with a group of like-minded cheese-lovers. You’ll chuckle at the scene where Wong is grilled by a police chief (“you’re
gonna get the chair!” “and what kind of chair is that?”

), guffaw at the pivotal car-buying scene, shake your head in amazement as Wong and Susan spend a needlessly long time looking for criminals at a racecourse only to leave and then go “oh, there they are”, and watch dumbfounded as Wong, who has to meet Susan by a certain time, is distracted by the shittest-looking carnival (stock footage, of course) for literally two hours.

It may not be the Bruce Lee film it masquerades as, but Bruce Lee Fights Back From The Grave turns out to be so much more. It’s a love story, it’s a thrilling mystery, it’s an action-packed extravaganza and, most of all, it’s a load of old shite. Get it watched.

Oh, and be sure to check out the trailer on YouTube, which blatantly states over and over again that this is definitely Bruce Lee and the film’s all about him fighting the “black angel of death” to come back to life. Which is like saying I’m Freddie Mercury.

Three out of five

How to see it
Bruce Lee Fights Back From The Grave is only available on Region 1 (US) DVD.

Bits and pieces
• Deborah Dutch has continued to star in numerous piles of old arse since appearing in this film. Here’s just a small taste of some of the pish she’s been in – Legal Briefs, Attack Of The 60 Foot Centerfolds, Bikini Witness, Vice Academy 4, Bikini Drive-In, Caged Women II. Seeing a theme?

• There are plenty of other Hong Kong films that pretend to feature Bruce Lee in order to cash in on the great man’s name. If you’re looking to see the legend in action, stay well away from Bruce Lee’s Deadly Kung Fu, Bruce Lee Vs The Supermen, The Spirit Of Bruce Lee, Treasure Of Bruce Lee, Goodbye Bruce Lee, Bruce’s Deadly Fingers and the fantastically titled The Black Dragon Revenges The Death Of Bruce Lee. None of them have anything to do with Bruce Lee.
Buffy The Vampire Slayer (1992)

Director: Fran Kuzul

Starring: Kristy Swanson, Donald Sutherland, Rutger Hauer, Luke Perry, Paul Reubens

“I’m the chosen one. And I choose to be shopping.”

Long before Buffy The Vampire Slayer became one of the most popular television shows of recent times, there was the Buffy movie. With a different tone, different storyline and different characters, the only real connection was that both were about a teenager who discovers she’s been chosen to fight vampires who are trying to destroy the world. While the TV series is undeniably better than the movie, there’s still some fun to be had here.

Buffy (Swanson) is your typical popular high school kid. She’s head of the cheerleading squad, all the lads fancy her and she spends her weekends at the mall with her clique of Clueless-a-like friends. Buffy’s perfectly content in her little bubble until it’s burst by Merrick, a well-spoken gent played by the legendary Donald Sutherland.

Merrick reckons Buffy is the chosen one, the one to save the world from the impending attack of Lothos, master of the vampires. At first she’s not having it, but after getting in a few scraps she ultimately accepts her destiny and sets about kicking some vampire arses in the hope of sorting things out in time for prom.

The most interesting thing about Buffy these days is the number of big names in its cast (many of whom weren’t big at the time, of course). Look! It’s a young Hilary Swank (pre-Oscar) in Buffy’s group of chums! Look really quickly! It’s an even younger Ben Affleck (pre-Oscar) in a blink-and-you’ll-miss-him cameo. Look once more! It’s David Arquette (pre-WCW Championship belt) getting bitten and turning into a shit vampire.

And that’s just the good guys. Among the baddies are cult legend Rutger Hauer as Lothos, the head of the vampires, who proceeds to chew as much of the scenery as he can find in a fantastically over-the-top performance. Meanwhile, the ‘bizarre casting decision’ award goes to Paul “Pee-wee Herman” Reubens as Lothos’ right-hand man. Watching Pee-wee try to play it serious as a long-haired vampire is a very odd experience though he ultimately fails to play it straight right through to the end of the movie, leading to one of the most memorable (and over-the-top) death scenes in cinematic history. Sort of.

While it has a different feel, different cast and different plot to the TV series that followed it, Buffy does at least share one crucial element with its serialised sibling – Joss Whedon. As his first major writing credit before going on to do Firefly, Serenity and of course the Buffy TV series, Buffy’s dialogue is a little shaky at times these days but certainly fits the era it’s from, showcasing Whedon’s knack for capturing teenage sarcasm perfectly. In any other movie Buffy would be an irritating character but here it seems to work, primarily because of the entertaining words Whedon puts in her mouth.
Even if you’ve never seen the TV series, *Buffy* is an interesting little curio that’s worth a watch. It’s very much trapped in the early ’90s (except for Luke Perry, whose fashion sense was probably odd at the time but seems strangely stylish 20 years later), but it’s a quirky film that deserves to stand on its own without the shadow of its far more successful offspring looming over it.

**Three out of five**

**How to see it**
*Buffy*’s available on bare-bones DVD in the UK, and DVD or Blu-ray in the US. The American Blu-ray is region-free, meaning UK Buffy fans can import it and it’ll work fine on a UK player.

**Bits and pieces**
• Yes, David Arquette really did once win a wrestling title. Not just any old title, but the WCW Heavyweight title. Less than a year later, WCW went under and was bought by the WWE. Funny, that.

• If you really need me to tell you about the *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* TV series that followed the movie, you are seriously out of touch with popular culture. Go find it on Netflix and watch the shit out of it.
Cannibal (2010)

Director: Benjamin Viré

Starring: Nicolas Gob, Helena Coppejans, Eric Godon, Philippe Nahon

“You want to change things? To alter nature? Nobody changes. A prat stays a prat, fat guys stay fat. A whore is a whore, a monster is a monster, whatever the clothes they’re wearing.”

Spare a thought for Max (Nicolas Gob). After a nasty past he doesn’t want to think about – but one you can bet will be brought up later in the movie – he’s become an agoraphobic, scared of unfamiliar environments or those where he has no control. Living a loner’s life in a cabin in the woods, Max only rarely leaves, usually to practice his golf. It’s a bit like how Tiger Woods must have been living in the days following the old ‘sinking the ball in two’ scandal.

One day during his practice Max comes across the body of a young woman (Coppejans) lying in the grass, covered in blood. He takes her home and washes her off, but notices she has no wounds – either someone’s got the painters in or that’s not her blood. Naming the girl Bianca (she doesn’t give her own name), Max develops an odd relationship with her, one in which he falls in love but has issues with her touching him because of his condition.

Things get significantly less normal one night when Bianca leaves the house. Upon realising she’s gone missing Max gives chase and finds her having sex with some random bloke shortly before munching into him like he was a big human-shaped apple. Yes, Bianca is a cannibal, and she gets her rocks off by shagging blokes then eating them. Not my cup of tea but then, who am I to judge – I like listening to Cyndi Lauper and watching films about midget spies (see the For Y’ur Height Only review).

Disgusted but intrigued, Max realises he still loves Bianca, and so the two form an odd unspoken agreement that they’ll have a relationship while she continues to eat people. There are people looking for Bianca though, people who want to bring her back to the life she was running from.

Despite its name, premise and gory DVD cover, Cannibal isn’t actually the madcap gorefest you may be expecting. It is in fact an artistically shot French movie that shares far more with the likes of the fantastic Haute Tension (Switchblade Romance) than it does with Zombie Flesh Eaters, Cannibal Holocaust et al.

There are some interesting stylistic choices made throughout the film, in particular with regards to colour. The forest scenes are moody and washed out, the colours muddy and the film quality deliberately gritty, grainy and decidedly low-budget. When Max travels to the city later in the movie, though, everything is shot in black-and-white, causing the once drab colour scheme of the forest to suddenly seem vibrant and full of life when Max has flashbacks.
If you’re expecting gore by the bucketload here, you’re going to be disappointed. There are only one or two scenes of actual cannibalism in this film and only one of these is grimace-inducing. It’s just not that sort of film, instead focusing on the relationship between Max and Bianca and his search for her after she goes missing in the second act.

*Cannibal* is a slow-paced, artistic film with curious cinematography and an interesting overall feel to it. As long as you’re not expecting *Dawn Of The Dead* and are willing to try to click with something less visceral, you may find it to be one of the most rewarding horror films this year. Its ambiguous ending will split opinion, but it’s well worth a watch.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

*Cannibal* is a fairly obscure film and can only be found on DVD in the UK. It hasn’t seen a North American release to date.

**Bits and pieces**

- Surprisingly, despite the average score I gave *Cannibal*, after this review was initially posted on the That Was A Bit Mental website I was informed by the film’s UK distributors that they were going to use a quote from the review on the back of the DVD box. Sure enough, find *Cannibal* in your local HMV and you’ll find yours truly declaring it as “one of the most rewarding horror films this year”, which is slightly more definitive than the original context. Meh,whatever.

- If you think cannibalism (otherwise known as anthropophagy) is grim, consider autophagia. That’s when people actually eat parts of their own body. Of course, most sensible people just stop at the fingernails.
**Children Of The Corn (1984)**

**Director:** Fritz Kiersch  
**Starring:** Linda Hamilton, Peter Horton, Courtney Gains

“Our time of tribulation has come. A test is at hand. A final test.”

Films based on Stephen King books are a mixed bunch. You have your great films that unfortunately have little to do with the book (*The Shining*), your great films that stick nearly 100% to the book (*Pet Sematary*), your non-horror films (*Stand By Me*) and your piles of shite (*Dreamcatcher*). Having not read the short story *Children Of The Corn* is based on I am not at liberty to suggest which category this film falls into, but needless to say it’s sure to be one of the first two because this is an enjoyable little flick.

A doctor (Horton) and his girlfriend (*The Terminator*’s Hamilton) are moving to the big city so he can set up a surgery. Whilst driving past a cornfield they hit a boy who steps onto the road. Realising he had already been stabbed, the doctor puts the body in his trunk and drives to the nearest town to get some help. Trouble is, the nearest town is Gatlin, a small countryside village much like any other you’d care to name. As long as you’re naming one in which the children have killed all the adults and are members of a religious cult.

There must be something about Stephen King books that makes their film adaptations scarier than most other movies. I can personally sit through 95% of most 80’s horrors without batting an eyelid. ‘Tense’ chase scenes don’t usually affect me and I can work out when the big scares are coming in most of the films, as they were more predictable back then. However, of the countless ’80s horror films I’ve seen, only a few succeed in making me feel extremely uneasy: among these are *Pet Sematary* and *Children Of The Corn*.

The film opens with a flashback of events that took place three years before the film is set, and right away the audience is thrown into the mix with a number of ‘scythe n’ knife’-related killings and a freaky looking Amish lad who looks as if he hasn’t slept for seven months. In time however, you may grow to feel sorry for him. Maybe.

The thing that really wins me over with *Children Of The Corn* is the imperfection of the two lead characters. Whereas in most films the hero is the virgin who never smokes, always does the right thing and collects injured birds off the road and gives them baths, *Children Of The Corn* forces you to question your feelings for the heroes.

This kicks off right from the first scene, where Burt refuses to propose to his girlfriend Vicky and doesn’t seem to have time for her. Meanwhile, when Burt suggests they take the injured kid’s body into town to get help Vicky at first refuses, showing a coldness not many ‘hero’ characters demonstrate. While this could have so easily resulted in a film with characters that the audience feels no sympathy for when they get involved in later events, the excellent performances by Peter Horton and Linda Hamilton coupled with the effective
script only make the characters more believable, bringing the audience closer to Burt and Vicky despite their foibles (after all, nobody’s perfect).

The real stars are the children, though. With so many young ‘uns on-screen it’s no doubt unsurprising that there’s a wide variety of ability on display. There are good kids, bad kids (the nameless ones who always seem to be there whenever someone pegs it) and batshit mental kids (Isaac, the leader of the cult). And then there’s Malachai. Never before have I hated a character more than I hated Malachai. Perhaps the young actor playing him (Courtney Gains) was tapping into the years of mockery he received for having a girl’s name, or perhaps he’s actually like the character, but this boy’s sneer makes you want to punch his head off and you really want him to get what’s coming to him (which, at the end of the day, is what the filmmakers intended). I’d love to have been at that casting meeting: “I think we should give the role of Malachai to young Courtney Gains, because he’s a complete prick”.

Although for the most part Children Of The Corn isn’t too dodgy, it does contain one of film’s biggest taboos: the brutal killing of children. Some of the adults get theirs too, especially at the start, but when you’ve got a town full of kids and they’re all a bit mental, some of them are going to have to take a kicking.

This film would have received a full five out of five if it hadn’t been for one disappointing aspect, the ending. Perhaps this is how it ends in the book, but as soon as the dirt started moving Tremors-style and getting a little out there I was disappointed. Had the film stayed away from special effects at the end and kept to the idea of a religious cult it would have been a far more satisfying ending. As it is, it gives the impression that the kids actually knew something we didn’t and maybe weren’t so mental after all… a pretty weak end to a fantastic story.

This is also true for the last scene, in which we’re ‘treated’ to a final scare as effective as a fart in the ocean. The last 30 seconds are so underwhelming that when you see the words “The End” you can’t help but think that ending was just thought up at the end of shooting in order to get that final scare in there (and I use the word ‘scare’ loosely). Don’t let that put you off however. Children Of The Corn is 88 minutes long. Of these 88 minutes, 80 are fantastic. It’s just a shame those last eight were so disappointing.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it
In the UK, Children Of The Corn is available on its own on DVD and in a box set along with the second and third films. In the US, you can either buy it as a standard DVD, a 25th Anniversary Blu-ray or as part of the Children Of The Corn Collection, a Miramax box set featuring the first six movies.

Bits and pieces
• Looking for the original Children Of The Corn novel by Stephen King? You won’t find it. Rather than a novel, Children Of The Corn was one of King’s many short stories. It can be
found in his short story compilation *Night Shift* (along with other stories later turned into films, like *The Lawnmower Man* and *Graveyard Shift*). Alternatively, it also features in *Stephen King Goes To The Movies*, a newer compilation also featuring the likes of *The Green Mile* and *The Shawshank Redemption*. Both can be bought through the Kindle store but I recommend *Night Shift* because it’s cheaper and features far more stories (twenty as opposed to five).

- This isn’t the only film adaptation of *Children Of The Corn*. A made-for-TV movie version was released in 2009, but it’s properly gash. There was also an independent short movie called *Disciples Of The Crow* released in 1983, a year before this more famous version.

- There have been a total of seven sequels to this version of *Children Of The Corn*. I’ll get round to reviewing them all eventually, but for now, the review of the second film is just over the page.
Children Of The Corn II: The Final Sacrifice (1992)

Director: David Price

Starring: Terence Knox, Ryan Bollman, Ned Romero

REDBEAR: “My ancestors would have told you that man should be at one with the Earth, the sky, the water. But the white man has never understood this. He only knows how to take. And after a while there’s nothing left to take, so everything’s out of balance and we all fall down.

GARRETT: “Wait a minute. So that’s what happened here in Gatlin?”

REDBEAR: “No. What happened in Gatlin was those kids went apeshit and killed everybody.”

How can a film so good have a sequel so achingly bad? Many will tell you this is nothing new, it’s just something that happens from time to time (Freddy’s Dead and Exorcist II: The Heretic spring to mind). But Children Of The Corn II is so terrible compared to the first film that your faith in corn-based films will be sorely tested.

Taking place shortly after the events of the first film, news teams have gathered at a small town just outside Gatlin to cover the story (presumably the survivors of the first film notified authorities). Meanwhile Garrett, a reporter, is driving through the countryside for a job interview in New York with his son Danny along for the ride (against his wishes). Hearing of the story in Gatlin, they decide to check it out. Horrific hijinks ensue.

Children Of The Corn II is rare in that you’ll probably enjoy it more if you haven’t seen the original first. If you already know the story so far, your brain will be overloaded with questions for the first 40 or 50 minutes. “Are those two corpses at the start meant to be the couple at the end of the first film?” “How come Malachai looks so different?” and “Where did that new kid come from, and how did he become the leader so quickly?”.

Put simply, this film makes very little attempt to connect to the original. The first scene after the credits (a terribly-acted news broadcast) tries to explain its own version of what happened, deciding to totally ignore the characters played by Linda Hamilton and Peter Horton in the first film.

One of the most important characters, Malachai, has been replaced by someone who looks absolutely nothing like him and is lacking in any sort of emotion, be it positive or negative (unlike the original actor who, as mentioned in the previous film’s review, made the part his own by being a wanker). Naturally, this isn’t entirely the fault of the filmmakers. After all, they could hardly call upon Courtney Gains to play the role again because this was filmed eight years after the original and going by the story he would already have been sacrificed because he’d be well into his twenties.

Dodgy role replacement aside, the whole thing reeks of shoddy filmmaking in general. Two elderly sisters are played by the same person and are never seen in the same scene; a Native American character (stereotypically named Red Bear) is introduced and quickly gets
into character by talking about how foolish “the white man” is; and the general quality of the acting reminds me of a girl from my Drama class in high school (she failed).

It’s not all bad news, though. There are some interesting death scenes (one in particular involving a windscreen and a bale of corn, reminiscent of Final Destination 2) and the actor playing Micah, the new cult leader, is curiously strange (as the role demands, after all). He’s certainly one of the more interesting characters and fits into the “Isaac” role of the first film quite neatly.

Humour is also scattered throughout the film, a move that is unwelcome in my opinion. The original Children Of The Corn was straight horror and nothing else; an attempt to add comedy feels out of place (except for the excellent quote at the top of this review, of course). A death in which an elderly chap’s electric wheelchair is taken over by one of the kids is a prime example of humour ruining the tone of the film.

The only real area in which this film is on an equal ground with the original is unfortunately one it probably wasn’t hoping to ape: both have a weak ending. Again we are treated to what seems to be a giant mole tunnelling underground, followed by poor CGI effects in an attempt to add an unnecessary supernatural element to the film. Of course, the sequel takes it too far before this point anyway, with pointless Predator-style ‘body-heat’ POV shots that affect the film in no way at all other than adding to the shitness factor.

Children Of The Corn II would have received only one skull out of five had it not been for the pleasant addition of Christie Clark, a fine actress who sadly didn’t do many films after this. To give a film an extra half a mark based on the appearance of a minor character alone however speaks volumes on the overall shoddiness of the entire production.

One and a half out of five

How to see it
As with the original film, Children Of The Corn 2 is available in the UK either on a standard DVD or in a box set along with the first and third films. It’s DVD-only in the US too, either on its own or as part of the six-film Children Of The Corn DVD Collection.

Bits and pieces
• There are nine individual deaths in the film, as well as at least a dozen townsfolk getting set on fire at one point. The harshest of the lot is the doctor, who’s stabbed with syringes, scalpels and finally a knife. The most ridiculous, meanwhile, is the chap who’s impaled by a corn stalk.

• Needless fact – Christie Clark was also the little sister in A Nightmare On Elm Street Part 2, one of the most homo-erotic horror films of the 1980s (but more on that later in the book). As a big Nightmare On Elm Street fan, I’m assuming that’s why she stood out to me here.
Child’s Play (1988)

Director: David Kirschner

Starring: Brad Dourif, Catherine Hicks, Alex Vincent, Chris Sarandon

“Hi, I’m Chucky. Wanna play?”

It’s hard to truly appreciate Child’s Play nowadays, since the first 40 minutes of the film are completely ruined. When it was first released it was genuinely chilling, a gripping whodunnit with a paranormal twist. Of course, nowadays everyone already knows ‘whodunnit’ and so the first half of the movie is spent waiting for the film’s characters to catch up and find out what the rest of the world already knows – that the killer is a doll.

Poor little Andy (the adorable Alex Barclay) wanted a Good Guy doll for his birthday, but his mum couldn’t afford one so she just gets him clothes and a shitty Good Guys tool kit instead. Noticing his disappointment, Andy’s mum thinks she’s struck it lucky later that day when a peddler near her work is selling knock-off Good Guy dolls stolen from a burnt-out toy shop. She buys one for $30 and is suddenly the greatest mum in the world again.

This doesn’t last, because it soon emerges that this particular doll is possessed by Charles Lee Ray (Brad Dourif), a serial killer and voodoo nut who transforms his soul into the doll just before he’s killed by a police officer. The doll, nicknamed Chucky, sets about killing Andy’s babysitter as well as the other criminal chaps who screwed him over before his ‘death’. Cue various explosions and voodoo doll stabbings.

Since it’s the first film, the audience isn’t supposed to know Chucky is the killer. There are plenty of moments where it’s suggested (he leaves footprints on a table, seemingly blows up a building and so forth), but every time someone’s killed Andy’s close by, leaving some doubt in the audience’s mind – isn’t it just Andy doing the killing and blaming it on his doll?

The special effects used to create the Chucky doll vary in quality throughout the film. In some scenes where Chucky speaks – most notably when he talks at length with his former voodoo mentor – the lip-syncing doesn’t really work too well due to the limitations of the robotics in the face and as such the illusion is shattered a bit. Other shots, particularly the far ones where Chucky is instead a midget actor wearing a Chucky mask, are far more effective and much creepier because the realistic movement makes it look more like a human in a doll’s body.

Child’s Play shouldn’t really have taken off the way it did. While the cast all put in great performances the kills are fairly dull and the two “he’s dead, or is he” endings are just silly to watch. The reason it was a success, and rightly so, is that Chucky is a fantastic movie monster. He’s a child’s best friend one minute, a foul-mouthed strangler the next and since his target victim is a six-year-old boy there’s something very sinister to him.
In a way, it was *Child’s Play*’s own success that ultimately ruined the first movie’s impact. Once Chucky became a household name and every knew *Child’s Play* as “the film with the killer doll”, it instantly rendered the film’s first 40 minutes useless. Nowadays even the DVD cover has a big photo of Chucky brandishing a knife, making sure you definitely know what the surprise is just in case you’ve managed to avoid it.

If you’re able to forget for a while that Chucky’s the killer and can try to watch the film in its original context, *Child’s Play* is good fun. Otherwise, the sequels are better because they kick off with the Chucky action right from the start and don’t spend half the movie trying to make you guess what you already know.

*Three out of five*

**How to see it**

*Child’s Play* is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US, which is nice. Despite being the first in a five-film series, it isn’t available in any box sets. More on that later though.

**Bits and pieces**

- Charles Lee Ray (Chucky’s real name) is taken from the names of three notorious criminals – Charles Manson, Lee Harvey Oswald and James Earl Ray. Not, as would have been more efficient, Ray Charles and Bruce Lee.

- If you think the idea of a serial killer using voodoo to put himself in the body of a doll is weird, you should have seen the original plot that was planned. The Good Guy dolls were originally supposed to have latex skin and ‘blood’, so if their skin was cut kids would be able to buy Good Guy bandages. At one point, Andy was going to do a blood brothers style pact with Chucky, and when his bloody mixed with Chucky’s it would give him life. That idea was scrapped for numerous reasons, the most obvious being that a doll filled with fake blood was a fucking insane idea in the first place.

- Every time a film or TV show features a killer doll these days, many claim it’s ripping off *Child’s Play*. In reality, it was by no means the first film about dolls coming to life. Stuart Gordon’s *Dolls* was released a year before *Child’s Play* and has a similar concept, while an old 1963 *Twilight Zone* episode called ‘Living Doll’ did it decades before Chucky existed.
Child’s Play 2 (1990)

Director: John Lafia

Starring: Alex Vincent, Jenny Agutter, Christine Elise, voice of Brad Dourif

“Why fight it, Andy? We’re going to be very close. In fact, we’re gonna be fucking inseparable.”

You just can’t keep a bad doll down. Even though it seemed fairly clear Chucky was dead at the end of the original Child’s Play, it turns out while the body was weak the spirit was still willing. So when the company responsible for Good Guy dolls gets hold of Chucky’s remains and sets about cleaning the doll up as a publicity stunt to show it wasn’t cursed, Chucky’s soul awakens again and shit goes down. He then sets about finding Andy, the kid from the first film (who’s now staying with a foster family after his mum was deemed… well, a bit mental), to finally take over his body.

In a way, Child’s Play 2 is faced with the same dilemma as Jaws 2 – when you know who the killer is and you’ve already had a good look at them at the end of the previous film you can’t spend another 50 minutes playing it all mysterious. Half the original Child’s Play was spent trying to guess if Andy’s doll really was the one doing the killings, or whether it was just Andy using the doll as an excuse. Now we all know it’s Chucky, that whodunit angle goes right out the window for the sequel, which is why this time Chucky springs into life and starts the bodycount before your arse has even started to warm the seat.

Andy’s foster home provides a refreshing change of scenery while still keeping the story grounded in reality a little – his foster parents understandably think all the events from the first film were in Andy’s head and so they aren’t having any of it when Chucky finally tracks him down and he tries to convince them to kill it. Instead they think it’s Tommy, a different Good Guy doll they bought which, unknown to them, Chucky has already buried in the back garden. Having Andy trapped in an unfamiliar house with his would-be killer with no way of convincing anyone to help him creates an interesting tension which at least brings back the whodunit angle in some form, even though we’re all in on it this time.

A few unconvincing kills later (it’s hard to imagine a small doll can effectively beat someone to death with a ruler or be strong enough to suffocate someone with a plastic bag) the film finds itself in its final location, a huge toy factory where the Good Guys are manufactured. It’s a fun setting for the typical fifteen minutes of “killer stalking the heroes” shenanigans you’d expect from an early ’90s slasher, with loads of conveyor belts and dangerous equipment lying around to keep things lively.

It all has to end eventually though, and Chucky’s demise this time is even more decisive than it was in the first movie, leaving absolutely no chance that they could put him together for a third film… or could they?
Although its predecessor was a stronger film when it was first released, now we all know Chucky is the killer these days *Child’s Play 2* is the more entertaining movie. It’s got more action, more tension and more Chucky quips. It’s still not exactly a classic, but if you’re looking for one Chucky film to watch from the pre-comedy trilogy this is the one to go for.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**
*Child’s Play 2* hasn’t yet had the Blu-ray treatment like its predecessor, so UK Chucky fans can only find it on standalone DVD and Americans can either do the same or get the Killer DVD Collection box set featuring *Child’s Play 2, Child’s Play 3, Bride Of Chucky* and *Seed Of Chucky*.

**Bits and pieces**
• Seriously, the bit where he kills the teacher with a ruler is far and away the shittest and least convincing moment in any *Child’s Play* film. They even cut to a shot from outside the school, where through a window you can just see a ruler moving up and down.

• You may be wondering why the DVD box set mentioned above features every *Child’s Play* film except the first one. Here’s the story. United Artists released the first *Child’s Play*, and shortly afterwards the studio was bought out by MGM. MGM was of the opinion that its films going forward should be family-friendly, so the rights to *Child’s Play* were sold to Universal, who went on to release the other four films. To this date, MGM owns the rights to the first *Child’s Play* and Universal owns all the others, so unless a deal is done don’t expect to see a complete box set any time soon.
Child’s Play 3 (1991)

Director: Jack Bender

Starring: Justin Whalin, Perrey Reeves, Jeremy Sylvers, voice of Brad Dourif

“You know what they say, you just can’t keep a Good Guy down.”

It’s ironic that the least sinister film in the Child’s Play trilogy was the one that gained the most notoriety. After the horrible killing of two-year-old James Bulger in 1992, The Sun newspaper decided to pin the blame on Child’s Play 3, claiming that the young boys who murdered Bulger had seen the film numerous times. While police would later confirm that this was completely untrue and they had never even seen it once, the damage had been done – Child’s Play 3 and its predecessors were removed from video shelves all over the UK, never to be seen again for at least a decade. Incredibly, The Sun continues to blame Child’s Play for all manner of killings, while still maintaining (in the face of police statements reporting otherwise) that it was responsible for the Bulger killings.

Regardless, let’s move on before I go off on a rant. I’ll discuss the Bulger incident further in the future (I wrote my university dissertation on it) but for now let’s look at the “offending” article itself. Child’s Play 3 is set eight years after the second movie (even though it was only released a year later). Now aged 16, Andy has been sent to a military training camp after failing to settle in any of the foster homes he’s been to.

Meanwhile, the company responsible for the Good Guy dolls has decided enough time has passed to start the production of Good Guys again (seriously lads, just fucking let it go), so the toy factory is re-opened and Chucky’s corpse is disposed of – but not before some of his blood drips onto the production line, causing Chucky’s soul to pass into a brand new doll. D’oh, you pesky toy makers and your piss-poor security measures.

After finding out where Andy’s based, Chucky mails himself (somehow) to the military camp so he can finally do what he’s been trying to do for so long – take over Andy’s body. When he gets there though he’s first found by Tyler, a young boy also at the camp. Since voodoo rules state that he can only take over the body of the first person he reveals himself to, Chucky decides to take over Tyler instead. As luck would have it though, Andy finds out about Chucky’s surprise appearance and so tries to put an end to the killer doll once and for all.

Rather than breathing new life into the series, the military camp setting is actually detrimental to Child’s Play 3’s quality. It’s packed with tired clichés – bossy drill sergeants, “yes” “yes what” “yes sir” chat and the old “drop and give me 20” bollocks – not to mention a few lines ripped completely from Full Metal Jacket. The result feels less like an original slasher film and more like an unoriginal war movie that happens to have a killer doll wandering around.
Despite this, *Child’s Play 3* is actually superior to its predecessors in one aspect – the inventiveness of its kills. Whether it’s the garbage truck scene, the part where Chucky substitutes paintball pellets for live rounds or the amusing moment when Chucky doesn’t even have to do anything to cause one chap’s death, it’s certainly the most creative film in the series to date in that respect.

This still doesn’t save *Child’s Play 3* from being anything more than an average sequel at best, though. While kudos have to go to the filmmakers for at least trying something different by placing the movie in a military camp and aging Andy eight years so it’s not following the same old “doll chases young boy” routine again, the film fumbles by regurgitating tired boot camp clichés and, um, following the same old “doll chases young boy” routine again with the introduction of the Tyler character. It’s a reasonable way to pass an hour and half, but of the five Chucky films to date this is the weakest of the bunch.

*Two and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

The situation with *Child’s Play 3* is identical to that of the second film – DVD only in the UK and the US, part of the Killer DVD Collection in the US.

- Despite The Sun’s furore regarding the link between *Child’s Play 3* and the murder of James Bulger, its influence (or the influence of any other film) was never mentioned at any point during the court trial. It was only when the judge was passing sentence that he made this odd and unfounded statement: “It is not for me to pass judgment on [the killers’] upbringing but I suspect that exposure to violent video films may be in part an explanation.” After hearing this, The Sun decided to get hold of the Blockbuster Video account belonging one killer’s father, and among the 200 or so films (many of which were children’s films) was *Child’s Play 3*. With that, The Sun decided to invent a story suggesting it was to blame.

- As you can tell, this is a subject I’ve researched to a rather tragic degree. If you ever meet me in real life, be sure to ask me to bore you to death about the details.
Bride Of Chucky (1998)

Director: Ronny Yu

Starring: Jennifer Tilly, Katherine Heigl, John Ritter, voice of Brad Dourif

JESSE: “How’d you end up like this?”
TIFFANY: “It’s a long story.”
CHUCKY: “Let me put it this way. If it were a movie, it would probably take three or four sequels to do it justice.”

A lot can change in seven years. When Child’s Play 3 was released in 1991 the idea of a killer doll was still considered scary. By the time Chucky’s fourth film went into production however horror was in its post-Scream phase and slasher films were being taken less seriously when their killers were human, let alone a tiny ginger plastic midget. Chucky would have stood no chance as a convincing horror star anymore had his fourth film stuck to the super-serious Child’s Play formula, so things would have to change.

And so, rather than following the tried-and-tested “Chucky stalks a young child” routine as seen in the previous three Child’s Play movies, Bride Of Chucky instead became a knowing, tongue-in-cheek, self-deprecating wink-wink movie that decided since audiences won’t take killer dolls seriously anymore, it wouldn’t take itself seriously either.

The film opens with Tiffany (Jennifer Tilly), an ex-girlfriend of Chucky’s when he was still a human, tracking down the remains of the Chucky doll and bringing them home. After performing voodoo on the doll and bringing Chucky back to life, she tells him she’s going to help him find a human body so they can finally get married like they’d planned. Problem is there’s been a little misunderstanding and Chucky never wanted to get married, so a dejected Tiffany locks Chucky in a cage, vowing to keep him in his doll form.

After breaking loose, Chucky decides to give Tiffany a taste of her own medicine and voodoo’s her soul into the body of a bride doll. The plastic pair grudgingly form an alliance to seek out the corpse of Charles Lee Ray (Chucky’s original form) so they can find the amulet he was buried with and use its power to turn them both human again.

Whereas the Child’s Play trilogy played things out with a stony-faced solemnity as if it were Cape Fear, Bride Of Chucky knows it’s a bit mental and because of this it’s far funnier than Chucky’s previous films. The one-liners come thick and fast and the characters of Chucky and Tiffany play well off each other.

They’re an odd couple both literally and figuratively – Tiffany wants a happy home where she bakes cookies for her loving man, while Chucky is a foul-mouthed sleazeball who doesn’t have a romantic bone in his plastic body – so it’s fun watching their personalities clash.
Humour aside, *Bride Of Chucky*’s level of violence is also brought killing and screaming into the late ‘90s. At one point being told his traditional knife is “too ‘80s”, Chucky is encouraged to improvise new ways of offing his foes and this results in some interesting kills. Safe to say you’ll never sleep in a water bed, break into a car or step into the middle of the motorway again – though if you do the latter you’re sort of asking for it anyway.

*Bride Of Chucky* may not be to everyone’s taste but it’s really the best direction the series could have taken. Chucky just wasn’t scary any more by the time this went into production (though the upcoming *Curse Of Chucky* may change that) and so it’s ultimately better to get audiences laughing with him than laughing at him.

With this change in tone, what could have become an ‘80s slasher character long forgotten among the *Leprechauns*, *Critters* and *Ghoulies* of this world is now a cult hero among genre fans, with merchandise up the wazoo and a horde of followers. *Bride Of Chucky* was a big risk but, as the film’s poster says, Chucky got lucky.

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**

*Bride Of Chucky* can be easily found cheaply on DVD in both the UK and North America. In the US it can also be found in Chucky: The Killer DVD Collection, a brilliantly dirt-cheap box set featuring *Child’s Play 2*, *Child’s Play 3*, *Bride Of Chucky* and *Seed Of Chucky*.

**Bits and pieces**

- It’s clear that Chucky is a big fan of rock/metal superstar Rob Zombie (as am I). The film opens with his song Living Dead Girl, and later in the film when Chucky and Tiffany are sitting in a car he turns on the radio and puts on Thunderkiss 65 by White Zombie, the band Rob Zombie used to be in.

- Director Ronny Yu is greatly envied by slasher film fans. Not only did he direct *Bride Of Chucky*, he also directed *Freddy Vs Jason*. This means he’s the only person to direct three big slasher movie villains. If you count Ghostface from *Scream*, then Wes Craven is the closest with two (him and Freddy).
Seed Of Chucky (2004)

Director: Don Mancini

Starring: Jennifer Tilly, Redman, John Waters, voices of Brad Dourif and Billy Boyd

“I’m an Oscar-nominee, for God’s sake. Now look at me, I’m fucking a puppet.”

After Bride Of Chucky took the Child’s Play series and injected a much-needed burst of dark humour to proceedings, it would have been impossible for its successor to go back to pure horror. Sure enough, Seed Of Chucky goes even further down the comedy route, only just stopping short of having the characters throw custard pies at one another.

Seed Of Chucky is set in the ‘real world’, a world in which Chucky is just a doll in some daft horror movies. We’re introduced to a new doll, Glen (voiced by Billy Boyd). Glen doesn’t know who his parents are – can you see where this is going? – but after seeing an on-set report from the latest Child’s Play movie on TV he notices that he shares the same ‘Made In Japan’ markings Chucky has on his wrist.

Glen decides to travel to Hollywood to meet Chucky and Tiffany, his apparently Japanese mum and dad. When he gets there he finds that Chucky and Tiffany are just normal dolls, but after a spot of voodoo (ah, that old chestnut) they’re back to their old selves and ready to carve up Los Angeles, but not before trying to figure out how to raise their son. Or is it their daughter?

You see, Chucky wants to raise Glen as a killer so he can go on murderous sprees with his old man in the same way other father/son combos would go fishing or watch sports. Tiffany, meanwhile, is adamant that their child is in fact a girl called Glenda (a nod to the Ed Wood cross-dressing classic Glen Or Glenda). The fact that, being a doll, Glen/da doesn’t have any genitalia doesn’t really solve the argument, so Chucky and Tiffany spend the rest of the film competing for the love (and gender) of their offspring.

Killer dolls aside, the real star of the show is Jennifer Tilly, not only providing the voice of Tiffany but also playing a caricaturised version of herself in this ‘real world’. This version of Tilly is a desperate B-list actress who was once respected (Tilly was nominated for an Oscar in real life for her performance in Woody Allen’s Bullets Over Broadway) and is now struggling to get all the good roles because they keep going to the likes of Julia Roberts.

Throughout the movie Tilly considers sleeping with a director (played by Wu-Tang Clan legend Redman) to get a part, is frustrated when everyone she meets only remembers her from her lesbian scene in Bound and treats her PA like dirt, without realising that she’s the one writing all her so-called ‘fan mail’.

She also sticks the boot into herself a few times while voicing Tiffany, who at first is starstruck by Tilly and then begins to lose respect for her (“no wonder her career’s in trouble”). In one scene Tiffany drags an unconscious Tilly across the floor and declares “jeez,
she’s fat” – a line many actors would refuse to say, I’d wager, but one that Tilly is game to deliver with refreshing self-deprecation.

After a series of inventive and gory death scenes (cult movie-making icon John Waters getting acid poured on his face, anyone?), the film falls apart a little in the third act as the novelty factor starts to wear off and Glen’s character (the weakest of the three dolls) comes to the fore. It’s a shame, because the first hour is great fun, but much like a French frog it just doesn’t have legs.

*Seed Of Chucky* is both the goriest and least serious of the five Chucky movies to date. The fact that the upcoming *Curse Of Chucky* is taking the series back to its deadly serious roots shows that *Seed* was essentially as far as the comedy approach could go, and this shows near the end of the film as the laughs get stretched further and further. Still, it’s not a terrible film by any means, and should at least keep you entertained for most of its duration.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

Seeing *Seed Of Chucky* is much the same deal as *Bride Of Chucky*. It can be found cheaply on DVD in both the UK and North America, and in the US it’s part of Chucky: The Killer DVD Collection, which features *Child’s Play 2, Child’s Play 3, Bride Of Chucky* and *Seed Of Chucky*. Unlike *Bride*, *Seed Of Chucky* is also available on Blu-ray in the US, but it’s region-locked so UK fans shouldn’t import it.

**Bits and pieces**

- Brits may recognise Jennifer Tilly’s assistant in the film – she’s played by Hannah Spearritt, formerly of pop band *S Club 7*, before she got a bigger acting role in ITV’s *Primeval*.

- This was actually distributed by artsy indie studio Focus Features, but because they were scared of tarnishing their reputation they made a new off-shoot label called Rogue Pictures and released *Seed Of Chucky* through that instead. Snobs.
Creepshow 3 (2006)

Directors: James Dudelson, Ana Clavell

Starring: Stephanie Pettee, AJ Bowen, Kris Allen

“Nurse Jacobs, I can’t write a prescription for ugly.”

James Dudelson and Ana Clavell should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. In 2005 Dudelson bought the rights to the Day Of The Dead name and released Day Of The Dead: Contagium, an unofficial sequel that completely pissed on everything George Romero’s classic stood for.

After this, having also obtained the rights to Creepshow (the fantastic anthology series previously written by Stephen King and directed by Romero), Dudelson and chum Clavell got to work on a script for Creepshow 3. If the aim was to once again destroy the great reputation of a classic Romero film by releasing an atrocious sequel that’s so bad you actually feel angry as you watch it, then mission accomplished. Creepshow 3 is an embarrassment.

Like its two predecessors, Creepshow 3 is an anthology consisting of numerous short stories (five in this instance) rather than one long film. Whereas each of the stories in the first two Creepshow films were self-contained tales with messages of morality though, the five mini-insults here each make very little sense.

The first, entitled “Alice”, tells the story of a teenager whose father has bought a new TV remote. Every time he presses a button on the remote she’s transported to an alternate dimension where her family are black, Hispanic and so forth. Oh, and for some reason she starts mutating and turning into a rabbit. The ending is completely bewildering and explains nothing.

Then there’s “The Radio”, which is probably the best of the bunch and the only story of the five on offer that actually makes sense and has a plot that can be followed from start to finish. A guy buys a new radio that talks to him and instructs him to murder people and steal money. It actually ends on a pretty clever note and for a second it looks like Creepshow 3 might have redeemed itself.

This notion is immediately tied up and kicked down a flight of stairs with “Call Girl”, in which a serial killing prostitute meets her match when a vampire chap requests her services. This one’s thankfully pretty short: it’s a shame, because while the concept is a good one the execution is weak.

The fourth tale is “The Professor’s Wife”, in which a weird professor chap (easily the worst actor in the film) invites two of his ex-students over to meet his fiancee in advance of their wedding. Convinced she’s a robot, the students proceed to hack her to bits to find how the
professor put her together, going so far beyond the point where it’d become clear a mistake has been made that the whole thing becomes ridiculous.

Finally there’s “Haunted Dog”, which is among the most cringeworthy twenty minutes you’ll ever experience in a film. An arrogant doctor leaves a tramp to choke on a hot dog and is haunted by him from that point on. Again, it’s a good idea, but it’s ruined by the guy they got to play the doctor, who’s so painfully unfunny during the countless “look how much of a cock this guy is” montages that watching him poorly insult patient after patient for far too long becomes a true exercise in patience.

The film attempts to tie all five stories together *Pulp Fiction*-style by having characters from each story appearing in cameo roles in others, but it only serves to add to the confusion. Why is the doctor attending the vampire kid’s all-vampire party? How come the Hispanic alternate dimension mother is at the professor’s wedding along with the real mother? The whole thing’s a mess.

Stay away from *Creepshow 3*, especially if you saw and enjoyed the first two. The second story may be half-decent but overall the film is a complete insult to the series and should have been shit-canned at the idea-gathering stage.

One out of five

**How to see it**
Really? Christ. It’s on DVD in both the UK and the US. You’d be better off jamming a tenner up a dog’s arse though.

**Bits and pieces**
- Seriously, I can’t stress enough how much those two can get fucked. First they ruined *Day Of The Dead*, then they ruined *Creepshow*. Everything they touch turns to shite.

- If you want more proof that this is a load of old arse, it’s currently got a dreaded 0% score on popular movie review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes.
Crimewave (1985)

Director: Sam Raimi

Starring: Reed Birney, Sheree Wilson, Bruce Campbell

RENALDO – “I’ve never seen you here before. I like that in a woman.”
WOMAN – “You’re cute.”
RENALDO – “Heh, keep talking baby. Maybe you’ll tell me something I don’t know.”

As far as unknown movies by popular filmmakers go, Crimewave is a double whammy of forgotten history. To many a film directed by Sam Raimi and written by the Coen Brothers would be a match made in heaven, but in fact it already happened with Crimewave. So why has a film with such a pedigree been lost in time, all but vanished after 26 years? Because Raimi and co-producer Bruce Campbell despised it.

The plan sounded great at first. After the huge success of The Evil Dead, young filmmaker Raimi decided that Crimewave was to be his next film. As with Evil Dead he rounded up all his friends – actor Bruce Campbell, editor Kaye Davis, composer Joe DoLuca, but this time he signed a deal with a big film studio so he wouldn’t have to worry about a budget anymore.

Eventually the studio muscled in and made changes Raimi wasn’t happy with – they kicked out Davis and DoLuca and replaced them with staff of their own choosing, and Bruce Campbell was removed from the lead role, a move that pissed off Raimi immensely. What’s more, the two lead actors brought in by the studio were, according to Campbell in his autobiography years later, “coke-nosed weirdo nutjobs”. The result was a film that Raimi and Campbell don’t like to talk about any more.

It’s a shame really, because Crimewave isn’t actually that bad. It’s got an interesting style, with ’40s-style characters, cars and interiors set against a story involving a security camera business in 1980s Detroit. It’s continually messing with your head as you try to place it in the right era, until you realise it isn’t supposed to have one.

The plot may seem complex (it’s the Coens after all) but it’s actually pretty easy to follow since it crams in all the story in the first 15 minutes or so. In brief: a co-owner of a security firm realises his partner is selling the business to a sleazy heel called Renaldo (Campbell), so he hires two goons to kill him. After a mix-up the goons kill the co-owner too, then go after his wife who was spying on them from across the street. Meanwhile, a hopeless nerd (Birney) is trying to chat up a beautiful woman (Wilson) but she’s after the heel who’s buying the company.

In reality, all this is just an excuse for loads of ridiculous slapstick comedy that will be immediately familiar to anyone fond of the sillier scenes from The Evil Dead. While a lot of the acting is of a fairly low standard and some of the special effects are hokey at best, there are plenty of clever and funny moments here to have you smiling a few times throughout. One fantastic scene in particular has a woman being chased into the security shop and
through the “safest hallway in the world”, which soon becomes a surreal ballet of colours and doors.

While the performances are by and large a little shaky, there’s one very obvious exception to this in the form of the magnificent Bruce Campbell. Bruce was originally supposed to be playing the lead role of the nerdy guy who becomes the hero and given his similar role in *The Evil Dead* it would have been a perfect fit. Ultimately though that pesky studio replaced him with someone else, leaving Raimi to put Campbell in a smaller role, that of the heel. Despite this, Campbell still manages to steal the show as a hilariously arrogant arsehole.

*Crimewave* has been a difficult film to find (I bought a Hong Kong DVD of it about eight years ago), though that finally changed recently (see below). I wouldn’t say it was worth spending a lot of time or money trying to get it, but if you get the chance to watch it I’d recommend you do so. While it’s nowhere near the quality of Raimi’s other films like *The Evil Dead* or *Spider-Man*, or the Coens’ later projects such as *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*, it’s still got enough glimmers of genius to make it worthwhile to an extent.

*Three out of five*

**How to see it**

Until recently *Crimewave* wasn’t readily available in the west (interested parties would have had to buy the aforementioned Hong Kong DVD). As of 14 May 2013 though it’s available on Blu-ray and DVD in the US courtesy of Shout! Factory. It’s also been released on DVD in various European countries over the past few years so UK Bruce Campbell fans might want to try to import one of those.

**Bits and pieces**

- There’s a very subtle nod to Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* movies during the scene with the storm. A newspaper is shown describing the events, and the second story on the front page says: “Military seals off Tennessee murder site. Time-space disturbance discovered.” This is a reference to the ending of *Evil Dead 2*, which Raimi was writing at the time.

- At one point Vic asks Nancy: “Would you like to have lunch some evening?” Obviously Raimi liked the line because he reused it in *Spider-Man* when Peter Parker asks Mary-Jane the same thing.
Dangerous Worry Dolls (2008)

**Director:** Charles Band

**Starring:** Jessica Morris, Meredith McClain, Deb Snyder

**Also known as:** Dangerous Chucky Dolls (UK DVD)

“Worry dolls. You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me.”

Full Moon Features are known for their incredibly low-budget horror movies and, as alluded to in their own tongue-in-cheek Gingerdead Man 2 (reviewed elsewhere in this book), many of these involve dolls. The likes of Puppet Master and Demonic Toys were very successful for Full Moon, so it’s no surprise they’d want to continue trying their hand at something similar. Despite its name, Dangerous Worry Dolls isn’t really that sort of film. At least, not at first.

It’s set in a young women’s reform institute (essentially a low-security prison), where Eva (Jessica Morris) has been sent for killing someone. Eva just wants to serve her sentence without any hassle so she can get out quick and be with her young daughter again, but she’s getting hassle from Killa Kim, a drug smuggler who wants her to be her mule. Even worse, the militant cow who runs the institute isn’t listening to Eva’s complaints because she “knows her type” and doesn’t think she’s capable of turning over a new leaf.

Eva’s luck changes when her daughter comes to visit and gives her some worry dolls, tiny voodoo-like skeleton dolls who come in a dinky coffin-shaped box. Her daughter explains that if she puts the worry dolls under her pillow as she sleeps, all her worries will go away. After being sexually assaulted by one of the guards (off-camera, thankfully), Eva reaches the end of her tether and lays the worry dolls under her pillow, hoping they’ll help. As she sleeps they come alive and crawl inside her ear, and that’s where it starts getting a bit odd.

The worry dolls give Eva renewed confidence, so she starts dishing out kickings and the odd murder to the other girls and staff in the facility. She also grows a spot in the middle of her forehead, a spot that continues to grow until eventually a tiny skull comes out of her forehead, squealing like a pig. Incredibly, thanks to the poor acting on display, hardly any of her fellow inmates pay any attention to this screaming forehead-skull, seemingly unimpressed by it and completely undermining the impact of the film.

Perhaps the most shocking thing about Dangerous Worry Dolls is that its sole great performance is the lead role, played by Jessica Morris, an actress I once described as “consistently wooden” in my review of the shitefest that was Scream Bloody Murder (also reviewed elsewhere in this book). She’s greatly improved in the years since that abomination, and she delivers her lines just right. It’s just a shame that, this time around, it’s the rest of the cast letting her down.
*Dangerous Worry Dolls* is dull. Its deaths mainly happen off-screen, its characters (with the exception of the lead) are more or less universally hateable, the “twist” scene involving one of the guards is just a complete cringe for all involved and the titular dolls are about as terrifying as dropping 5p. Despite its dramatic title, this is one film you really shouldn’t worry about.

*One and a half out of five*

**How to see it**
As previously stated, the UK version of this film is known as *Dangerous Chucky Dolls* (I smell a lawsuit) and is only available on DVD. In the US it’s also DVD-only, either as a standalone film or in a three-film box set along with *Demonic Toys 2* and *Doll Graveyard*.

**Bits and pieces**
- Worry dolls are actually a real thing in Guatemala. If someone’s having trouble sleeping they can tell the worry doll their fears and place it under their pillow. The doll is then said to do the worrying on the person’s behalf so they’re less stressed. Guatemala also has a large illegal drug market. It’s up to you whether the two are related.

- I’ve got a bit of a soft spot for Full Moon Features, because they released a load of cheesy horror films in the 1980s. The *Puppet Master* films are a thing of beauty – look out for reviews on That Was A Bit Mental in the future.
Dead Silence (2007)

Director: James Wan

Starring: Ryan Kwanten, Donnie Wahlberg, Michael Fairman

“Can you help me with a missing persons case? I’m looking for a male. About this tall. Sometimes seen with a hand up his ass.”

Dolls are creepy, that’s one thing many of us can agree on. Some of them look like they can come alive when you’re not watching. Ventriloquist dummies – those built for the sole purpose of being made to look alive by their owner – are particularly eerie in this respect. I’m certain that’s more or less the sole concept behind Dead Silence, a concept its creators were happy to run with until they realised they actually needed to build a film around it.

Jamie (Ryan Kwanten) and his wife Lisa are very much in love. As Jamie’s heading off to work he notices that someone has left a mysterious package outside their front door. He opens it to find a ventriloquist’s dummy, with no note explaining who sent it or why it’s been sent to them. Jamie decides he’ll figure it out later and leaves the doll at home with Lisa. When he returns he finds his wife lying dead in bed with her tongue ripped out. Bloody FedEx eh?

It soon emerges that the doll once belonged to Mary Shaw, a famous ventriloquist who was mocked one day in front of a huge audience by a young boy. Shaw kidnapped the boy and he was never seen again, and after realising she’d done it the townsfolk tracked her down and attacked her, ripping her tongue out.

Yes, not content with borrowing from Child’s Play, Dolls and any other killer doll film ever made, Dead Silence also owes a suspiciously large chunk of its plot to A Nightmare On Elm Street with its familiar ‘vigilante parents kill evil child catcher who continues to haunt their children from beyond the grave’ plot. Not to mention it even has its own children’s rhyme, though “beware the stare of Mary Shaw” isn’t quite as catchy as “one, two, Freddy’s coming for you”.

Dead Silence is very much style over substance. There is a steady stream of wanky pseudo-arty shots throughout, where maps become wide shots of the road and extreme zooms into eyeballs transition into new scenes. And no matter how many times they do it (which is a lot), they just can’t seem to make a shot of a doll slowly moving its eyes look that creepy.

The film has two saving graces. The first is Donnie Wahlberg, who plays the cop following Jamie as he investigates his wife’s murder. Wahlberg’s character is naturally suspicious of Jamie’s claims that the doll killed his wife, and he consistently gets the best lines in the film as he aims snarky and sarcastic comments Jamie’s way as he tries to find evidence that will pin the crime on him.

The other decent aspect is the twist ending, which makes sense and is cleverly handled. You’re likely to have suspicions about the characters in question before the ending is
revealed, but it’s unlikely you’d guess exactly what’s been going on. It’s a nice little twist and one that brings a satisfying end to what’s essentially a fairly forgettable film.

Two out of five

How to see it
Dead Silence is one of those rare titles that’s available in Blu-ray in the UK but not in North America. Thankfully, any Americans hoping for some hi-def doll-based monotony can import the UK Blu-ray disc because it’s region-free and will play anywhere. DVD-wise, it’s available standalone in both regions – in the UK it’s also in a three-film box set with Shrooms (which is decent) and Wind Chill (which I haven’t seen).

Bits and pieces
• Donnie Wahlberg plays an investigator called Detective Lipton. Wahlberg was also in the much-loved HBO mini-series Band Of Brothers. His character’s name in that? 2nd Lieutenant Lipton.

• Donnie Wahlberg and his brother Mark Wahlberg are part of an group that, along with their chef brother Paul Wahlberg, owns and runs a family burger restaurant in Massachusetts. The restaurant’s name? Wahlburgers.
Deadly Blessing (1981)

Director: Wes Craven

Starring: Maren Jensen, Sharon Stone, Ernest Borgnine, Michael Berryman

“If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out. If thine own hand offends thee... then in God's name, cut it off.”

There’s an interesting story told by screenwriter Glenn Benest in Arrow Video’s DVD release of Deadly Blessing (this review is based on a review copy of said DVD). The story goes that a young Sharon Stone, in her first big role, had just come from a modelling career and had no idea how to act or what to do.

Like a deer in head lights, Stone kept asking director Wes Craven for guidance and to help her with her acting. The cast and crewmembers looked at each other and Craven explained that he didn’t do that sort of thing, he was more about setting up shots and the like. “GOD DAMN IT,” Stone then screamed at the top of her voice, “WOULD YOU DIRECT ME?”

In a way it’s a shame that Craven politely declined and had a quiet word with Stone rather than giving her the advice she sought, because she’s clearly the weakest performer by far in what is an otherwise effective little film.

Deadly Blessing focuses on Martha Schmidt (Battlestar Galactica’s Maren Jensen), a headstrong city girl married to Jim, a country boy who used to be a member of the Hittites. The Hittites are a strict religious community (much like the Amish) who feel technology is the work of the devil and constantly warn of the coming of the demonic Incubus. Jim had married Martha to get away from his cultish peers, and they’re not happy with him.

After a ‘mysterious’ accident kills Jim, Martha tries to get to the bottom of things with the help of her city friends Lana (Stone) and Vicky, who come to stay with her as she mourns. As more people die and Martha and her friends are continually harassed it becomes clear that there may be a killer in the midst of the Hittites.

Many of the key scenes in Deadly Blessing feel like rough drafts of similar scenes in Craven’s later film A Nightmare On Elm Street. Sharon Stone’s character, for example, has a recurring dream about a menacing figure and the scene in which she tells her friends about it is very similar to that in A Nightmare On Elm Street where Nancy and Tina discuss their dreams about Freddy.

Perhaps the most obvious similarity however is the scene in which Martha takes a bath and is attacked by a snake, who comes out of the water between her legs in a shot that is replicated almost identically using Freddy’s glove in A Nightmare On Elm Street.

The film is a little slow-paced and while there are a few memorable moments (like the aforementioned snake in the bath and a scene involving a spider and an open mouth)
there’s a whole lot of nothing going on for large parts of the movie. Despite this, it never really feels boring because these moments are timed to appear just as interest begins to lag.

All seems fine with *Deadly Blessing* and it seems fairly straightforward until the film’s last three minutes. First of all the story is resolved in a bizarre manner that fans of *Sleepaway Camp* will find familiar, and then there’s a ridiculous shock ending that was actually removed from the film when it was first released in the UK because the studio was concerned it’d confuse viewers.

Not only is this mental ending reinstated for the upcoming DVD, it’s also addressed in the aforementioned interview with the screenwriter in which he confesses he didn’t write that scene and was shocked when he saw it in the cinema, noting that it was clearly added to give the film a *Carrie*-style final scare.

*Deadly Blessing* has separated critics but I enjoyed it. It’s not action-packed by any means but it’s an interesting film that ends with a clever little twist, followed by another fucking ridiculous one.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

*Deadly Blessing* has been graced with two excellent releases. In the UK it’s available on Blu-ray and DVD courtesy of Arrow Video, and is a treat to watch thanks to its restored print, the reinstated batshit-crazy ending and its extras (including an interesting 15-minute chat with the screenwriter and a half-hour interview with actor Michael Berryman who discusses the Wes Craven films he’s starred in – including *The Hills Have Eyes* – and then goes on to completely slate *The Hills Have Eyes* remakes). In the US, the Blu-ray and DVD are handled by Shout! Factory, who include an audio commentary by Wes Craven and another interview with Berryman.

**Bits and pieces**

- Here’s another little anecdote from the DVD commentary. During one key scene in the film a real spider is dropped into Sharon Stone’s mouth. She refused to do the scene, even with Wes Craven offering to be the one who drops it. Eventually she agreed to do it if the spider’s teeth were removed – even though this would have made it incredibly difficult for the spider to feed. I can’t decide if this made her a prick for asking a spider to be mutilated like that, or a good sport for at least letting them drop it in her mouth.

- Wes Craven once admitted that in his early years as a director he learned the trade by shooting numerous X-rated movies under a different name. It’s not known what films he directed but I doubt they’d be worth hunting down anyway.
Deadtime Stories: Volume 1 (2009)

Directors: Jeff Monahan, Michael Fischa, Tom Savini

Starring: Amy Marsalis, Jeff Monahan, Bingo O’Malley, Jason Norman

“Now I lay me down to rest, but there’s a goblin upon my chest. He’s grey and ugly and very gory, and he wants to tell me a Deadtime Story.”

Utter the name George A. Romero to any self-respecting horror fan and they’ll fire off any of his classic zombie films in your direction. The “holy trilogy” of Night Of The Living Dead, Dawn Of The Dead and Day Of The Dead remain the definitive zombie series to this day and while his recent undead films haven’t really met the same standards you can forgive the guy a bit because of his past glories. This shite, however, is unforgivable.

For you see, it is Mr George A. Romero’s name that you will see on the DVD cover of Deadtime Stories, or – to give it its full title – George A. Romero Presents Deadtime Stories Volume 1. It’s Mr Romero himself who introduces this 75-minute anthology consisting of three horror stories. And it’s good old George who gets an executive producer credit on all three of these bland tales. Frankly then George, you should be ashamed of yourself, because these three stories are weaker than a hamster’s piss, and as a man who created such legendary films in the past you fucking know it too.

You know a story’s bad when the entire plot can be fully explained in one sentence, and this is the case for all three tales here. To summarise:

1) Valley Of The Shadow - A woman takes a group into the jungle to search for her missing husband, and they all die.

2) Wet - A man digs up a mermaid, is told to put it back, refuses to do so and is then turned into a mermaid himself.

3) Housecall - A doctor’s called to examine a teen claiming to be a vampire, but it turns out the doctor’s a vampire too and he kills the lad’s mum.

There you go, I’ve just saved you 75 minutes. Imagine those simple tales strung out for the entire length of a TV episode each. The first one doesn’t even have a fucking twist. Off they go to try and find her husband... and they die. That’s it. There’s no mysterious power that caused it, no surprise ending where it turns out he’s joined a tribe and then he kills her or anything like that. The tribe catches her and her crew and sticks their heads on spikes and it ends with a half-hearted attempt at comedy as the heads chat to each other for no reason.

After this it’s time for Uncle George to crack a shitty line (and I mean an absolutely terrible one, one that isn’t even funny, something like “talk about a bad situation”), and we’re onto the next story, the bloody mermaid thing. Much of the first half of this one is just two guys staring angrily at each other for ages while one tries to sell a box to the other, who keeps
saying “no, there was a mermaid in it, you should bury her again”. After an eternity the guy goes home and the mermaid comes out, eats the guy’s balls (seriously) then turns him into a mermaid too. Then she grabs the other guy and they both DISAPPEAR. What?

Finally, there’s *Housecall*, a story which actually had potential because it was directed by legendary effects supremo and longtime Romero chum Tom Savini. Right away you can tell there’s at least some effort going on in this one as Savini tries an odd aspect ratio, lowers the frame rate and gives the film an old 1920s horror feel, something that saves this entire package from an infamous one-half score here on TWABM. Ultimately though, the plot’s about as complex as a Psy chorus and the film ends, this time leading to a feeling of disappointment rather than the anger spawned by the other two.

Simply put, *Deadtime Stories* is gash. Do not under any circumstances be fooled by the George A. Romero name on the box, as his total contribution adds up to around two minutes of him sitting in a chair reading from a book. You’d swear a group of amateur filmmakers had just turned up in his living room with a camcorder, given him a big book and said “do us a favour and read from that mate” before slipping a tenner in his shirt pocket.

At one point during the first tale in *Deadtime Stories*, a member of the jungle crew questions the main lass’s prediction that they’ll find her husband in 48 hours. “You think we’re going to make it in two days?” he asks. In hindsight, that wasn’t such a ridiculous question, because I have the feeling the exact same question was asked by the crew when this prick of a film was in production. Stay well away from this garbage, or the next Deadtime Story you’ll be telling will be about the time you pissed a tenner against a wall after being fooled into thinking you were buying a Romero film.

*One out of five*

**How to see it**
For the sake of courtesy, I’ll tell you that *Deadtime Stories* is DVD-only in both the UK and US. It’s also not available on Blu-ray in either region, proving once and for all that you can’t polish a shite.

**Bits and pieces**
- Unsurprisingly, this isn't the first time something’s been named *Deadtime Stories*. A 1986 film of the same name (also known as *Freaky Fairytales*) is also a three-story anthology, but its stories are horror versions of stories involving Goldilocks, Red Riding Hood and a witch. There’s also a PC game called *Deadtime Stories*, but sadly it’s one of those ‘hidden object’ games that are a dime a dozen these days.

- In case you're morbidly curious, there's also a *Deadtime Stories Volume 2*, which is reportedly slightly better (not that it could be much worse). I'll be reviewing it sometime in the future.
Dinoshark (2010)

Director: Kevin O’Neill

Starring: Eric Balfour, Iva Hasperger, Roger Corman

“You’re gonna need a bigger chopper, cabron.”

There are officially somewhere in the region of three or four billion movies about dangerous animals that have been mutated a little, so Dinoshark would have to do something special to gnash its way to the top of the list. It doesn’t.

The film opens with a shot of a baby Dinoshark breaking free from an Arctic glacier that’s been melting (damn you global warming, etc). Obviously ice acts just like a cryogenic chamber because despite having been frozen for millions of years the baby Dinoshark is alive and well. Fast forward a few years and the older, wiser, hungrier Dinoshark has made its way to Puerto Vallarta – hey, you’d head for the sun too if you’d been trapped in ice for that long – and is looking to chew on some Mexicans.

Who can stop the Dinoshark? Unfortunately, the answer to that question is suave dickhead Trace McGraw, one of the least likeable heroes in cinematic history. Trace thinks he’s the greatest man who ever lived, but nobody really believes his stupidly exaggerated stories about the adventures he’s been up to since he was last in Mexico. When he sees the Dinoshark ripping a fellow boater to shreds, then, people laugh and tell him he’s making it up.

They’re not laughing so much when the Dinoshark starts attacking other people near the beach, mauling swimmers, children and water polo players in a mess of blood and unconvincing CGI, and so off goes Trace to give it a swift kicking.

The quality of the acting in Dinoshark is so bad it actually made me angry to think there are struggling actors out there trying to get a gig while pricks like these are stinking up celluloid. The only decent performance is from cult film producer Roger Corman (who also produced this – how the mighty have fallen). He plays a small role as a scientist and is the only believable thing in a film with an obviously unbelievable plot.

It’s a shame that the best thing about Dinoshark is the title. It’s not well-made enough to be surprisingly adept and it’s not cheesy enough to be a guilty pleasure. It’s just badly made from start to finish and really not worth bothering with. This one should have stayed frozen.

One out of five

How to see it
Dinoshark is only available on DVD in the UK, courtesy of Anchor Bay (who really used to be a lot better at picking which films to distribute). Anchor Bay also handles the US DVD, as well as the US-only Blu-ray. The film may be pish but both the DVD and Blu-ray versions at
least feature an enjoyable audio commentary by legendary producer Roger Corman, who speaks about the challenges of independent filmmaking.

**Bits and pieces**

- When it comes to producing B-movies, Roger Corman is the king. He's produced over 400 titles, going all the way back to the 1950's (with the likes of *The Beast With A Million Eyes* and *Stakeout On Dope Street*). The man is a hero of mine – most of the films he produces may be complete shite, but that's part of their charm.

- Director Kevin O'Neill also directed *Dinocroc* six years prior. Basically, if you're looking for someone to direct your 'dangerous water creature merged with a dinosaur' film, he's your man.
Drag Me To Hell (2009)

Director: Sam Raimi

Starring: Alison Lohmann, Justin Long, Lorna Raver

“I’m gonna get me some.”

While Sam Raimi is best known these days for being the director of the Spider-Man trilogy, to fans of horror and cult cinema he’ll always be the man behind the legendary Evil Dead films. With this trilogy Raimi took situations that in real life would be blood-curdling beyond belief and presented them in a darkly comic way that was both horrific and hilarious at the same time. Drag Me To Hell marked Raimi’s return to the horror genre, and while it could never live up to the Evil Dead series it has a ruddy good go at it.

The story begins with Christine (the likeable Alison Lohmann) trying to impress her boss at the bank so she can be promoted to an assistant manager position. Christine is approached by an old gypsy woman who hasn’t been paying her mortgage and needs a little more time to pay it. Though she wants to help the woman, Christine is pressured by her boss into refusing the extension. Enraged, the woman attacks Christine and is dragged away by security. Not to Hell, mind, just out the bank.

Things start to go a little tits-up when Christine, returning to her car, is attacked by the old woman. After a lengthy and typically ridiculous Raimi-style battle, the woman tears a button from Christine’s shirt, curses it and gives it back to her, then leaves. From that point on, Christine’s life is filled with visions, hallucinations and attacks from strange beings. It soon emerges that the woman has summoned the Lamia, an ancient demon, who will torment Christine for three days then appear to drag her down to the depths of Hell. Bit harsh, but there you go.

The first half of Drag Me To Hell very much concentrates on providing the viewer with jump scares on a regular basis. Jump! as Christine dreams the old woman is lying next to her in bed. Leap! as she’s attacked by the shadow of a demon. Shriek! as a haunted handkerchief floats up towards the screen (seriously). While jump scares are cheap ways to provoke a reaction, Raimi nonetheless times them to perfection here and for once they’re hard to predict, keeping the audience on edge as shock after shock is delivered.

Eventually though the fun and games have to stop and the small matter of the plot has to be dealt with. The second half of the film, then, is more story-driven and sees Christine trying to figure out how to stop the Lamia from dragging her down to Hell. It’s a little odd because the man giving her advice seems fairly useless (had he suggested in the first place that she do what she does at the end then things would have gone better for her), though she does eventually figure it out on her own.

The most memorable moment of the film is its twist ending. Naturally I won’t give the game away but there’s a chance you may be able to figure out what happens anyway if you’re
perceptive enough. Something happens in an earlier scene that seems so out of place suspicious viewers may notice it, wonder why the film's stopped to focused on it, and be able to guess what's happened as a result. Raimi gambles with it though, and if you didn't notice it then when the twist comes it'll all suddenly make sense and seem very clever.

Drag Me To Hell is a Marmite film. Of the people I've discussed it with, around half adored it and half despised it. I personally really enjoyed it but I'm giving it a lower score than I think it deserves because while I feel you should see it, you should be prepared to be part of the population who just don't connect with it.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it
Drag Me To Hell is out on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and North America. Don't be fooled by the 'Unrated' Director's Cut – both it and the Theatrical Cut last just as long as each other. A couple of shots have been changed, and that's about it.

Bits and pieces
• Apparently this was originally going to star Ellen Page but she decided to drop out and go film roller derby film Whip It instead. Whip It was decent, but I reckon this was much better.

• Back in the 1970s, every Universal film would say “when in Hollywood, visit Universal Studios” at the end of the credits. Raimi decided to put it back in for this film.
Elvira’s Haunted Hills (2001)

Director: Sam Irvin

Starring: Cassandra Peterson, Richard O’Brien, Scott Atkinson

DR BRADLEY – “The village people say this castle is evil.”
ELVIRA – “Meh, who listens to the Village People any more?”

If you’re not familiar with Cassandra Peterson, she’s a comedy actress most famous for her alter-ago, the campy vampire Elvira. Elvira used to introduce old horror films on American TV back in the 1980s and her cheesy jokes and – let’s face it – enormous chest made her a cult favourite among horror fans. In 1988 Peterson wrote and starred in a horror comedy called Elvira: Mistress Of The Dark, a film that’s since become the guilty pleasure of many a hardened horror nut. A sequel was planned, but after many years being screwed over by various studios she finally decided to go indie and make the film herself. The result, finally released thirteen years later, was Elvira’s Haunted Hills.

Set in 1851, Haunted Hills sees Elvira travelling through Europe to perform a show in Paris but finding herself lost in Romania in the process. After hitching a ride with a creepy-looking coach Elvira meets Dr Bradley, a posh-sounding Englishman who offers to take her to a castle to stay for the night. What he neglects to tell her is that the castle is owned by Lord Hellsubus (Richard O’Brien), a rich maniac who lost his wife many years ago and never recovered. Oh, and his wife haunts the mansion and looks just like Elvira. Cue the antics!

Make no bones about it, this horror-comedy has much more of the latter and hardly any of the former, but that was always its intention. It’s a spoof of the various Roger Corman and Hammer movies of the 70s and 80s set in the same time period, with nods to The House Of Usher and The Pit And The Pendulum throughout (though you don’t have to have seen those films to ‘get’ it).

Haunted Hills packs an impressive number of jokes in its 90-minute running time, and while some of them are fairly cringeworthy (comedy ‘boink’ sound effects and sped-up scenes will never be funny, and the numerous long screaming scenes are intensely irritating) there are a decent number of quips that hit the mark, mainly those from Elvira herself.

Indeed, it’s little wonder Elvira is the star of the show, because she’s the only truly entertaining character in the film. Her down-to-earth nature and modern, dry sense of humour provides a funny juxtaposition with the 1851 setting and she still seems young and full of life despite being over 50 when the movie was filmed.

If you want to see what the big deal is with Elvira then Elvira’s Haunted Hills is a decent way to find out. It’s by no means a great film but her performance shines through and turns a potentially humour-free mess into a chuckle-filled cheesefest.

Three out of five
How to see it

*Elvira’s Haunted Hills* is available on DVD in both the UK and US. It’s got plenty of documentaries, including an interview with Richard O’Brien. It isn’t yet available on Blu-ray.

Bits and pieces

• Richard O’Brien is something of a legend. To some he’s best known for writing *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and starring in the movie version, but to those my age (born in the early ‘80s) he’s more recognisable as the host of brilliant Channel 4 TV show *The Crystal Maze*.

• Regardless of the quality of the film, plenty of respect has to go to Cassandra Peterson (Elvira), because she funded *Haunted Hills* herself. Ultimately, she ended up spending a million dollars of her own money.
The Evil Dead (1981)

Director: Sam Raimi

Starring: Bruce Campbell, Ellen Sandweiss, Betsy Baker

“Kill her if you can, loverboy!”

One of my personal goals is to watch and review all 72 video nasty films – one of the benefits of this was getting to once again watch arguably the best and inarguably the most famous of the lot. Of course, had the Director of Public Prosecutions not been on the arsehole pills in 1984 The Evil Dead probably wouldn’t have been a video nasty in the first place because, as anyone who’s seen it will agree, there’s no way it should have been considered a notorious and dangerous film. After all, it’s far too silly to be taken seriously.

For those still to enjoy its daft delights, The Evil Dead tells the story of five young chums who decide to spend the weekend in a cabin in the woods (sound clichéd? That’s because this was the film that created the cliché). When they get there they find the Book of the Dead, a book that when read summons sleeping demons to possess the living. The good news is that nobody can read the book, the bad news is they also find a tape recorder with a tape of an old historian reading the book’s contents aloud. As they listen to the tape the demons are summoned and it’s up to the five friends to survive until daylight.

As the film progresses and the various teens are possessed, it becomes clear that the hero of the day is to be young Ashley, the shy and innocent one of the bunch played by Bruce Campbell in his first role. Nowadays Campbell is a bit of a cult icon among horror film fans and this is more or less solely thanks to the Evil Dead films and his performances in them. Ash takes a kicking throughout the majority of the film and there’s something satisfying about seeing the underdog getting splattered with gallons of blood, getting pinned under bookcases that are apparently much heavier than they look and generally not having a nice time of it. Even the movie’s final scene shows that he just can’t get a break.

What’s perhaps most impressive about The Evil Dead is that so many people look on it with fondness despite it on paper being, for want of a better word, nasty. One character is stabbed in the ankle with a pencil, after which the viewer is treated to the sight of it being twisted around in said ankle in unflinching detail. Another has their head caved in with an axe. Then there’s the film’s infamous ‘tree rape’ scene, in which Ellen Sandweiss’ character wanders into the woods to investigate a noise she hears, only to be assaulted and violated by the woods themselves (this scene was cut for a long time by the BBFC and was only recently allowed to be shown uncut). Yet despite this, the film’s charmingly low budget and its combination of likeable characters and laughable creatures means it’s still fondly remembered as a fun movie.
If you’ve never had the pleasure of seeing *The Evil Dead* yet I urge you to hunt it down, along with its sequels *Evil Dead 2: Dead By Dawn* and *Army Of Darkness*. Ash is one of the greatest heroes in horror history and this film shows the seeds of his creation. I guarantee laughter, I guarantee entertainment and I guarantee you’ll feel smugly satisfied when you tell your mates “I’ve seen a video nasty” while conveniently forgetting to tell them the one you watched was probably the least nasty of the bunch.

*Five out of five*

**How to see it**

There have been umpteen DVD versions of *The Evil Dead* and its two sequels released over the years. In the UK your best bet is the DVD and Blu-ray released late last year by Sony Pictures, because it’s got around three hours of special features. In the US, Anchor Bay’s released numerous DVD versions and the most recently released DVD and Blu-ray are the best bets. Many years ago there was a brilliant DVD special edition which looked like the Book of the Dead but it’s been long out of print so you’d need to hunt for a second hand copy.

**Bits and pieces**

- This wasn’t actually Sam Raimi’s first attempt at a horror film. Before *The Evil Dead* was *Within The Woods*, a 30-minute 8mm movie Raimi made during college with Bruce Campbell and Ellen Sandweiss. *Within The Woods* was an attempt to raise money to make *The Evil Dead*, and many things in the short film ended up appearing in *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead 2*.

- The cabin was located in Morristown, Tennessee. Want to go and visit it? Tough balls, it was burnt down by a bunch of rednecks in the middle of 1981. All that remains is part of the stone chimney stack, some of the roof and a hole dug in the middle where the trapdoor to the ‘cellar’ was (there never actually was a real cellar in the cabin).
Exam (2009)

Director: Stuart Hazeldine

Starring: Luke Mably, Chukwudi Iwuji, Jimi Mistry, Nathalie Cox, Adar Beck, Pollyanna McIntosh

“There is one question before you, and one answer is required. If you try to communicate with myself or the guard, you will be disqualified. If you spoil your paper, intentionally or accidentally, you will be disqualified. If you choose to leave this room for any reason, you will be disqualified. Any questions?”

Sitting an exam can be stressful at the best of times, but imagine taking one at a job interview where passing could get you a lucrative job with a top company. Not bad enough? Then imagine how you’d feel if you turned over your exam paper only to find that the question sheet was completely blank.

That’s the dilemma facing the eight applicants in Exam, and they have 80 minutes to figure out the answer. There are a few rules in place – if any of them speaks to the invigilator or guard, spoils their exam paper or leaves the room they’ll immediately be disqualified.

Within minutes one of the applicants starts writing down why she feels she should get the job and is thrown out for spoiling her paper, making things even more confusing. How do you solve a problem when you don’t know what the question is, and couldn’t write down the answer even if you did?

Eventually one of the eight – an arrogant, outspoken chap (Luke Mably) – explains to the rest of the group that there are no rules to prevent them from talking to each other. He assigns everyone stereotypical nicknames – Black, Brown, Brunette and so forth, naming himself White – and starts instructing everyone to try different things. Naturally the others don’t like being bossed around, and turn against White. That’s when things get interesting.

Despite its low budget Exam still manages to look and feel slick throughout. This was clearly a labour of love for director/writer Stuart Hazeldine and it shows. It’s well shot throughout and the score does that rare trick of being effective yet completely unnoticeable at the same time. The only real negatives are some of the performances, most notably from Jimi “East Is East” Mistry who plays Brown and is about as wooden as the desks in the exam room.

Your opinion of Exam is likely to rest on the ending. For some it’s a clever conclusion that comes out of left field, for other’s it’s a silly, almost childish solution that may open up more questions than it answers. Regardless, Exam remains a good example of a film that keep you entertained for an hour and a half using only a single room and eight people.

*Three out of five*
**How to see it**

*Exam* is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in the UK. In the US it’s only available on DVD, but the UK Blu-ray is region free so if you really want to see it in high-def you can import it.

**Bits and pieces**

- Seriously, the ending (no spoilers) made me shout “oh, fuck off” at the television.

- I like films like this, films that in theory could be shot with a single camera and no budget whatsoever and rely solely on the strength of its script. I’d love to make a film like this but the only film idea I can think of is a kebab shop owner who kills customers and makes them into kebab meat. It’d be called *Turkish Delight*. To be honest, I came up with the title first.
Exorcismus (2010)

Director: Manuel Carballo

Starring: Sophie Vavasseur, Stephen Billington, Richard Felix, Jo-Anne Stockham

“Don’t worry, God never abandons anything to evil.”

Typical bloody teenagers, eh? They mess around with their pals, they take drugs, they get possessed by the devil and try to kill their family members, they go to nightclubs... wait, hang on. That doesn't seem right.

Well, it’s certainly the case at least for 15-year-old Emma (the believable Sophie Vavasseur), who has started slipping into odd little episodes where she starts acting like a proper fanny then waking up and wondering what's happened. Her parents take her to a psychiatrist but, suspiciously, he has a heart attack while having a session with her. Later she tries to kill her brother before snapping out of it and coming to her senses.

Eventually, Emma starts to believe she may be possessed by the devil, so she finds her uncle – a priest who is conveniently known for having performed an exorcism previously, because exorcisms are seemingly a daily occurrence in England – and tries to convince him to perform one on her. But is Emma really possessed by the devil, or is it all in her silly little teenage head?

Well, she is possessed. Sorry if that seems like I’m spoiling things, but the film doesn’t really keep you in suspense for too long either. In fact, it’s only about half an hour in when she starts levitating in front of her family, leaving the audience in no doubt that these aren’t just teenage mood swings she’s having.

This makes for an oddly-paced film in which the cat is let out of the bag far too early and a struggle then begins to keep an exorcism interesting for another hour. This is handled by the priest’s strange decision to perform the exorcism over a number of small daily sessions, in between which Emma is inexplicably free to leave the house and hang out with her mates, during which dodgy incidents inevitably occur.

The film’s various oddities and silly plot points aside (Emma’s brother is sent to stay with his aunt so he can stay away from her during the exorcism, but it turns out the aunt just lives next door and he ends up talking to her anyway), it’s refreshing to see an exorcism story taking place in a normal London suburb with normal British teens involved. The young actress playing Emma, Sophie Vavasseur, puts in a solid performance and while things do eventually get a little silly when she starts slipping into her devil voice she does the best she can with the lines she’s given and generally plays the lead role just right.

As the story progresses, Exorcismus chucks in more twists than a Curly Wurly, making sure that while you may know Emma is definitely possessed you’re still not entirely sure what’s going to happen. While none of these twists are exactly ground-breaking – it’s unlikely that
the final revelation will shock you to the core – they at least retain your interest until the film’s end.

Despite being from the same Spanish production team as the fantastic .REC films, Exorcismus isn’t exactly going to be the sort of film that sticks long in your mind after you’ve seen it. The familiar location will make it interesting for British viewers, the lead actress does a good job and fans of possession films will be interested in the different ways this film takes the subject. It’s not terrific by any means but it’s a decent little flick.

*Three out of five*

**How to see it**
Exorcismus is available on DVD in both the UK and US. The only Blu-ray version currently available is in Spain, with the title *La posesión de Emma Evans*.

**Bits and pieces**
- Sophie Vavasseur, who plays the lead role of Emma, wasn’t a stranger to horror films when she signed up for Exorcismus. When she was twelve she played Angela Ashford (the Red Queen) in Resident Evil: Apocalypse.

- You may have heard that Doug “Hellraiser” Bradley is in Exorcismus. By no means should this be the main reason you see the film, because he only pops up for a single scene near the end.
The Exorcist (1973)

Director: William Friedkin

Starring: Linda Blair, Ellen Burstyn, Jason Miller

“Mother, what’s wrong with me?”

_The Exorcist_ is not a horror film. At least, that’s what director William Friedkin, writer William Peter Blatty and Linda Blair, who played the possessed little girl in the film, would have you believe. According to them, it’s a drama about the mystery of faith that just happens to have disturbing scenes in it. Personally I’d chuck a stern “bullshit” at that theory, but it doesn’t really matter. What’s important is that whatever genre or niche you try to place it in, _The Exorcist_ remains one of the greatest films ever made.

The story’s well-known, but for those who’ve maybe managed to avoid it I’ll fill you in on the basics. Chris MacNeil (Burstyn) gets concerned when her little girl Regan starts showing some odd behaviour. She pees on the carpet, swears at doctors and starts playing with ouija boards. While this may be the normal sort of behaviour you’d expect from an Essex youth, for the well brought-up Regan it’s very uncharacteristic.

Doctors are unable to figure out what’s wrong with Regan and brain scans come back negative, suggesting she’s not suffering from any sort of mental illness. Meanwhile, Regan’s behaviour gets more and more shocking, culminating in her slapping her mother across the face and ramming her head into her crotch. Remember, not from Essex.

It soon emerges that Regan claims to be possessed by the devil so, at her wit’s end, Chris goes to a local priest and asks him to arrange an exorcism. After a bit of persuasion (mainly involving Regan masturbating with a crucifix and spinning her head 360 degrees), he decides to get in touch with Father Merrin, one of the few Jesuit priests who still perform the rare ritual. Can they drive the devil out of Regan? That would be telling.

While its key moments have been parodied time and time again, spoofed by the likes of the Wayans brothers in _Scary Movie 2_, Leslie Nielsen in _Repossessed_ and even a Danish bacon advert, _The Exorcist_ still has the power to shock. This is mainly due to two things – the believable and realistic special effects and the superb performance by Linda Blair as Regan.

Regan is such a likeable, idyllic little girl at the start of the movie that when she descends into her possessed state and starts saying and doing the most outrageous things it’s all the more shocking. You find yourself siding with her mother as she tries to get help – you care about this once-sweet little girl’s well-being and you want her to overcome this demon who’s possessed her. Had Regan not been so easy to warm to at the start then the audience would have made less of an emotional investment in the movie.

The effects, many of which have only been recently explained, are the work of genius. These days it suffers from the “Beatles effect” – the genre has evolved so much over the years (in
this case thanks to CGI) that it can be hard to appreciate the impact it made when it was first released, but at the time it was doing stuff on camera that had never been seen before and without a computer in sight.

The bed shaking was handled by building a bed, cutting a hole in the wall behind it and having a crew of men literally shake the bed from behind the set. The spinning head was a robotic dummy, the vomit scene was created with a mouth attachment that fired pea soup... all pieces of technical genius and all remarkably believable.

You could watch The Exorcist ten times and get something new out of it each time you watched it. Legendary critic Mark Kermode famously said he’s watched it over 200 times and it still feels new to him every time. There are so many subtle moments, so many nods to events that will happen later on, so many different ways to consider each scene and so many different interpretations you can give to its open ending that everyone will take away something different from the film. Religious viewers will see the fear in having their faith challenged, parents will see the fear in the helplessness Chris feels as her daughter succumbs.

Whoever you are and whatever your beliefs may be, you really have to see this film. It may terrify you beyond belief (though if you’re a hardened Saw addict it may not), but it’s one of the most important films in cinema and a landmark of the horror genre – whether or not the filmmakers believe it’s a part of it.

Five out of five

How to see it
The best way to see The Exorcist by far is the Blu-ray, available in both the UK and US. This two-disc beauty features both the original theatrical version of the film, as well as the director’s cut The Version You’ve Never Seen (reviewed over the page) and some brilliant features, including one showing for the first time how the special effects were done. It also contains the excellent Mark Kermode documentary The Fear Of God. If you’d rather go down the DVD route you can buy either the theatrical version or The Version You’ve Never Seen separately. Alternatively, there’s a boxset (in both the UK and US) called The Complete Anthology, which contains The Exorcist (theatrical edition), Exorcist II: The Heretic, The Exorcist III, Exorcist: The Beginning and Exorcist: Dominion. The UK also has an alternative box set containing just the first three films.

Bits and pieces
• The secrets to The Exorcist’s special effects have remained untold for decades but the Blu-ray finally shows some never-seen on-set footage of how they were set up. The scene in which Regan levitates was done with fishing line painted with grey stripes. Apparently it’s a theatre trick, because a striped line is harder to see than a full one. Genius.

• Part of me feels bad for Linda Blair. She’s been in over 60 movies since The Exorcist, but she’ll always be known as ‘the girl from The Exorcist’ rather than ‘the girl from Savage Island’ or ‘her from Roller Boogie’. Not that I’m surprised, of course.
• Fun fact: the author of The Exorcist, William Peter Blatty, was once on the game show You Bet Your Life, hosted by Groucho Marx, where he won $10,000. When asked what he’d do with the winnings, Blatty said he was going to take some time off to “work on a novel”. In a way, then, Groucho Marx was responsible for The Exorcist.
The Exorcist: The Version You’ve Never Seen (2000)

Director: William Friedkin

Starring: Linda Blair, Ellen Burstyn, Jason Miller

“I think the point is to make us despair. To see ourselves as animal and ugly. To make us reject the possibility that God could love us.”

Although *The Exorcist* was a worldwide smash hit and remains Warner Bros’ highest-grossing film at the box office (after inflation), William Peter Blatty remained unsatisfied. As the author of the book on which the film was based he felt some key scenes had been dropped, scenes that would have given viewers the message he originally wanted to express.

William Friedkin, the film’s director, disagreed. He felt the film worked perfectly as it was and told Blatty he was being “a bad winner”, that they were both making a fortune on a hugely critically successful film and he should be happy with the recognition. The two fell out for a while because of this dispute.

Time passed and Blatty and Friedkin resolved their differences and became friends again. Blatty still maintained that he wasn’t happy with parts of the film, in particular the ending, which he felt ended too ambiguously and left people leaving the cinema on a downer thinking the devil may have won. Friedkin remained unconvinced, and maintained that the film should stay untouched.

Eventually, around the time of the film’s 25th anniversary, Blatty persuaded Friedkin to dig out the unused footage from the film and put together a new cut of *The Exorcist* that more closely resembled Blatty’s original vision, a sort of ‘Writer’s Cut’. The result was released in cinemas in 2000 as *The Exorcist: The Version You’ve Never Seen*.

Despite Blatty’s original intention for the re-release, the most notable change in this new cut is the inclusion of the legendary ‘spider walk’ scene. This deleted scene, in which Regan flips upside-down and walks down the stairs like a spider, had been part of *Exorcist* lore for years with fans eager to see it as it was originally intended. The scene itself is pretty effective, and its inclusion is welcome.

So, the spider walk aside, what else is in there? Well, the other main addition is of course the aforementioned alternative ending, which involves an extra scene at the end where Father Dyer and Lt Kinderman have a pleasant chat. This was the scene Blatty wanted to add to reassure the viewer that all was well with the world, and I could take it or leave it really.

There are also a few little trims and additions dotted here and there throughout the movie. Father Merrin has a few extra scenes with Chris MacNeil and Father Karras which flesh his character out a little, and there are some new digital effects where a demon’s face subliminally pops up from time to time.
Do these changes make *The Version You’ve Never Seen* a better movie than the original? Not necessarily, it just makes it a slightly different one that perhaps feels slightly more modern. Both versions are effective but if pushed I’d recommend you watch the spider scene online then just check out the original version of the film, since its more ambiguous ending leaves a greater feeling of unease.

*Five out of five*

**How to see it**

*The Version You’ve Never Seen* is provided on the outstanding Blu-ray version of *The Exorcist*, along with the theatrical version. It can also be found on DVD as a standalone version, and isn’t featured in any box sets.

**Bits and pieces**

• When I was at university my local Odeon cinema was showing a different ‘classic’ movie every week – *Raiders Of The Lost Ark, The Exorcist, The Godfather* and so on. I went to see *The Exorcist* but I didn’t realise it was this version, which had only been released a couple of years previously. Since the audience was mainly students everyone was laughing uproariously at all the bits that were once ‘scary’ – Regan pissing herself at the party and the like – to show that they were cool and this notoriously scary movie was breeze to them. Being one of those annoying people who take film far too seriously, I was livid that they were being so disrespectful. Then the ‘spider walk’ scene happened and you could literally hear all the air being sucked out of the room as everyone gasped in unison. This wasn’t one of the famous *Exorcist* scenes that had been spoofed a million times, and because nobody knew it was coming it hit them like a ton of bricks. The rest of the film was watched in terrified silence, with nobody knowing what was coming next, as if it was 1973 all over again.

• The spider walk scene was digitally altered so that blood streams from Regan’s mouth at the end. The unaltered version can be seen in *The Fear Of God* documentary provided with the theatrical version of *The Exorcist*. 
The Exterminator (1980)

Director: James Glickenhaus

Starring: Robert Ginty, Christopher George, Samantha Eggar

*CIA AGENT* – “This Exterminator is the most dangerous serial killer in the United States and he’s in New York City! What do you think about all this?”

*DALTON* – “I think you need to take a shit. It’s coming out of your mouth instead of your asshole.”

One of the more popular vigilante films to hit during the grindhouse era, *The Exterminator* tells the story of a man out to clean up the city’s crime by dishing out some pain of his own.

John’s best friend Michael saves his life while they’re both fighting in Vietnam. After completing their service they return to New York to try to return to some sort of normality, but shortly afterwards Michael is mugged by a gang and left paralysed from the neck down. John vows to repay his friend by hunting down the gang and making them pay for their crime.

This should be a fairly straightforward movie, but after John deals with the gang he decides not to stop there. Instead, he decides to take on all crime and clean up New York by dishing out punishment to every sleazeball around. The media start calling him The Exterminator, the police want to catch him and the CIA start hunting him down because they think he’s working for a rival party to expose the government’s inability to deal with crime. Can John stay on the run from those who want to stop him?

*The Exterminator* gained a cult following in the grindhouse cinemas of the ‘70s and early ‘80s, and was also one of the more notorious films released on VHS in the early video boom. It’s unsurprising then that *The Exterminator*’s most memorable moments are the more violent scenes, which are mostly executed (ahem) with style.

By far the most notable example of this is the Vietnam prologue where special effects guru Stan Winston (*The Terminator, Jurassic Park, Alien, Predator*) was drafted in to help create a chillingly realistic decapitation scene. It’s a truly shocking moment and one that no doubt contributed a great deal to the film’s cult success.

While the rest of the film never quite manages to match this prologue in terms of shock factor, it comes close at times. A scene involving a giant meat grinder doesn’t look very convincing but is made so by the screams emitted by the victim, whereas a moment involving a prostitute and a soldering iron is still wince-inducing even though it mercifully takes place off-camera.
Robert Ginty is decent as the titular Exterminator. He plays the role completely straight, without any over-the-top rants or ridiculous ‘action movie’ facial expressions. He’s got one or two cheesy lines (“if you’re lying, I’ll be back”) but for the most part he’s a good lead.

*The Exterminator* is grindhouse cheese but it’s entertaining grindhouse cheese. The set-pieces are effective, the acting is understated but spot-on and the whole film’s got an unashamed seediness and grit to it. The final scene ruins what could have been a powerful ending, but that aside it’s one of the better-made films of its era.

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**
*The Exterminator* is available on Blu-ray and DVD in the UK courtesy of Arrow Video. It contains a commentary and a couple of documentaries. The US has its own special edition Blu-ray/DVD combo, so if you’re on that side of the Atlantic you should obviously go for that.

**Bits and pieces**
• The beheading scene at the start cost $25,000 and the whole Vietnam intro cost $400,000. Considering the entire movie’s budget was $2 million, that means 20% of the film’s budget was spent on the first five minutes. That’s how you start off with a bang.

• The uncut version has only been available in the UK for a few years. The beheading scene used to be cut pretty badly (so to speak), as was the distressing scene where a prostitute is tortured with a soldering iron. Thankfully, as stated in the review, the latter still isn’t very graphic in its uncut form, with most of the abuse happening off-camera.
The Eye (2002)

Directors: Oxide & Danny Pang

Starring: Angelica Lee, Lawrence Chou

"Why are you sitting in my chair?"

Poor old Mun, she’s blind as a fucking bat. Her luck soon changes though when she’s given a cornea transplant that finally allows her to see the world. Problem is, she’s seeing it through the eyes of some troubled lass who claimed she could see ghosts, then hung herself because nobody liked her. Cue a lot of scary set-pieces as Mun tries to figure out exactly what’s going on and learn a bit more about the nutter whose eyes she’s been lumbered with while at the same time being mercilessly abused by numerous ghosts.

Forget an eye transplant, it’s a new arse you’ll be wanting after you’ve seen this. There are a number of memorable scenes in this film that are so pant-soilingly creepy I couldn’t even begin to describe without thinking about them and instinctively tightening the old bumcheeks. Needless to say, if you’ve already seen the film, all I need to do is give a list of words and each one should send a chill down your spine.


Similarly, a number of sentences that would sound normal under any other circumstances now have different connotations after seeing The Eye (known as Jian Gui in its native country of China). These days I can’t have anyone tell me “I’m freezing” or ask me “why are you sitting in my chair” without me going crazy and wildly swinging a stool at them. Let’s not beat about the bush – assuming you’re using the correct horror-viewing formula of “no lights + maximum sound”, The Eye is one extremely scary film.

It’s got quite a few jumpy moments, two of which happen before the film even starts. The intro burns out as if the projector has broken, then there’s a loud bang and you see a faceless version of the heroine. Then there’s a loud scream and an evil red face booms onto the screen followed by the warning “SIT TIGHT”.

The majority of the frights, however, take place in the first half of the film. Once Mun realises what’s going on, the back half becomes more of a mystery story as she and hapless geek Dr Wah run all over Asia trying to find out about her eye donor. This is a shame because it’s this second half where the film starts to fall apart a little. The final fifteen minutes then try for a big action-packed finale, but this doesn’t really suit the mood of the film.

The disappointing latter sections aside, The Eye contains one of the scariest scenes I’ve seen in a very long time. Many people reviewing this film have referred to the infamous elevator scene, which is certainly very tense, but by far the scariest scene – especially when watched at a deafening volume with the lights out – is the scene in which Mun, having recently
regained her sight, takes a calligraphy lesson to learn how to write properly. I won’t say any more about it but needless to say, I have not been terrified like that for quite some time.

The score is a bit of a mixed bag. There are some moments when it’s terrible (such as the scene where Dr Wah thinks Mun’s sister is hitting on her), but whenever a ghost turns up and the tension builds there’s a little musical sting which also builds in tension and volume as the ghost approaches (check out the scene with the woman and child ghost entering the restaurant with the meat to see what I mean... as she approaches, the music swells).

By far the cleverest thing about The Eye though is its biggest secret, something the film doesn’t even address. There are actually ghosts hidden throughout the film. Some of them are pretty obvious as they’re part of the plot (the woman in the hospital, the calligraphy ghost etc), but others you won’t see unless you look for them. They’re tucked away in the background and you may only acknowledge them on a subliminal level.

Perhaps the most effective example of this, and one that will send a shiver down your fucking SOUL should you happen to spot it unexpectedly like I did, appears during a scene in which Mun and Dr Wah are sitting on a train. When the train enters a tunnel the face of a ghost can be seen in the window. Since the ghost isn’t mentioned again and there isn’t a big deal made about it, it’s perhaps the most chilling moment of the film. It’s particularly effective when you watch the film with a group of friends and they didn’t notice it. Just rewind the film after you’ve watched it and freak the piss out of them.

The Eye is a great film that I’d thoroughly recommended. While the final act fails to live up to the rest of the film the presence of some terrifying scare scenes, creepy ghost appearances and a plot that can actually be followed (something often lacking in Asian cinema due to differences in culture and translation) make for an excellent fright flick that you really should see.

Four and a half out of five

How to see it
The Eye can be found on DVD in the UK and US, though the US version was released in limited numbers back in 2004 and as such is pretty difficult to find these days. The UK also has a box set, courtesy of Tartan Video, which features The Eye, The Eye 2 and The Eye Infinity. For the love of Christ, make sure you don’t get the US remake starring Jessica Alba instead.

Bits and pieces
• In Chinese mythology there are two Grim Reapers, called Wuchang. One is black and one is white. One takes the spirit to heaven or hell, while the other disperses the soul in the body. The black spirits that appear in The Eye are black Wuchang.
• The opening credits (the proper ones that take places after the jump scare fake ones) are pretty clever. They appear in Braille first and are then translated. Because she’s blind, get it? Sigh. Well I liked it.
Final Destination (2000)

Director: James Wong

Starring: Devon Sawa, Ali Larter, Seann William Scott

“Beware. The risk of cheating the plan, disrespecting the design, could initiate a horrifying fury that would terrorise even the Grim Reaper. And you don’t even want to FUCK with that Mack Daddy.”

Final Destination is one of my guilty pleasures. I know it’s a load of hokey shite and I know the plot’s so daft it makes Lady Gaga’s fashion sense seem positively reserved by comparison, but I still find myself enjoying it when I watch it.

It tells the story of Alex, a young chap about to go on a flight to Paris with the rest of his class and two of his teachers. Before the plane takes off Alex has a premonition (shown in grisly detail) that it’s going to burst into flames in mid-air, so he throws a hissy fit and gets off the plane, along with a few other students and one of the teachers who get caught up in the commotion.

As Alex’s chums have a go at him at the terminal for making them miss their flight, they’re immediately stunned into silence when in the distance they see their plane explode in mid-air, just like Alex predicted.

Naturally, the FBI are a bit suspicious so they decide to keep their eye on Alex, but just as they decide he’s innocent the rest of the survivors begin to die one by one. Alex realises that because he and his friends cheated death by getting off the plane, Death itself is a bit pissed off and is trying to kill them off to keep its records in order.

The most entertaining moments in Final Destination, then, are the numerous death scenes, each of which would seem accidental were we not aware that Death’s causing them. Each death scene is a clever “will they, won’t they” balance where it’s not quite clear when and how the victim is going to peg it. The numerous red herrings keep the audience guessing, turning something as simple as a strangulation into an elaborate dance in which the viewer is teased with a myriad of potential hazards and near-misses before the poor sap finally croaks in an inevitably grim fashion.

After an exciting first 45 minutes, the back half of Final Destination loses its steam a little. Once Alex figures out what’s going on and how it all works he becomes a member of the tinfoil hat brigade, opening tins of food while wearing thick gloves and standing candles in the middle of water-filled bowls in case they fall. This is where things start to get a little wayward.

Still, Final Destination is worth a look. It was popular enough to spawn four sequels, but you should definitely start with this one. Its tale of an angry death looking to cover up its
mistake may be a silly one and the acting may be poorer than Detroit at times, but it’s daft fun.

Three out of five

How to see it
Final Destination can be found fairly cheaply on DVD and Blu-ray. Although there are now five Final Destination films there’s no box set containing all of them. The best you can get if you live in the UK is either the UK Blu-ray box set which consists of the first four films, or the Final Destination DVD Thrill-ogy boxset (ugh) with the first three movies. The Thrill-ogy is also available in the US on DVD and Blu-ray, but there’s no four-film Blu-ray box set there.

Bits and pieces
• Once you finish watching Final Destination, watch it again and keep a close eye on the opening credits. All the imagery shown during them are premonitions of the deaths that end up happening in the film. So the film about a guy who can predict deaths also predicts those deaths too. Filmception.

• Most of the characters in Final Destination have surnames dedicated to horror legends – Alex Browning (Tod Browning), Valerie Lewton (Val Lewton), Agent Schreck (Max Schreck), Tod Waggner (George Waggner), Terry Chaney (Lon Chaney), Larry Murnau (F. W. Murnau) and Billy Hitchcock (Alfred Hitchcock).
For Y’ur Height Only (1981)

Director: Eddie Nicart

Starring: Weng Weng, Yehlen Catral, Beth Sandoval

“You’re such a tiny little guy. Very petite, like a potato.”

Dr Kohler, a scientist responsible for the creation of the deadly N-bomb (the explosive that
is, not the racial slur), has been kidnapped by a group of Filipino henchmen working for the
mysterious Mr Giant. A top secret agency sends their finest agent on a mission to find out
more, rescue Dr Kohler and put an end to Giant’s crime syndicate. What’s that? It sounds
like your standard spy movie? That’s because I neglected to tell you the secret agent in
question is a midget.

Yes, the hero in For Y’ur Height Only (no, I don’t understand the apostrophe) is Agent 00,
played by 2’9” Weng Weng (who still holds the Guinness World Record as the shortest actor
in a leading role). Is this cruel? Is it exploiting poor little Weng Weng? Well, if it is, you
wouldn’t know it, because the tiny fella seems to be having a whale of a time.

Being such a diminutive chap, Agent 00 can infiltrate areas no other agent can, squeezing
himself into tight gaps and hiding under tables before springing out and attacking his
enemies. And boy, can he attack. Much of the film’s numerous fight scenes consist of Weng
Weng kicking various arses, not to mention testicles and heads. They’re as well
choreographed as you’d expect a fight with a midget could be, though you’ll find Agent 00’s
apparent strength a little hard to swallow at times.

The one challenge with an action movie starring a dinky lad is that you’re going to struggle
to find a stunt double, so luckily Weng Weng is more than capable of performing his own
stunts. It does look like he gets a helping hand at times however – some scenes see him
sliding backwards across the floor at speed while firing a gun, a trick no doubt aided by an
off-camera crew member physically launching him across the floor. There’s also one
hilarious scene where he leaps on a criminal from the top of a stairwell, clearly achieved by
having someone literally chuck him at them.

Of course, if the film wasn’t actually entertaining then For Y’ur Eyes Only’s gimmick would
probably get boring eventually. Thankfully this isn’t the case and the film remains amusing
throughout. Agent 00 is armed with a huge selection of gadgets and gizmos (presented to
him in an absurdly long scene aping the Q scenes in a Bond movie) and uses these devices
throughout the film to keep things interesting.

It’s the items Agent 00 receives along the way that lead to the most memorable scenes
however, most notably when he jumps out the window of a skyscraper while holding an
umbrella (clearly turning into a dummy during the wide shot, smacking its legs off the side
of the building as it gracelessly tumbles down). There’s also the scene in which he is given a
jetpack. Yes, this film has a midget with a jetpack. Naturally, when I watched this with a
primarily Glaswegian audience, one chap was heard to excitedly exclaim “awww fuck offft” during this scene.

The only real negative point of *For Y’ur Height Only* is the soundtrack. It only has a couple of themes and one of them is an incredibly irritating rendition of the James Bond theme interspersed with screeching trumpets. This is repeated ad nauseum throughout the film and begins to grate by the end.

That’s the only annoying aspect of a hugely entertaining film, however. *For Y’ur Height Only* may essentially boil down to people laughing at a midget trying to be James Bond, but given that Weng Weng’s clearly having as much fun as the audience then enjoying it without feeling guilty is no tall order (ahem).

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**
*For Y’ur Height Only* is only available on DVD in the US so the only way UK film buffs can see it is by importing it (assuming you can play US DVDs). It’s worth the hassle, because the DVD comes with a bonus film, the pleasingly shite kung fu film *Challenge Of The Tiger* starring Bruce Le (not a typo).

**Bits and pieces**
- There was actually a sequel to *For Y’ur Height Only* called *The Impossible Kid*. It once again starred Weng Weng as Agent 00 because, let’s face it, 2’9” Filipino actors don’t exactly grow on trees. If they did though, they’d be tiny trees.

- Weng Weng sadly died at the age of 34. It was a pretty small funeral. Sorry.
Friday The 13th (1980)

Director: Sean S Cunningham

Starring: Betsy Palmer, Adrienne King, Kevin Bacon, Walt Gorney

“You’re going to Camp Blood, ain’t ya? You’ll never come back again. It’s got a death curse!”

You can’t beat a good Jason movie. Not that this is one, of course, because he’s not really in it. And while the reference to Friday The 13th in the opening scene of Scream did its best to inform today’s horror fans that Jason Voorhees was never actually the killer in the original movie, many still believe he’s been the one slicing up teens ever since the series began. They’re wrong. Laugh at them.

Regardless of the big man’s absence Friday The 13th is still a hugely influential film. Much like Halloween inspired the slasher genre in the first place, Friday The 13th was the film responsible for countless imitators in the more specific camp slasher sub-genre. Sleepaway Camp, The Burning, even modern ‘gems’ like Scream Bloody Murder (reviewed elsewhere in this book)... they all got the original ‘teens at a camp’ idea from Friday The 13th.

The story now sounds clichéd but at the time it was novel. 23 years after Camp Crystal Lake closes down following an accident an enterprising young chap decides to open it up again, despite warnings from the locals to leave well alone. As we join the story the counsellors are making their way to the camp early to prepare for the children’s arrival in a few days. But they’re not alone... well, obviously, because the other counsellors are there. What I mean is there’s a killer wandering around too.

As the first important camp slasher movie, Friday The 13th established a lot of the clichés that remain to this day. Gory deaths are a given but it was also responsible for cementing the unwritten rule that if you have sex you die, the subsequent rule that the virgin is the one who’ll become the survivor, and the presence of that camp slasher favourite, the Crazy Old Man™.

Friday The 13th’s Crazy Old Man™ is Ralph, an apparent Grade A mentalist who advises one of the counsellors that Camp Crystal Lake has a “death curse” and that they should stay away. Though it’s not a curse as such, the fact that Ralph was right all along and that he’s smart enough to then piss off after his warning so he can survive past the closing credits (in this film, at least) means he’s a credit to Crazy Old Men™ everywhere. Good work, Ralph.

Of course, all the counsellors ignore Ralph because he’s a Crazy Old Man™ and continue on to the camp, presumably because if they’d said “hmmm, sounds dangerous, let’s go back home and get a bar job instead” the film would perhaps have been less exciting and may not have spawned the eleven subsequent films it did.

And so, as would soon become traditional, the counsellors start getting offed one by one. The deaths are surprisingly realistic for a film with such a low budget, mainly thanks to the
special effects expertise of a young Tom Savini, who would go on to become a legend of the horror genre with films like *Dawn Of The Dead*. The most impressive scene of the bunch is the arrow-in-the-neck demise of Jack – played by a 21-year-old Kevin Bacon in his first role – which looks so believable that to this day many are still stumped as to how it was done (though there have been documentaries since that have revealed the secret).

Of course, as is customary in these films the killer has to eventually be revealed, and while I won’t spoil it (in case you’re one of the few people who doesn’t know what happens) it leads to a rather underwhelming final fifteen minutes when you realise the killer isn’t exactly the strongest or most intimidating person in the world. Still, the final death and the brilliant twist ending make up for it.

*Friday The 13th* may be showing its age now and it may not prominently feature the man who would become synonymous with the series but despite this it’s still a great example of the genre at its purest. If you’re relatively new to slasher films and are as a result less likely to be able to tell when the jumps are coming (many films used the *Friday The 13th* series as templates for the timing of their jumps) then you’ll be in for a scary ride, but for everyone else these days it’s just a dumb, fun movie that happened to give birth to an entire sub-genre that continues to exist more than 30 years on. See it.

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**

*Friday The 13th* is available in a few different versions. The UK DVD from Warner Bros is completely uncut, as is the Blu-ray version. In the US, stay away from the older Paramount DVD because it’s cut. Instead, go for the Uncut Deluxe Edition on DVD or Blu-ray. If you’re feeling particularly flush, the recently released *Friday The 13th: The Complete Collection* Blu-ray boxset is a cracking package featuring all twelve movies. It’s only available in North America at the time of writing, but it’s region free and so works in the UK if you import it (as I did).

**Bits and pieces**

• Spoiler warning ahead! That classic “ki ki ki ma ma ma” sound that plays over the musical score whenever someone’s about to peg it isn’t actually a random noise. According to the film’s composer Harry Manfredini, it’s meant to be an echo of Mrs Voorhees, who says “kill her mommy” in Jason’s voice near the end of the film. So the “ki ki ki ma ma ma” actually comes from “kill kill kill mommy mommy mommy”. Lovely stuff.

• Apparently Betsy Palmer (Mrs Voorhees) angered a film critic by choosing to appear in a violent film. The critic decided to print her name and address, encouraging people to write to her and criticise her for her immoral decision. Fantastically, the idiot printed the wrong address, meaning some other poor sap got loads of hate mail. Palmer didn’t want to do the film anyway, she was just doing it for easy money. After she read the script she apparently described the film as “a piece of shit”.

• Don’t watch the trailer for *Friday The 13th*, whatever you do. The bastard spoils all the deaths in the film!
Ghostwatch (1992)

Director: Lesley Manning

Starring: Michael Parkinson, Sarah Greene, Craig Charles, Michelle & Cherise Wesson

“What big eyes you have... what big eyes you have.”

Picture the scene. It’s Halloween night, 1992, and the BBC has decided to present a live, hour-long broadcast from the most haunted house in Britain in an attempt to catch the first live, on-camera footage of ghostly events taking place. Well-respected presenter Michael Parkinson is hosting proceedings at a nearby studio, accompanied by parapsychologist Lin Pascoe (there to give an expert’s view), and TV host Mike Smith is manning the phone lines and taking calls from any members of the public who see anything odd.

But the real focus of the show is the outside broadcast live from the haunted house, as popular children’s presenter (and real-life husband of Mike Smith) Sarah Greene plans to spend the night with the Early family, who are being terrorised by a ghost going by the name of Pipes (so called because the noise he initially made sounds like old central heating pipes clanking and warming up). Meanwhile, outside the house will be Craig Charles (comedian and star of popular sci-fi sitcom Red Dwarf) who will be interviewing witnesses and generally adding some comic relief to what should be an otherwise nervy night. They are all expecting to have a laugh with the audience and make light of the situation, but that’s until things start to go wrong. The eldest daughter’s voice is taken over by Pipes, photo frames fly off the wall and Pipes starts taking over the studio.

Except he doesn’t really. The whole thing was a fake broadcast filmed in the style of Orson Welles’s famous War Of The Worlds radio drama, presented as genuine in order to terrify the audience into thinking it was really happening. It was perhaps too successful, because it ended up with the dubious honour of being the first TV programme to genuinely inflict post-traumatic stress symptoms in children, and caused one mentally unstable viewer to kill himself.

As a result, the BBC has never shown Ghostwatch again in the eighteen years since it was released for fear of the same thing happening again, but it’s now available on DVD and while the acting is a little less credible these days it’s still a spooky little tale.

I vaguely remember Ghostwatch’s first broadcast in 1992. I never saw it at the time (I was only 9 and still kept my distance from ‘scary’ things), but my uncle phoned up my house, convinced it was real. These days it’s fair to say that Ghostwatch is not the most convincing ‘hoax’ of all time, primarily due to the poor acting ability of the actresses playing the mother and her two daughters. Despite the generally believable performances from the actual TV presenters playing themselves, these two actresses still manage to bring you back to reality as you realise this isn’t possibly genuine, simply because nobody talks like they do. The eldest daughter and mother in particular are unconvincing.
However, for those who missed the opening titles and tuned in halfway through, this could have very easily passed as a genuine piece of reality TV. Hindsight makes it difficult to determine whether people would have been gullible enough to buy it, because when I recently watched it I was fully aware that it was fake and was looking for signs of this. Perhaps it didn’t even enter the minds of people watching it at the time – bear in mind this was the early 90’s, long before the wave of both reality TV and famous hoaxes such as *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Last Broadcast* and (in my opinion, of course) Living TV’s Most Haunted.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that regardless of its believability, *Ghostwatch* is extremely well-produced and successfully mimics the format of real-life TV broadcasts long before Chris Morris and Armando Ianucci attempted it with spoof news shows *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye*.

The tension is well-built with the initially slight unease of members of the public phoning in and claiming they’ve seen a shadowy figure in some footage that was played earlier. This progresses to some subliminal appearances of a strange person in the background, in a number of blink-and-you’ll-miss-him shots. Eventually it all comes to a head, the audience gets the most blatant sighting of the figure, and from then on the viewers are hooked as all hell breaks loose.

To say any more would cruelly spoil things, and this truly is a DVD that has to be watched with as little knowledge of events as possible, but the internet is buzzing with those who have already seen it and are comparing sightings of the ghost, trying to get the definitive list of how many times he appears (the correct answer? Nine in total).

*Ghostwatch* may not be everybody’s cup of tea – the acting is occasionally dodgy, the ending is ridiculous and the whole thing smells faintly of cheese. But anyone willing to let that slide and consider that nearly two decades ago this scared the hell out of a gullible country (and unfortunately led to a suicide) will thoroughly enjoy watching this. If possible, watch it in a large group and play Spot The Ghost.

In short, *Ghostwatch* inspired a hell of a lot of ‘fake’ reality programmes that followed, and for this reason alone should be worth a view. At its best it’s a fantastic study in the human mind and how it deals with subliminal imagery and belief. At its worst it’s a bloody good ghost story. It’s a win-win situation.

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**

*Ghostwatch* is only available on DVD, which is understandable because it was shot for TV and as such an HD version would be impossible. It’s only available in the UK but the 2011 DVD release by 101 Films is region-free so Americans can buy that if they want to see it.

**Bits and pieces**

- When *Ghostwatch* originally aired Craig Charles was already well-known for playing Lister in brilliant TV sci-fi comedy *Red Dwarf*. The show’s fifth series had finished earlier that year.
There’s a particularly disturbing bit in *Ghostwatch* in which Craig Charles, in a park, interviews some locals about a man who used to live in the house. They tell him in pretty unnecessary detail that he hung himself in the cupboard under the stairs and his cats, locked in there with him, ended up trying to eat his body. Bear in mind a lot of kids were watching this.

Apparently the ending to *Ghostwatch* was originally supposed to go even further, with Michael Parkinson suggesting that the ghost might have travelled through the airwaves and ended up in the viewer’s home. Given the national panic that ensued anyway, it’s a fucking good job that didn’t happen.
The Gingerdead Man (2005)

Director: Charles Band

Starring: Gary Busey, Robin Sydney, Ryan Locke

“Daddy, you’ve got to come and get me. I’m at Betty’s Bakery and we’ve got homicidal baked goods after us.”

On rare occasions a film title is so great you just know in your heart that the film has to be fantastic. Usually though, especially in the B-movie horror genre, the movie fails to deliver on the quality of the title. The Gingerdead Man is unfortunately a prime example of this.

The film starts off with a flashback of a killer (played by Gary Busey) going a bit gun-crazy in a restaurant then shooting a girl called Sarah as he leaves. Sarah survives, unlike the rest of her family. Months later, as she works in her bakery, she hears that the killer is getting the electric chair.

As luck would have it, the killer is executed just as she’s cooking a gingerbread man. After getting into a scrap with a local beauty queen, Sarah accidentally sends a power surge into the oven, causing the killer’s soul to travel through the electricity and into the gingerbread man she’s cooking. Cue ridiculous scenes with a tiny pastry swearing at people and threatening to cut their fingers off.

Despite the admittedly ace title The Gingerdead Man is an atrocious film, with acting that verges on the level of a primary school play and special effects that look like someone spent half an hour learning how to use a Mac for the first time.

What’s more, the Gingerdead Man himself is a rubbish character. His face is boring, his dialogue is horrible (“well, I sure ain’t the Pillsbury fucking Doughboy”) and most of the time you can tell he’s just a poor quality hand puppet that someone’s working from the inside. When he fires a gun in one scene you can even make out the human hand holding the gun in place.

The characters are vapid, their mock southern accents are horrible, one guy is an absolute cock yet manages to get the wholesome girl without really doing anything, and the ‘twist’ ending is so laughably bad that I had to rewind it to make sure it was definitely meant to be a twist.

The only positive thing about The Gingerdead Man is that at just under 70 minutes long it’s mercifully short, leaving you more time afterwards to watch something entertaining. This one should have been left in the oven to burn.

A half out of five

How to see it
The Gingerdead Man is DVD-only. In the UK you can only buy the original, whereas Americans can either buy it on its own, in a double-bill with its sequel The Passion Of The Crust (ugh), or in a trilogy box set with the sequel and the third film, Saturday Night Cleaver (make it stop).

 Bits and pieces
 • You've got to wonder what the fuck Gary Busey was playing at to get involved with this pile of pish. A couple of years earlier he was voicing a character in Grand Theft Auto: Vice City – going from that to voicing killer pastry couldn't have been the original plan.

 • Other choice dialogue 'gems' from the titular Gingerbread Man include “save room for dessert cause I'm coming after you,” and the sublime “eat me, you punk bitch”.

Director: Silvia St Croix

Starring: Joseph Porter, Kelsey Sanders, K-Von

“Rise, Haunted Dildo! RIIIIIISE!”

We all know the vast majority of sequels are worse than their predecessors, but when the original film in question is The Gingerdead Man then there isn’t much needed to break that rule. Sure enough, while Gingerdead Man 2 isn’t exactly a great movie, it still manages to do enough to surpass the first movie in the entertainment stakes.

Ironically, the best bits in Gingerdead Man 2 are the ones that don’t feature the titular brutal biscuit at all. The majority of the film has little to do with the tiny killer (no longer played by Gary Busey, who seemingly got his mind back), instead focusing on the story of Cheatum, a film studio losing money as it continues to churn out crap horror sequels.

As a film created by Full Moon, a studio notorious for creating countless zero-budget horror franchises like Killjoy, Puppet Master and, of course, Gingerdead Man, this movie is essentially Full Moon’s attempt to make fun of itself and say “look, we know we make shitty movies, but that’s why people love us”.

The most obvious example of this is the Tiny Terrors, a bunch of crappy puppets starring in a zero-budget horror film the studio is shooting, which are clearly a nod to the countless puppet-related films Full Moon have made in the past – Puppet Master, Demonic Toys, Dangerous Worry Dolls and so forth. The Tiny Terrors are hilariously bad creations, though in this way the likes of Shit-For-Brains (a baby doll with poo dripping down its head) and Haunted Dildo (a big floppy penis wearing a suit) have won my heart.

The rest of the film is filled with little in-jokes and cameos from past cult horror stars (special effects guru Greg Nicotero and Michelle Bauer, one of the original scream queens, make appearances, and directors John Carl Buechler and David DeCoteau also have self-deprecating cameos) that will please Full Moon fans, but they’re subtle enough that others won’t notice them and feel left out.

The acting, as expected, is horrible, though in this case it does add to the film’s deliberately cheesy atmosphere. The only highlights are the hideously-named K-Von as the studio’s owner and Kelsey Sanders as a volunteer with a Make-A-Wish-type charity. Joseph Porter, who plays a wheelchair-bound Cheatum devotee with a curious secret, is above and beyond the worst of a bad bunch, but while the film’s dodgy twist ending goes some way to explaining this it’s not really an excuse.

And then, of course, there’s the Gingerdead Man himself. For the first part of the film he does very little, generally fannying about while swearing at things and not being noticed by anyone. He does get his hands dirty once or twice during the film with some ropey murder
scenes, but for the most part he’s the least interesting thing about the film. The final fifteen minutes more or less confirms that the filmmakers felt the same way, since a different enemy takes centre stage and the crazed cookie is more or less ignored. It’s only in his death scene, which is more than a little blasphemous (and plays on the Passion Of The Crust subtitle in exactly the way you’d imagine) that he actually becomes the film’s main focal point.

There’s no need to see the original Gingerdead Man, but if you fancy a self-aware film that’s deliberately cheap and nasty and makes fun of itself for being so, then give this a go. It’s certainly not great, but fair play to Full Moon for managing to polish that turd a little.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it
If you live in the UK and want to get Gingerdead Man 2 on region 2 DVD, you’re shit out of luck and will need to import. In the US it’s available either on its own, in a double-bill with its predecessor, or in a trilogy box set.

Bits and pieces
• It might be an improvement over the original but Gingerdead Man 2 does still have some cringeworthy moments, especially the song that plays over the credits. It's a horrible spoof of Joan Jett's 'Bad Reputation' with the lyrics “run run run, as fast as you can”. It's about as entertaining as witnessing an old lady getting mugged.

• Greg Nicotero, who plays one of the makeup effects guys at the studio, has a real-life special effects portfolio that would impress even the soberest judge. In recent times he's worked on The Walking Dead, Django Unchained, Predators, Drag Me To Hell, Grindhouse, Transformers, Sin City and Kill Bill. More impressively though, he's worked on more classic horror franchises than anyone else in Hollywood, having done effects work on Day Of The Dead, Evil Dead II, Phantasm II, A Nightmare On Elm Street 5, Halloween 5, Texas Chainsaw Massacre III and Scream. The guy's a horror effects legend, basically.
Gremlins (1984)

Director: Joe Dante

Starring: Zach Galligan, Phoebe Cates, Dick Miller, Corey Feldman

“I warned you. With mogwai comes much responsibility. But you didn’t listen.”

When it comes to Christmas presents, most people like to keep it simple. A few DVDs, a book or two, maybe some flowers or the ever-reliable box of Quality Street. Not so with Randall Peltzer’s dad. A dodgy inventor by trade, Randall decides that this Christmas he’s going to surprise his son Billy with something he’s never seen before in his life. While on a trip through Chinatown trying to sell his wares, he comes across just the thing – an odd creature called a mogwai.

After naming it Gizmo, Randall gives Billy the mogwai while also passing along three very important instructions given to him by the shop owner – keep it away from bright lights, don’t get it wet and, above all else, don’t feed it after midnight. It’s like taking care of a fat goth, basically. Guess what happens next?

That’s right. After getting Gizmo wet and discovering it makes him multiply and spawn loads more mogulai, Billy’s clock dies and he accidentally feeds these new mogulai after midnight, causing them to turn into evil monsters called Gremlins.

At the time, Gremlins was a revelation. The creature effects were incredible, its sense of humour was the exception rather than the rule and it gained a large following, and for good reason. These days, sacrilegious though it may be to say it, Gremlins suffers from the same problem as Child’s Play in that it spends too long revealing what we already know. Whereas the sequel, Gremlins 2: The New Batch, kicks off the action fairly early into the film, the original spends a lot of time faffing around with the rules, letting us get to know Gizmo and only revealing the monsters at the end of the second act.

What’s more, moments that would have been hilarious at the time are merely smile-inducing these days, with the exception of the fun bar scene in which the Gremlins smoke a lot of cigarettes and generally take over the place.

If you’ve never seen it and have somehow managed to avoid the whole integration of its ‘three rules’ in popular culture then Gremlins is worth a watch because it’s still a fun movie, albeit one whose structure has been mimicked and refined many times by other films over the years. Otherwise, if you already know the deal with the Gremlins and you don’t want to spend the first 50 minutes waiting for the other characters to catch up with you, it might be worth skipping straight to the sequel first.

Three out of five

How to see it
In the UK, *Gremlins* is available on DVD and Blu-ray, or in a DVD box set along with the sequel, *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*. The US offers the same, but there’s also a three-disc Blu-ray set featuring *Gremlins, Gremlins 2: The New Batch* and, for some reason, *The Goonies*. Maybe it’s a Corey Feldman link, I dunno.

**Bits and pieces**

- Believe it or not, *Gremlins* was a bit of a rush job. It was supposed to be released at Christmas (which made sense, given that’s when the film is set and given that Gizmo is a Christmas present), but when Paramount announced *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom* for a summer release and Columbia did the same with *Ghostbusters*, Warner Bros realised it needed a summer movie too so it sped up production on *Gremlins*.

- Mogwai isn’t just some bullshit word made up for the film. It’s actually Cantonese for ‘demon’ or ‘gremlin’.

- Here’s one to Google, it’ll blow your mind. Courthouse Square is a backlot set located at Universal Studios. Not only is it the city centre in *Gremlins*, it’s also downtown Hill Valley in *Back To The Future*. 
**Halloween (1978)**

**Director:** John Carpenter

**Starring:** Jamie Lee Curtis, Donald Pleasance, PJ Soles, Nancy Loomis

“I spent eight years trying to reach him, and then another seven trying to keep him locked up because I realized what was living behind that boy’s eyes was purely and simply evil.”

There are a sacred handful of films that will forever be considered horror classics, films that revolutionised the genre and influenced the creation of countless others that followed in its wake. Look inside the wallets of Night Of The Living Dead, Psycho, The Exorcist and The Texas Chain Saw Massacre and you’ll find they’re all card-carrying members of this elite club, but John Carpenter’s Halloween was the one who went to the printing shop and had the cards designed. Shite metaphors aside, the influence Halloween had on horror is one that continues to this day, largely because it was the first film to successfully introduce the slasher genre to the mainstream public.

While it’s often wrongly credited as the first ever slasher movie (the likes of Black Christmas and The Driller Killer came before it), there’s no denying that Halloween was the first to nail it and the one that would inspire the endless stream of low-budget slashers that followed it (a stream that continues to flow right through to the present day and shows no sign of drying up). Its simple premise — a babysitter stalked by a faceless, unstoppable killer — made it easy for the viewer to relate and as such made it terrifying to the teenage audiences that came in their droves to see it. Simply put, Halloween changed horror cinema forever.

It begins with a flashback as we learn the story of Michael Myers, a young boy who suddenly snaps one Halloween. Putting on a clown mask, Michael grabs a kitchen knife and goes upstairs to his older sister’s bedroom, where he stabs her countless times. When his parents get home and find that young Mike’s turned his sister into a human sieve, he’s sent to an asylum for the rest of his life.

Naturally, someone sitting in a cell for 90 minutes would make for a fairly shit movie, so Michael (now aged 21 when we catch up with him) has the common courtesy to escape the asylum and head back to his home town of Haddonfield to raise some hell again.

Halloween is bloody impressive given its shoestring budget of $325,000. Jamie Lee Curtis and the actresses playing her friends had to go to a charity shop to buy their own outfits, director John Carpenter also composed the music on a cheapo piano and synthesiser, the cast were complete unknowns (other than Donald Pleasance, who plays Michael’s doctor Sam Loomis) and there isn’t a special effect to be seen throughout. Yet despite (or perhaps because of) this, it’s one of those rarities — a horror film that remains genuinely scary more than 35 years later.

Michael Myers is the perfect bogeyman. With his expressionless white mask (a painted William Shatner mask, incidentally) it’s impossible to tell what he’s thinking. He doesn’t just
kill like Jason or other slasher villains do, he stalks his prey, watching them and waiting for
the right moment to attack, catching them off guard then studying how they react as they
die. He’s chilling.

Even his mere presence in the background is enough to cause a fright, a fact taken
advantage of by John Carpenter’s clever direction. During some indoor scenes there are
occasional subtle glimpses of the white mask outside the window as he stands in the
darkness. This keeps the audience on edge and puts them in the odd position of actually
hoping to see complete darkness outside. What other film makes its viewers NOT afraid of
the dark?

_Halloween_ may be near-perfect but there are one or two tiny elements that make it fall just
short. While the young Jamie Lee Curtis is fantastically believable in the lead role of Laurie –
giving a real girl-next-door feeling that greatly adds to the film’s authenticity – and PJ Soles
is funny as her friend Lynda, the same can’t be said for the third member of the group,
Annie (played by Nancy Loomis).

She’s so wooden they might as well have put a charity shop skirt on a table and wheeled it
alongside the other two, and while her character’s fairly unimportant in the grand scheme
of things, she’s the sole reminder that we’re dealing with a low budget film here. Her
stupidly hammy facial expressions during her strangulation scene are ridiculous, cheesy
garbage and ruin what should have been a classic moment in horror cinema.

This is made up for by the amazing Donald Pleasance, who steals the show as Dr Sam
Loomis. The only true ‘star’ in the film, Pleasance only signed up for the movie because his
daughter was a big fan of Carpenter’s previous movie, _Assault On Precinct 13_, but it’s a good
job he did because it’s difficult to imagine anyone else in the role.

While it could be argued that the point of film reviews is to give opinions on – among other
things – the likes of plot development, to say much more about _Halloween_ would be to spoil
it. It’s the sort of film where, if you’ve been lucky enough to come this far without finding
out what happens, you should track it down as soon as possible and enjoy it. All you really
need to know is that it’s a true horror classic and is essential viewing for any fan of the
genre.

_Five out of five_

**How to see it**

_Halloween_ is available on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and the US. In the US there’s a
DVD box set featuring _Halloween, Halloween 4_ and _Halloween 5_. The UK is better off, as
there are a number of decent box sets out there. The current Anchor Bay box set features
the first five movies, whereas an out-of-print one (also from Anchor Bay) features the first
eight. To date there’s sadly no news of a Blu-ray box set.

**Bits and pieces**

- When _Halloween_ was shown on TV, John Carpenter shot an extra twelve minutes of
  footage to help link it to the sequel that was in production. This includes a scene where Dr
Loomis goes to the mental institution Michael Myers escaped from, and sees the word ‘sister’ written in blood on the wall. This version is available on some DVD versions of the film. Look for discs advertising the “extended version”.

- According to the credits, the soundtrack was composed by The Bowling Green Philharmonic Orchestra. It was actually just John Carpenter: Bowling Green, Kentucky is where he grew up.

- Carpenter has since said that one of the reasons he cast Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie was because he wanted to pay the ultimate tribute to Alfred Hitchcock, who had cast her mother Janet Leigh in Psycho.
Halloween (2007)

Director: Rob Zombie

Starring: Malcolm McDowell, Scout Taylor-Compton, Tyler Mane, Sheri Moon Zombie

“These eyes will deceive you, they will destroy you. They will take from you your innocence, your pride, and eventually your soul. These eyes do not see what you and I see. Behind these eyes one finds only blackness, the absence of light, these are of a psychopath.”

The most effective remakes are not those that simply try to update the original film so it fits in with today’s society and technology, but those that actually attempt to give a unique take on its predecessor and handle the same story in a different way. This is what Rob Zombie’s version of Halloween does, and in doing so it makes it abundantly clear that the filmmaker has an intense respect for John Carpenter’s original.

While the original film focused mainly on Jamie Lee Curtis’s character Laurie Strode and her ordeal throughout the movie, Zombie’s take is very much focused on the killer instead. Far more time is spent on Michael Myers and his backstory – his violent upbringing at the hands of his father, his time at the asylum as he grew up there, his loving mother’s desperate attempts to get through to him and cure him from his psychosis, and his eventual escape years later as a young adult. Rather than going down the “look at what’s happening to this poor girl” route, the message of Zombie’s Halloween is more a case of “look at what this young boy has become”.

This shift of focus isn’t the only difference between the remake and the original, however – Zombie’s version is also far more shocking and visceral. Whereas the few killings in the original film are very ‘clean’, swift and to-the-point, when Myers attacks his victims in the remake it makes for extremely unsettling viewing.

Many films of this generation have similarly grisly and graphic death scenes, but Halloween is impressive in that they never feel glamorised. These killings are raw, they’re shocking. They’re not some big-chested bimbo getting a knife in the tit as she pulls a hammy pained expression, they’re unflinching and realistic – and it’s to Zombie’s credit that they’re presented in this way rather than the ‘torture porn’ many of today’s horror films are accused of offering.

The casting for the most part is effective. It would be easy to accuse Zombie of nepotism by casting his wife Sheri Moon as Michael Myers’ mum and also putting his friend Bill Moseley in the film, and it would be similarly simple to suggest the casting of Halloween 4 and 5’s Danielle Harris as one of Laurie’s friends was simply Zombie’s attempt to pander to the fans, but they all put in solid, realistic performances to ensure the film remains as plausible as possible. The addition of strong character actors like Malcolm McDowell (playing the Dr Loomis role almost as well as the late Donald Pleasance did) and Brad Dourif as the sheriff makes for some compelling moments too, particularly when the two are in the same scene.
Oddly, the only real negative performance is that of Scout Taylor-Compton as the ‘heroine’ Laurie Strode. Stepping into Jamie Lee Curtis’s shoes is a big enough feat as it is, but she’s barely even able to do the laces up. It’s not a bad job by any means but it’s almost impressive how forgettable she is and how unimportant Laurie becomes because of this. Indeed, this underwhelming version of Laurie is one of the reasons Michael Myers is the key focal point of the remake rather than the terrified babysitter.

It also helps that the Michael Myers in this film is one of the best in the history of the lengthy *Halloween* series. This guy isn’t just a simple crazed killer, he’s a proper monster in every sense of the word. Played by the 6’9” Tyler Mane he’s simply terrifying to look at, and that’s just in the asylum scenes before he even escapes and finds the iconic white mask and jumpsuit. Once he does pop them on he’s a truly frightening sight, a Myers with obvious strength to back up his intimidating appearance.

Rob Zombie’s *Halloween* may not boast the effective simplicity of the original film but it almost makes up for it with its rawness. It’s the original story told in a far more aggressive manner, yet one that still clearly holds Carpenter’s classic in high regard. A success.

*Four and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

Brits are properly shafted with the *Halloween* remake, where it’s only available on a single-disc DVD. In America, there’s a two-disc DVD, a three-disc DVD with an amazing four-and-a-half-hour documentary by Rob Zombie, and a two-disc Blu-ray featuring the same documentary. There’s no Blu-ray in the UK, and the US one is region-locked. There is one solution, though – there’s an Australian Blu-ray which is identical to the US one (including that massive documentary) and it’s Region B, which is the same as the UK, so import that.

**Bits and pieces**

- Danielle Harris plays Annie Brackett in this remake, but when she was eleven she also played Jamie Lloyd in *Halloween 4* and *Halloween 5*. That means she’s been in as many *Halloween* films as Jamie Lee Curtis. Only Donald Pleasance has been in more *Halloween* films than them.

- I will happily watch anything with Danny Trejo in it. He could be playing a shop assistant in a supermarket and the whole film could be a four-hour epic in which he just re-prices expired strawberries and I’d still watch the shit out of it.
Hall oween III: Season Of The Witch (1982)

Director: Tommy Lee Wallace

Starring: Tom Atkins, Dan O’Herlihy, Stacey Nelkin

“Halloween, the festival of Samhain. The last great one took place 3000 years ago, when the hills ran red with the blood of animals and children.”

Despite the success of the first two Halloween films, rather than sticking with the same formula the third movie went in a completely different direction and scrapped Michael Myers, opting instead to tell a completely different story altogether. It was a move that paid off in my opinon, even though it’s a film that’s not really remembered these days.

Indeed, had this been simply named Season Of The Witch and not contained the word ‘Halloween’ in the title, it would have probably received a much better response from horror fans. As it is however many people tend to see this as the bastard son of the series despite the fact that, lack of Myers aside, it’s one of the stronger Halloween films.

A hospital patient is brutally murdered and his attacker dies soon after when his car blows up. Dr Dan Challis witnesses these events and decides to investigate, along with the daughter of the murdered man. They soon discover that Silver Shamrock (a Halloween mask-making company), led by the evil Conal Cochran, is plotting to revive the original idea of Halloween: mass murder. How does Cochran plan to do this? By triggering all the masks they’ve sold to kill whoever is wearing them at a certain time on Halloween. Now that’s a quality idea.

From the opening credits we know we’re still in Halloween territory, despite that key missing ingredient of Mr Myers. As a crude pumpkin is drawn on screen using an old computer (probably an old BBC Micro or something) the music is reminiscent of John Carpenter’s score from the first two films.

The idea of how Cochran plans to kill the children of America is also sheer brilliance. Using the addictive power of hype to control these impressionable children and lead them Pied Piper-like to their eventual demise is a stroke of genius which really should be used more often in films. Since it isn’t – mainly because the killing of children is still fairly taboo in cinema plots – when Halloween III’s most grisly death involves an eight-year-old boy it’s bloody effective stuff.

There are some nice death scenes throughout, including a genuinely jump-inducing scene in a motel room (with a grotesque aftermath) and the infamous aforementioned child death. Needless to say this is a very uncomfortable moment to watch, and while some may complain it’s a step too far, I feel it’s a very powerful image and one that’s perfectly handled.
Tom Atkins is great in every film he appears in and here he is no different. The fact he looks like a normal Joe and not a well-built stereotypical ‘hero’ figure allows us to connect with him on a better level than we would with, say, Busta Rhymes in the later *Halloween: Resurrection*. At times his acting borders on over-theatrics, but it’s so cheesy and typically ‘80s you can’t help but love it.

As for evil super-villain Conal Cochran (well, he must be a super-villain if he plans on killing every child in the country), Dan O’Herlihy plays him as well as possible given the script he has to work with. After all, no human being on this planet could successfully manage to explain how the masks are powered with rock from Stonehenge at least nibbling some of the scenery, so O’Herlihy just properly goes for it.

In all, *Halloween III* is top class ‘80s horror. As long as you go into it with an open mind you should enjoy it. This is not really a *Halloween* film, so don’t expect one. Block Michael Myers out of your mind for 92 minutes, settle down with some Doritos and Coke, and enjoy a good slice of cheesy ‘80s terror.

Four out of five

**How to see it**  
*Halloween III* is only available on DVD in the UK, either on its own or in the boxsets mentioned in the *Halloween* review above. In the US it’s either available as a standalone DVD or in a special edition Blu-ray complete with a couple of commentaries and documentaries.

**Bits and pieces**  
• Tom Atkins is one of my favourite ‘80s B-movie actors. He also starred in the likes of *Maniac Cop* and *Night Of The Creeps*. In the latter, he delivers one of my favourite lines ever. As a police chief, he tells the girls in a sorority house: “The good news is your dates are here.” Upon being asked what the bad news is, he casually replies: “They’re dead.”

• The US network TV version of *Halloween III* has some silly cuts. The deaths are made slightly less gory, which is understandable, but there are some daft cuts to the dialogue too. “They got their orders all screwed up” is changed to “they got their orders all messed up”, because even mild swear words seemingly aren’t allowed on network TV, but they even go as far as to change “I swear to God” to “I swear to you”. But yup, they’re still allowed to kill off a little kid.

• If *Halloween III* had been a success, the next film would have been another completely different Halloween-related story. Instead, after everyone complained that Michael Myers wasn’t in it, the idea was scrapped and *Halloween 4* brought Myers back.
Hell Comes To Frogtown (1988)

Directors: Donald G Jackson, RJ Kizer

Starring: Roddy Piper, Sandahl Bergman

“Eat lead, froggies!”

*Hell Comes To Frogtown* has one of the greatest premises in film history. It’s set in the future, after a nuclear war has turned America into a sort of *Mad Max/Fallout* post-apocalyptic wasteland. Due to the radiation, the world’s population is either dead or sterile. That is, except for a handful of females scattered throughout the land and one man, Sam Hell (wrestling legend Rowdy Roddy Piper).

Hell is captured by the government and told he has to travel around the country, having sex with as many of the fertile women as he can so he can re-populate the planet. A big pair of explosive underpants are attached to Hell and he’s told that if he tries to escape they’ll explode. Suprisingly, Sam doesn’t seem too happy with this agreement for some reason.

He’s also none too pleased when he’s told that a group of these nubile, fertile young women are being held prisoner in Frogtown, an area populated by mutants who have evolved into walking, talking frog people, and that he has to head into Frogtown and rescue them.

The resulting 85 minutes is a collection of mental scenes. One minute you’re watching Roddy Piper kick the shit out of a giant frog man, the next he’s riding around in a big armoured pink truck, the next his doctor is doing a special dance for the leader of the frogs, who becomes visibly aroused (yes, complete with a noticeable froggy erection). It’s just bizarre.

Credit has to go to the film’s script, however. It’s filled with great one-liners, especially during the back end of the movie, and the over-dramatic ham acting really adds to the dialogue. The most notable example of this is the scene in which one of the frog leaders confronts one of his underlings, asking for an explanation then opting midway through to scream “SHUT YOUR HOOOOOOOOOOOOLE” at him.

*Hell Comes To Frogtown* is crazier than a dolphin filled with cheese, but it’s a good laugh and one you should check out if you’ve got some chums willing to watch. It’s odd in that it feels like it should be in the “so bad it’s good” camp alongside the likes of *Troll 2*, even though its production quality is reasonably high. One thing’s for sure however – after one watch this will definitely blast its way into your top five post-apocalyptic frog mutant films.

Three out of five

How to see it

*Hell Comes To Frogtown* is available on DVD in the UK. It's also part of the B Movie Campaign boxset, a DVD set containing twelve movies including *Return Of The Killer*.
Tomatoes, Elvira: Mistress Of The Dark and the brilliant The Stuff. It's DVD-only in America too, either on its lonesome or in a double-list disc along with Def-Con 4, another post-apocalyptic film.

Bits and pieces
- Roddy Piper wasn't just a popular wrestler, he was a great B-movie actor too. His most popular role was Nada in John Carpenter's classic *They Live*. He also combined his wrestling and acting abilities in two charmingly hideous '80s TV movies, *Body Slam* and *Tagteam*.

- Amazingly, this spawned (ahem, as in frog spawn) three sequels! So, if you liked *Hell Comes To Frogtown*, you might like *Frogtown II*, *Toad Warrior* or *Max Hell: Frog Warrior*. None of them starred Roddy Piper.
Hobo With A Shotgun (2011)

Director: Jason Eisener

Starring: Rutger Hauer, Molly Dunsworth, Brian Downey

“You and me are going on a car ride to hell… and you’re riding shotgun.”

Not since Santa Claus Conquers The Martians has a film’s title so clearly summed up its premise. Hobo With A Shotgun is, when all is said and done, the tale of a hobo armed with a shotgun. And it’s brilliant.

Rutger Hauer plays the titular hobo, a nameless tramp with a shopping trolley who wanders from city to city by catching rides on cargo trains. His journey takes him to Hopetown, a rundown district where murderers, drug dealers and prostitutes are in charge and the police are as bent as a three pound note. After trying to save one hooker from abuse and getting a makeshift tattoo carved into his chest for his troubles, the hobo decides it’s time to clean up Hopetown and take out Drake, the dictatorial leader of the ne’er-do-wells. With a shotgun.

It’s a simple plot, and at a whisker over 80 minutes it’s a brief movie, but Hobo With A Shotgun manages to pack in a hell of a lot of action, not to mention controversial and gory moments. If you were trying to play some sort of drinking game where you had to take a shot every time a head, foot, gut or other body part either exploded in a shower of blood or was removed by force, you’d need to have your stomach pumped by the hour mark.

It’s clear the film thrives on this too, throwing in ever-increasingly ridiculous set-ups and more contentious moments to really try and provoke a reaction. Three naked women hitting a man with baseball bats as he’s hung upside-down? Check. A woman having her hand shredded in a lawnmower, then using her bony stump to stab someone else? Yup. An entire schoolbus full of cute children set on fire? Incredibly, it’s in there.

And yet somehow, despite how shocking this sounds in words, the whole film is so over-the-top and so blatantly set on trying to offend that it actually isn’t that bad. It’s the Evil Dead situation taken to the nth degree – show something so ridiculously over-the-top and do it consistently enough and it’ll eventually become so absurd it evokes laughter rather than offence.

Top marks should go to the legendary Rutger Hauer in the leading role. He manages to get across a character that you’d never want to meet but still feel a great deal of sympathy and admiration for at the same time. Plus he looks cool as fuck with a shotgun.

Many films don’t try to change the world. They don’t want to cure cancer or spread awareness of suffering or make people appreciate their loved ones more. Some films just want to entertain and show the viewer something they’ve never seen before in any other movie. Hobo With A Shotgun does this time and time again, and as a result what it lacks in subtlety it makes up with shocks and laughs by the shopping trolley-load.
Four out of five

How to see it
Hobo With A Shotgun is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US. Why can't every film be so straightforward?

Bits and pieces
- *Hobo With A Shotgun* was originally a spoof trailer in *Grindhouse*, Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez's love letter to sleazy drive-in horror movies. The trailer was so popular it became a real movie. The same happened with another fake trailer, *Machete*.

- If you’re unfamiliar with Rutger Hauer, do yourself a favour and track down a copy of *The Hitcher* (the 1986 original, not the rubbish 2007 remake with Sean Bean). After it, you’ll realise why he’s considered a legend to many.
The Human Centipede (First Sequence) (2009)

Director: Tom Six

Starring: Dieter Laser, Ashley Williams, Ashlynn Yennie, Akihiro Kitamura

“Do you already regret your little escape? In fact, I’m thankful for it, because now I know you are definitely the middle piece.”

(First, a short disclaimer: this is a particularly nasty movie, and while this review obviously features no images there’s still a little colourful language explaining some of the more controversial scenes. If you get queasy just reading about bodily fluids and medical experiments, let alone seeing them, it might be best to give this one your own zero-star rating and move on. Now that you’ve been sufficiently warned, on with the review.)

There are plenty of positions in life that it would be best to avoid. Being in goal for San Marino when you’re playing Brazil at football would be one of them. Being the poor sod in charge of cleaning up after an orgy would be another. There’s one position that’s probably worst of all though, and that’s the middle piece in a human centipede. The reason for this will become obvious later.

The Human Centipede opens with two attractive young American women getting lost on the way to a party in Germany when suddenly their car breaks down. They wander through the woods until they finally reach a huge house and when they ring the doorbell an odd chap answers and lets them in. So far so shamelessly stolen from The Rocky Horror Picture Show, but what follows makes Rocky Horror’s transvestite shenanigans seem about as shocking as someone blowing their nose.

The man, a stony-faced German chap called Dr Heiter (Laser), offers the girls some water. They accept and realise it’s been spiked, but it’s too late and when they wake up they find themselves strapped to hospital beds.

In fairly graphic detail, the doc explains to the girls along with a third prisoner (a Japanese man) that he wants to create a human centipede – a single organism made up of three people. He’ll do this by joining up one person’s mouth to the anus of another, and then joining the other’s mouth to a third person’s anus. In that way, all going well, the three will work together as one functioning body.

Surprisingly, despite that previous paragraph, The Human Centipede isn’t very disturbing to watch, at least not with regards to what actually appears on screen. Much like Psycho and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The Human Centipede plays on the notion that the viewer’s imagination is much more powerful than anything film can show.

In actual fact, the film shows nothing graphic relating to the experiment other than around 20 seconds of operation footage where the doc cuts a slice out of someone’s bum. Movies
like *Saw* and *Hostel*, which explicitly show body parts being sliced, stabbed and crushed, are a million times more visceral and graphic.

Indeed, mercifully (or more likely simply thanks to budget constraints), each person in the centipede wears a sort of nappy so as to block the view of the actual mouth-to-rump connection, leaving what it looks like entirely within the confines of your own mind. This extends to the most grotesque scene in the film where the Japanese chap, having eaten some food laced with laxatives earlier, realises he suddenly has to (to put it politely as possible) dispose of his waste. Though you never see anything, the thought of what’s going on in that poor middle woman’s mouth is enough to put a bad taste in your own. Simply put, this film is more likely to shock you if you have a vivid imagination.

Dodgy content aside, *The Human Centipede* is actually a fantastically shot film. The lighting is moody, the outdoor shots are atmospheric and Dr Heiter’s house is so geometrically unusual it’s almost a character in its own right. Had it not been for the small matter of people with their gums wrapped round each other’s arses it could even be considered beautiful. While the even-more-controversial *Human Centipede 2* isn’t quite as artistic, there’s no denying it would be unfair to pass this first film off as low-budget trash simply because of its tasteless subject matter.

Also stunning is Dieter Laser’s performance as the insane doctor. He’s like Christopher Walken with the intensity turned up so far the dial has broken off, and is simply terrifying to both see and hear.

If the mere thought of what happens in *The Human Centipede* makes you feel physically ill then this film clearly isn’t for you. Many of the scenes, while not graphic, will still give enough information to get your mind working and make for very uncomfortable viewing.

If, however, you’re intrigued by the concept but are simply worried about what you may see than by all means watch it. It is nowhere near as visually horrifying as you may have heard and if the only thing holding you back is the fear of what is shown rather than what is simply implied then there’s very little to be concerned about. Either way, this is a far more accomplished, professional film than some of its critics would have you believe.

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**
If you’re morbidly curious, *The Human Centipede* is available on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US. In the UK it can also be found in a boxset along with its far dodgier sequel. This boxset is dual-format, so you get both the DVD and Blu-ray versions of each film.

**Bits and pieces**
- *South Park* spoofed this film brilliant in an episode called *The Human Cent-iPad*. Check out the documentary *7 Days To Air*, which deals with the making of a *South Park* episode, because it's this episode that features in it.
• Delightfully, the tagline on the film poster is “100% medically accurate”. The far sicker second film features the tagline “100% medically inaccurate.” The upcoming third film, starring Eric Roberts and set to feature a 500-person centipede in a prison, has the tagline “100% politically incorrect”.
**Jaws 2 (1978)**

**Director:** Jeannot Szwarc

**Starring:** Roy Scheider, Lorraine Gray, Mark Gruner

“I’m telling you, and I’m telling everybody at this table that that’s a shark! And I know what a shark looks like, because I’ve seen one up close. And you’d better do something about this one, because I don’t intend to go through that hell again!”

Poor Chief Brody. After dealing with a huge shark in the original *Jaws* and helping restore Amity Island to some sort of normality, weird things are starting to happen again. Surely there can’t be another shark in Amity? You bet your fins there is.

What made the original *Jaws* so gripping was the film’s refusal to show the shark until near the end of the movie. Until then you only saw people in the water reacting to attacks, screaming and writhing as the invisible killer underneath them turned the water blood red. It was the classic “what you don’t see is scarier than what you do see” technique and it worked a treat.

*Jaws 2* starts off at a disadvantage, then, because it can’t use the same trick again. Hiding the shark is a pointless exercise because we all know what to expect and can’t be surprised a second time. As a result, it has a slightly different feel to its predecessor – we see a lot more of the shark and it gets involved a lot more this time around. At times it feels more like a slasher movie, a contrast to the original’s tense, slow pace.

Despite this, *Jaws 2* is still fairly tame. The story goes that Universal were eager to get the film a PG rating to get as many ticket sales as possible, and so most of the shark attacks either happen off-camera or are cleverly shot so that the fatal bites are obscured by things in the way. This weakens the effect of the attacks and dramatically removes some of the shock factor.

The film also lessens the impact by providing a final act with far too many characters in it. Whereas the first film had only three heroes, giving each enough screen time to let the viewer learn more about them and warm to them, this time the final showdown involves the shark, Brody, a helicopter pilot and around ten kids stranded in their boats. I couldn’t give an eighth of a shit if some kid who had two lines of dialogue gets his leg chomped, I have no idea who he is and it makes no difference to the movie whether he lives or dies.

*Jaws 2* isn’t as bad as it could have been. It goes in the direction it should have gone, it just goes about executing it in slightly the wrong way. With too many characters and not enough shock value it’s just a diluted, less effective version of the original.

**Two and a half out of five**

**How to see it**
Jaws 2 is available in both the UK and US in a nifty special edition DVD set with extras, commentaries and the like. It’s fairly cheap these days. It isn’t available on Blu-ray, but the UK has a nice DVD boxset containing Jaws 2, Jaws 3 and Jaws: The Revenge.

Bits and pieces
• You’d be amazed at how many people think “just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water” was the tagline for Jaws. It was actually the tagline for Jaws 2, hence ‘going back’. If you’re reading this and thinking “no shit”, then you’re one of the educated ones.

• There’s an odd rumour going around that an Irish broadcast of Jaws 2 in the early 1980s showed extra footage of one of Jaws’ victims lying inside his mouth and screaming. Many Jaws fans say this can’t possibly be the case, while those who claim to have seen it are adamant they weren’t imagining things. I don’t know who to believe, really.
Jurassic Park (1993)

Director: Steven Spielberg

Starring: Sam Neill, Laura Dern, Richard Attenborough, Jeff Goldblum

HAMMOND – “All major theme parks have had delays. When they opened Disneyland in 1956, nothing worked!”

MALCOLM – “But John, if the Pirates Of The Caribbean breaks down the pirates don’t eat the tourists.”

My childhood memories of Jurassic Park are a mixture of peaceful moments involving brachiosaurs and a triceratops, and loud noises played over a bright lime green colour. You see, when it first hit cinemas in 1993 I was ten years old and I, my mum, my dad and my dinosaur-mad brother went to see it. Signs at the cinema warned that, although Jurassic Park was rated PG, there were some scary scenes that would be unsuitable for young children (the 12A rating didn’t exist in the UK at this point). Anyone seeing us go into the cinema would think my seven-year-old brother was a potential problem, but in fact the opposite was the case.

For want of a better phrase, I was a bit of a pussy when I was younger, whereas at the tender age of seven my brother loved A Nightmare On Elm Street, Child’s Play and the like. That’s why, when the T-Rex attacked the jeeps in the pouring rain and ate the annoying lawyer, or when the Dilophosaurus spat on the double-crossing Dennis Nedry and attacked him in his car, or when the raptors were chasing Tim and Lex in the kitchen, I never saw those scenes – I only heard them, with my lime green t-shirt pulled over my face in fear.

Despite this fear I still loved Jurassic Park, and the majority of 1993 and 1994 was spent playing with the toys (remember the ones that roared when you moved their arm, and the Dino Damage ones that had chunks of flesh you could pull off?), playing the video games (the Mega Drive one let you play as the raptor) and re-watching the VHS over and over again, the smaller telly and lower volume providing me with a safer environment to watch the dodgier scenes. It was a part of my childhood and now, aged 30, I still love it.

For the sake of procedure I feel obliged to explain the story of Jurassic Park, this being a review and all, though you really should know it by now. Eccentric Scottish billionaire John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) has opened up a theme park in a remote tropical island, a theme park that features real life dinosaurs he’s managed to clone using the DNA extracted from blood found in fossilised mosquitoes.

Excited about his park, he invites some guests – palaeontologist Alan Grant (Neill), palaeobotanist Ellie Sattler (Dern), theorist Ian Malcolm (Goldblum) and the aforementioned annoying lawyer – to see the park before it opens and get their expert opinions. Oh, and he’s invited his two grandchildren too, because things definitely won’t go tits-up.
After a while, things go tits-up and, thanks to some underhand subterfuge from park IT nerd Dennis Nedry, the electric fences around the park go down, leaving the dinosaurs free to run riot and do what they feel like. And, somewhat unsurprisingly, what they feel like doing is munching on humans. It’s up to the gang (who are scattered around the island) to regroup and get the fuck out of Dodge before a raptor puts them between two slices of bread.

Even watching it eighteen years later on Blu-ray, *Jurassic Park* still looks sensational. There are one or two moments where the CGI now looks ever so slightly dated (most notably the scene with the brachiosaurs where everyone sees the dinosaurs for the first time), but the fact that all of the dinosaur effects are still infinitely more convincing than the tripe churned out today – I’m looking at you *Dinoshark*, *Lockjaw* and *Mega Piranha* – just shows what an incredible achievement this film’s special effects were at the time on computer hardware that nowadays would be considered, if you’ll pardon the pun, prehistoric.

It’s just a perfect film that works on so many levels for all ages. Children get a kick out of seeing people interact with dinosaurs – something we’ve all wanted to do at some point – while adults can appreciate the arguments the characters have over the ethical and moral implications of cloning and disrupting the laws of natural selection by bringing back extinct animals, topics that are still strikingly relevant almost two decades later.

If you’ve never seen *Jurassic Park*, I feel like crying right in your face then whipping my head left and right so the tears slap across your inexperienced eyes. It’s an essential film that everyone with any sense of wonder or imagination has to see. At the time it was released it was a revelation in filmmaking and its use of CGI changed the way movies were created, while these days it’s become a demonstration that even though its special effects DNA has been cloned and misused so many times since, when used properly it can make for some of the most spectacular cinema ever seen.

*Five out of five*

**How to see it**

It should come as no surprise that a movie as iconic as *Jurassic Park* can be watched in a myriad of ways. It’s available on both DVD and Blu-ray in the UK and US, and it’s also available in DVD or Blu-ray trilogy boxsets also containing sequels *The Lost World* and *Jurassic Park III*. Americans can also buy the newly-released *Jurassic Park 3D* on Blu-ray: at the time of writing the Brits are still waiting for it, though the US one is region-free.

**Bits and pieces**

• There are loads of computer geeks who laugh at the bit near the end of the film where Lex is trying to hack into the park’s computer. “It’s a UNIX system, I know this”, she beams as we’re shown a ridiculously futuristic-looking display in which 3D folders are flying all over the place. In reality, that was actually a real thing – it was the Silicon Graphics 3D File System Navigator, an experimental version of UNIX that really existed. So don’t take the piss.
• “Clever girl”, a line from Jurassic Park, is a phrase I probably use at least five or six times a week in the workplace. It has yet to get old. For me, at least.
The Lost World: Jurassic Park (1997)

Director: Steven Spielberg

Starring: Jeff Goldblum, Julianne Moore, Pete Postlethwaite, Vince Vaughn, Richard Attenborough

HAMMOND – “Don’t worry, I’m not making the same mistakes again.”

MALCOLM – “No, no, you’re making all new ones.”

If the original Jurassic Park was a love letter to our childhood obsession with dinosaurs and our desire to one day see one in real life, The Lost World instead takes its inspiration from King Kong and others of its ilk, showing what happens when large beasts are confronted in their natural habitat and how they react when placed in unfamiliar surroundings. Fear is replaced with sympathy, and by the end of the film Spielberg’s big accomplishment this time isn’t making us believe these fearsome creatures exist, but making us actually want them to overcome our own species in order to survive. That’s right, I can get deep when I want to.

After the incidents of the first film essentially made the Jurassic Park complex in Isla Nublar a bit of a write-off, The Lost World starts with Ian Malcolm (Goldblum) meeting up with John Hammond (Attenborough) for a little chat. Hammond tells Malcolm that Isla Nublar wasn’t really the main site, and that there was actually another island called Isla Sornar where they bred the dinosaurs and raised them in their natural habitat before moving them over to Jurassic Park. Remember that scene at the start of the first Jurassic Park where they were putting the raptor in the crate? That was at the other island, that was.

Hammond tells Malcolm that Ingen, the company he was in charge of, has punted him and put a weasely lawyer guy in charge instead. Not dissuaded by this, Hammond wants Malcolm to head to the second island as part of a research group to study the dinosaurs. Oh, and as if that weren’t enough, the sneaky old prick has also invited Malcolm’s scientist girlfriend to join the team and has already sent her there as a way of convincing him to go.

Malcolm perhaps puts it best himself, in the first of many one-liners he gets in this film: “this is no longer a research project, it’s a rescue mission”. Little does Hammond know, however, that Ingen has sent its own workers to the island, in an attempt to bring the dinos back to the US and show them at a new Jurassic Park in San Diego. Because the last one worked out so well.

The Lost World tries its best to outdo the original in every way possible. You liked the bit with the T-Rex? Well now there are two of them! You liked when they were running with the herd? Now there’s a bigger herd and people are trying to catch them! Remember the sick triceratops? There’s a healthy one this time, and it fucks shit up! You liked seeing people interact with the dinosaurs? Well now a whole army turns up at one point to hunt them all down! You wanted a stegosaurus? Job done, and while we’re at it let’s have it fuck shit up too.
The problem is, in adding all this extra action there’s less focus on the story, and while most people don’t exactly watch *Jurassic Park* films for the character development, there’s still something missing this time around in terms of that human element. You still care about Malcolm because he’s familiar to you after the first film, but the other main characters – his annoying daughter, his headstrong girlfriend (Julianne Moore), their photographer (Vince Vaughn), the veteran hunter who wants to bag a T-Rex (Pete Postlethwaite) – are all lacking that certain something and, ultimately, you couldn’t care less whether they survive or end up as part of a T-Rex’s next shite.

Speaking of Mr. Rex, it’s once again the tyrannosaurs who steal the show despite the obligatory raptor scenes. The scene in which two T-Rexes push the team’s trailer off a cliff is impressive stuff, and when a solitary Rex discovers a large group of Ingen workers camping out chaos ensues.

By far the most memorable (and opinion-dividing) moment however is the film’s last fifteen minutes, in which Ingen manage to get a T-Rex back to the US and it starts running riot through the streets of San Diego. This is clearly Spielberg’s attempt at *Godzilla* and while it’s fun, it’s a bit of a jarring change of tone that doesn’t really sit well with the rest of the film.

*The Lost World* was never going to better the sheer novelty and innovation offered by the original *Jurassic Park*, but as sheer spectacle it’s still up there. It loses a little personality and while it’s still good fun to watch it does start to feel more like a generic monster movie by the end... but hey, you haven’t seen anything yet. Just wait until I review the third one.

**Three and a half out of five**

**How to see it**
It’s the same deal for *The Lost World* as it is for the original *Jurassic Park* – it’s available on both DVD and Blu-ray, either on its own or as part of a trilogy boxset.

**Bits and pieces**
- Julianne Moore’s character is called Sarah Harding. Five years later, a different Sarah Harding would join the pop group Girls Aloud. It’s up for debate whether it would be worse to be trapped on an island full of dangerous dinosaurs or to have to work with that ginger one off Girls Aloud.

- There’s a bit near the end, when the T Rex is in San Diego, where you see two Japanese guys running away and screaming something in Japanese. Apparently they’re saying: “I left Japan to get away from this”. 
Jurassic Park III (2001)

Director: Joe Johnston

Starring: Sam Neill, William H Macy, Tea Leoni

“No force on earth or heaven could get me on that island.”

Some twat (Leoni) sends her son on holiday with her boyfriend, where they both go parasailing over Isla Sorna to try and see some dinosaurs. Clearly not bothering to pay attention to the carnage in Isla Nublar or the incident a few years prior in which a big T-Rex kicked the shit out of San Diego, they somehow seem surprised when things go wrong and they crash-land on the island.

Weeks pass and the twat and her loser ex-husband (Macy) are worried, so they pretend to be millionaires and propose an offer to the original film’s hero, Dr Alan Grant (Neill): be our tour guide as we fly over the island to see some dinosaurs, and we’ll pay you enough money to keep your archaeology gig going for years to come.

Grant reluctantly agrees and is understandably pissed off when the plane instead lands on the island and the twat and loser tell him their secret – they’re actually not rich and he’s been roped into helping them find their missing son. This is no longer a research project, it’s a rescue mission... except Grant doesn’t say that because Jeff Goldblum already got to say it in the second film.

If the original Jurassic Park was a spectacle – a unique film at the time that changed the face of big-budget special effects cinema – and The Lost World was Spielberg’s homage to King Kong, Godzilla et al, Jurassic Park III is basically just a high-budget Lockjaw or Sharktopus. It’s goofy, it’s got some ridiculous moments in it and any thought-provoking social commentary in there (of which there’s very little) is there by complete accent.

The raptors have been given an overhaul this time around, and are so intelligent that it’s getting a bit silly. Now it seems they can talk to each other (in dino-speak, of course), something they oddly chose not to do in the first film when stalking two children through a kitchen, a scenario in which communication could have been helpful. Even more ridiculous is that Grant, by sheer chance, happened to have been given a replica of a raptor’s windpipe earlier in the film and in a key scene late in the film, just as he’s being surrounded by raptors, he blows in it and magically makes noises that not only sound like a raptor, but can actually be understood by them. How in the realm of fuck does that happen?

That aside, there are some new dinos chucked into the mix here too, which range from awesome (the Spinosaurus may actually be a little bit better than the T-Rex, as proven in the scene where they fight and it breaks the T-Rex’s neck) to disappointing – for years fans of the series wanted to see pterodactyls getting used in action scenes, but it’s all just a bit rubbish when we finally get our wish and are hit with a visually impressive but sloppy aviary
scene. Not to mention the usual *Jurassic Park* name-fail by featuring dinosaurs that didn’t actually exist during the Jurassic period, though that’s probably nitpicking.

The strong trio of Neill, Macy and Leoni aside, the supporting cast have all the charisma of a packet of Monster Munch. Grant’s apprentice Billy is so boring and generic (just look at his name, for Christ’s sake) that when he disappears, seemingly left for dead, then magically appears again at the end of the film with no explanation as to how he survived, you think “oh, I forgot about him” even though you only just saw him 20 minutes previously.

Meanwhile, the series’ annoying child tradition continues when Grant finds the missing son but this time he’s even more annoying because, having survived in dino-infested jungle for so long, he’s a know-it-all kid rather than your basic screamer. Needless to say, the fact that the film doesn’t end with a raptor picking bits of him out of his teeth and speaking to the others in raptorese while a subtitle says “tastes like CHILDREN hahahaha” is nothing short of an injustice.

Any time I watch a film I consider what lessons I’ve learned from it. The lesson I learned from the original *Jurassic Park* is that you should never try to play God, no matter how appealing the results may seem. The sequel, meanwhile, taught me that you shouldn’t try to mess around with nature and try to take things out of their natural habitat because things will go wrong. The only thing *Jurassic Park III* taught me is that if you ever go to a foreign country and can’t speak the language, simply cut a native’s throat out and blow through their windpipe like some sort of obscene flute and you’ll get along fine.

None of the above is to say *Jurassic Park III* is a terrible film, mind you, it’s entertaining in the same way watching a fight going on outside your window is entertaining – it’s a good laugh and you’ll chuckle away for its short duration but you wouldn’t exactly film it and try to sell it to the Tate Gallery. This big-budget creature feature is dumb fun and nothing more.

*Three out of five*

**How to see it**
You guessed it – *Jurassic Park III* is available on both DVD and Blu-ray, either on its own or as part of a trilogy boxset.

**Bits and pieces**
- Jeff Goldblum was supposed to be in *Jurassic Park III* too, and even turned up to shoot a few scenes. He ended up injuring his leg during filming though, and decided that since his character wasn’t too important he’d just drop out. Bet that went down well.

- I’ve lost count how many times I’ve tried to defend this film to people. Mind you, my argument of “yes, it’s shite, but that’s why I like it” isn’t very convincing.
Killer Klowns From Outer Space (1988)

Director: Stephen Chiodo

Starring: Grant Cramer, Suzanne Snyder, John Nelson, John Vernon

“Killer clowns? From outer space? Holy shit.”

Sometimes a film is so clearly ridiculous it doesn’t pretend otherwise and instead proclaims through its title: “If you buy this film, you’re in for some weird shit”. As you can no doubt imagine, Killer Klowns From Outer Space falls directly into this category.

It was created by the Chido brothers, a trio of siblings with a love for the weird and wonderful and an admirable passion for film-making, in particular puppetry and special effects.

In fact, there’s a good chance you’ve seen their work before, because in recent times the Chiodos have made occasional contributions to The Simpsons (like the Gravey & Jobriath cartoon), and more notably created all the puppets in Team America. It’s fairly clear, then, what sort of sense of humour they have.

Killer Klowns From Outer Space, however, was the only time the Chiodos worked together to create the story, do the special effects and direct a whole movie, and while many these days regard it as a “good bad” movie among the ranks of Troll 2 and Howard The Duck in reality it’s actually pretty well made for its budget, hammy acting and ridiculous plot aside.

It’s set in a small country town, where one night a couple on a date see a flaming meteorite enter the atmosphere in the distance and land with a crash. When they go to investigate they find a circus big top in its place. They enter the big top and discover that it’s actually an alien spaceship, where aliens who look like clowns are abducting the townsfolk, placing them in big cotton candy cocoons and draining their blood to drink it.

While the acting is by-and-large horrible throughout the film (with the exception of Dirty Harry and Animal House star John Vernon as the police chief), there’s no denying that Killer Klowns From Outer Space is a labour of love, not just by the Chiodos but by the entire cast as well. They may not be great actors but by God you can tell they’re giving it their all.

Somewhat more impressive is the excellent clown costumes. While it would have been perfectly acceptable to just say “well, they’re from space, so let’s just say all the clowns look the same”, the Chiodos made all sorts of weird and wonderful clowns so that each looks completely unique. It’s a pleasant attention to detail that really gives the film a sense of character.

You’ll see a lot of things in Killer Klowns that you’ve never seen in any other film. Popcorn that comes to life and eats people, for example. Or custard pies that actually contain acid.
And, of course, the classic scene where a group of people are eaten alive by a shadow puppet.

*Killer Klowns From Outer Space* is silly fun, and fantastic proof that a low budget doesn’t necessarily mean a film should be lacking in originality and great ideas. Get some mates around, get some (non-killer) popcorn and enjoy some proper low-budget ’80s comedy cheese.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**
*Killer Klowns* is only available on DVD in the UK. Americans can choose from the DVD or a Blu-ray version, both from MGM. The Blu-ray is region-free, though, so it’s safe to import.

**Bits and pieces**
• There’s a scene in *Killer Klowns* in which a car is flung off a cliff. It was originally going to look pretty spectacular, with the car hurtling over the cliff and smashing to the ground. Instead, the crew forgot to remove the stoppers under the car’s wheels and the rope holding it snapped, leading to the slightly less impressive sight of the car slowly rolling off the cliff and getting caught in a tree.

• A couple of years ago a sequel was announced, entitled *Return Of The Killer Klowns From Outer Space In 3D*. Apparently it hasn’t been abandoned yet, so fingers crossed.

• Should you be interested, there’s an XXX spoof of *Killer Klowns* available, courtesy of the delightful-sounding White Ghetto Films. Don’t expect a review any time soon because my wife would kill me.
Killjoy (2000)

Director: Craig Ross Jr

Starring: Angel Vargas, Vera Yell, Lee Marks

“That’s how you bust caps, mother FUCKER!”

Killjoy is a film about a bullied boy who summons the spirit of an evil voodoo ghetto clown from the ‘hood. If you managed to read that without flinching then you must have truly seen everything the world has to offer.

The story goes that young Michael fancies the girlfriend of Lorenzo, the baddest motherfucker in the whole... um, street. Lorenzo threatens Michael with a gun and tells him that if he ever goes near his lady again he’ll put more holes in him than this movie’s plot.

Eager to get his own back on Lorenzo and the girl (even though she didn’t really do anything), Michael decides to summon Killjoy, an evil spirit that messes people up in a way that’s never really explained too well. After sitting a hilariously cheap-looking doll in a room full of candles and asking Killjoy to come, Michael’s prayers are answered and Killjoy starts fucking people up.

This is where the movie starts to make even less sense than it already did. It’s hard to tell whether everyone’s in some sort of dream world, or the real world, or a different dimension or something, and the film can’t really make its own mind up either. One minute the characters are entering an ice cream truck and teleporting into a different realm, the next their corpses are turning up in real life. Confusion runs rife.

Also bizarre is Killjoy himself. He’s essentially some sort of ‘gangsta’ clown and as such has some ridiculous lines that make him about as terrifying as a Kriss Kross music video. Watch as he slaps a man to the ground then says “biiiiii-iiitch”, or attacks a female character before saying “that’s some good pussy”. There’s nothing terrifying about him at all, he’s just a proper pain in the arse.

I can’t really recommend Killjoy, not even as a “so bad it’s good” film, unless you see genuine humour in the idea of a killer clown talking like Chris Rock. It’s so low budget that it goes beyond “how charming” and wanders into “they’re not even fucking trying to make this look good” territory, and as such is more annoying than amusing to watch.

One out of five

How to see it

Killjoy is available on DVD only in both the UK and US. In America it can also be found in various different boxsets, including a trilogy boxset containing Killjoy 2 and Killjoy 3. Just in case you fancy losing all faith in the medium of cinema.
Bits and pieces

- A fourth Killjoy film was recently released. It's called *Killjoy Goes To Hell*, a clear 'homage' to the ninth Friday The 13th film, *Jason Goes To Hell*. I can think of at least seventeen thousand films I'd rather watch first.

- This isn't to be confused with *Killjoy*, the 1981 TV movie starring Kim Basinger. Mind you, that's one hell of a niche thing to be confused about.
The Langoliers (1995)

Director: Tom Holland

Starring: David Morse, Mark Chapman, Patricia Wettig, Bronson Pinchot

“I hear a really terrible scary sound. And it’s awful. A little like Rice Krispies after you pour in the milk. But I know it’s closer than it was, because something’s coming. Something making that horrible cereal noise.”

As a three-hour made-for-TV film based on a Stephen King book, The Langoliers could either have been compelling viewing or cheesy as hell. Impressively, it manages to be both at the same time. While the story is full of the typical twists and turns you’d expect from a King yarn, the acting is so laughable at times it somehow manages to make things even more entertaining.

On paper, you’d be forgiven for wondering just how The Langoliers manages to last three hours. After all, the plot is the sort of minimalist scenario you might expect as an exercise at an improv class. A group of passengers wake up midway through a flight to Boston to find the rest of the passengers, crew and pilots are missing. With no noticeable damage to the plane and no sign that anyone left, confusion spreads as the group try to figure out what’s happened to everyone. That’s about it.

Of course, with the genius storytelling mind of Stephen King behind the wheel twists and turns inevitably ensue, and by the end the film has covered the likes of time travel, telepathy and big CGI balls of fur that eat up the Earth. And it’s a true testament to King’s talents that as mental as all that sounds, it still makes perfect sense when it happens, even when a Maine airport is completely swallowed up whole by a handful of the aforementioned furballs.

This being a mid-’90s TV movie, the cheese factor is immensely high. The acting ranges from adequate (David Morse is believable as an off-duty pilot who tries to save the day) to atrocious (pretty much everyone else). Probably the most bizarre example of this is Mark Chapman, who plays the mysterious Nick. Despite actually being a British actor (he’s from London, apparently), he still somehow manages to provide a terrible, fake-sounding English accent. This isn’t helped by his stereotypical English gentleman dialogue, which is so clichéd that at times he actually says “jolly good”.

While the plot is engaging and there’s always a desire to find out what’s going to happen to the group, The Langoliers constantly seems like it’s trying its very best to put you off with its embarrassingly poor production. The music is horrible, the CGI effects when the titular Langoliers arrive are laughable, and the final scene is easily one of the worst things ever committed to film.

If you’re looking for a film that takes a great story then buries it in made-for-TV cheese then you’ve got very specific tastes and should probably broaden your search filter. Regardless,
The Langoliers will fit your rather niche needs perfectly, and despite its incredible three-hour duration it still manages to whizz by. It’s worth a look, just leave your critic’s hat at the door because it’s certainly not cinema magic.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it
The Langoliers is available on DVD in both the UK and the US. There’s also an American DVD boxset that features The Langoliers alongside two other Stephen King films, The Stand and Golden Years.

Bits and pieces
• I’m not quite sure why, but this review of The Langoliers is the most popular on That Was A Bit Mental in terms of hits. Not just by a bit, either: by a massive distance. It wasn’t due to a one-off traffic surge either, it’s been consistently popular for the past two years.

• If you want to read Stephen King’s original novella of The Langoliers, you can find it on the Kindle store. Don’t search for The Langoliers though, since it was only ever released on its own in Germany and as such that version is in German. Instead, search for Four Past Midnight, since this was King’s four-story collection featuring The Langoliers, The Library Policeman, The Sun Dog and Secret Window, Secret Garden (later filmed as Secret Window with Johnny Depp).
Lockjaw (2008)

Director: Amir Valinia

Starring: DMX, Wes Brown, Louis Herthum, Lauren Fain

Also known as: Carnivorous (USA)

“Don’t forget, at the end of the day it’s just a snake. A really messed up snake.”

I’ve seen some bad films in my time – as you’ll know if you’ve taken more than a brief glance at some of the other reviews in this book – but Lockjaw is by far one of the worst movies I’ve seen in the past couple of years. It’s not the CGI effects or the hopeless music, those I can deal with. It’s the plot, the script and the acting that make this one such a stinker.

The film starts with a flashback in which a young lad called Alan and his friend Becky break into a voodoo-loving man’s house and steal a dangerous voodoo pen from him before he and his son find out.

Alan, disturbed by his dad’s abusive behaviour towards his mother, decides for no apparent reason to draw a picture – using the voodoo pen – of a big monster eating his dad. Sure enough, after his drunken father leaves the house, he’s gobbled up by the beast and never seen again.

Fast forward to the present day and Alan and Becky are now married. While they do gardening at their home Becky digs up the pen, but before she gets to ask Alan about it she’s run over by a van containing a group of teens who happen to be the biggest bunch of absolute cocks you’ve ever seen in any film to date. Alan uses the pen to draw the monster again, this time attacking the van, and so one by one the teens start getting picked off by the beast. A guy summoning a monster to get revenge on people killing someone close to him? Ah, so it’s basically Pumpkinhead then.

It’s hard to properly describe just how painful Lockjaw is to watch. Almost every member of the main cast has at least one infuriating quality – there’s the quirky guy who talks really loudly because he’s desperate to steal every scene, then there’s the slutty one who was clearly hired for the inevitable nudity alone but then doesn’t even get naked (resulting in an awkward sex scene in which she groans away as if she’s getting some then quickly jumps out of bed when she hears a noise, revealing that she’s clothed). Even rap legend DMX, who only appears in a couple of scenes, puts in a half-hearted performance at best because it’s clear that deep down he knows this is no 8 Mile.

The plot’s got more holes than an orgy – how did young Alan know to draw a picture with the magic stick in the first place? How could Alan get a good look at everyone in the van as it sped past after hitting his wife, to the point that he could draw good renditions of all five of them? And who was the joker who told the people in this film “you know, I reckon acting’s the job for you”?
The only thing *Lockjaw* has going for it is that the stupid CGI monster thing looks slightly more convincing than the stupid CGI monster things in SyFy-funded films like *Dinoshark* and *Mega Python Vs Gatoroid*. That’s literally it though – everything else is just cringeworthy. Every single scene is an exercise in amazement as you realise the director actually must have said to his actors “that’s fine, let’s move on” time and time again instead of “can you do that again, only not shit this time”. Don’t be swayed by the potential comedy value of DMX being in it either – he barely features and he’s as wooden as a bookshelf when he does.

When a film is so half-arsed that it doesn’t even bother to provide enough music to cover the whole of the credits (the music simply stops halfway through leaving the rest of them scrolling upwards in silence) then it’s clear that there wasn’t a lot of effort put into this one. Stay well away.

*One out of five*

**How to see it**
In the UK, *Lockjaw* is only available on DVD, either on its own or in a ‘Mega Monster’ boxset along with *Bear* and *Mega Shark Vs Giant Octopus*. In the US (where it’s known as *Carnivorous*) you can get it on DVD or Blu-ray, but you won’t find it in any similarly thrifty boxsets.

**Bits and pieces**
- *Lockjaw* is a snidey 76 minutes long. That would usually be cause for complaint but by the time I was twenty minutes into this bastard I was grateful.

- Rapper DMX was doing well with his acting career, with his high point being a co-starring role in *Cradle 2 The Grave* alongside Jet Li. He starred in ten movies before ending up on *Lockjaw*. After that, he starred in one more film... then nothing. Naturally, I’m blaming the curse of *Lockjaw* that I just made up.
Mega Piranha (2010)

Director: Eric Forsberg

Starring: Tiffany, Paul Logan, David Labiosa

“I’ve figured it out. It wasn’t the explosion that killed him, and it wasn’t terrorists... it was giant piranha. Yes, giant piranha.”

Mega Piranha is at times hilarious and depressing. The hilarity comes with the disbelief that a film can really be so bad, whereas the depression hits you when you realise there are proper ‘real’ actors struggling for roles out there who would have been up for at least trying to give a film about 30-foot piranha a modicum of credibility.

Syfy’s creature feature productions are bad at the best of times but this film is a shambles on every level, starting with the plot. Some generic ambassador or other is killed in Venezuela, so the US military send out a special agent built like a brick shithouse to investigate it and see if it someone assassinated him. When he gets there he realises it wasn’t an assassination but rather death by piranha – big piranha. He then teams up with former ‘80s pop sensation Tiffany (who’s apparently a scientist) and some other guy with a rubbish goatee to destroy the piranha, all while some weird Venezuelan soldier guys are chasing them for some reason.

If it seems like I perhaps struggled to stay on top of the story for this one, you wouldn’t be wrong. It’s little wonder though given how ridiculously fast it chucks everything at you. Establishing shots are replaced with two-second shots of people walking fast or ominous buildings with a big Impact font subtitle sliding in saying “HANK ROBERTS, HEAD OF INTELLIGENCE” or “MILITARY INTELLIGENCE HEADQUARTERS PACIFIC DIVISION” or something like that, and by the time you get your head round what you just read they’re halfway through the next inane piece of dialogue about how “these things are getting bigger” and how in four hours’ time they’ll be big enough to swallow Harlem or something, I don’t know.

Meanwhile, the quality of the acting is so shocking you start to wonder if this maybe wasn’t some sort of joke. Tiffany couldn’t act her way out of an open door and buff action ‘hero’ Paul Logan’s voice is so needlessly deep and bass-heavy that earthworms picking up the vibrations in the dirt were making better sense of what he was saying than I was. Then there’s the ‘Venezuelan’ bad guy who regularly forgets he’s supposed to be Venezuelan and slips into his native New York accent.

Let’s not forget the hideous CGI effects (the piranha are laughable and the bigger they get the less the CGI chap seems to bother, eventually just sticking splashes and shadows in the water that genuinely look like anyone could do it) and piss-poor editing (in one scene one of the characters is seen sitting down in one shot, then standing up in the next, then sitting down again FIVE times in a row) that both combine to make this less a case of “what’s going to happen to the piranha” and more “how shitter is this film going to get”. I lost it near the
end when a nuclear attack (seriously) destroyed a whole lake of piranha but seemingly didn’t affect the ducks still clearly seen swimming about on the water.

*Mega Piranha* expertly walks the line between so-bad-it’s-good and so-bad-it’s-shite. As an achievement in filmmaking it fails miserably on every possible level, but if you’re the sort who takes pleasure in laughing at bad editing and direction as much as the usual bad acting and script, then you’ll be in hog’s heaven here. Anyone simply looking for a decent film though will be let down.

*One and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

*Mega Piranha* is DVD-only in the UK, which is a shame because that horrible CGI really comes into its own when it’s highly defined. Americans are 'luckier' because they get to choose from either DVD or Blu-ray versions. There’s also a two-disc DVD option featuring both *Mega Piranha* and *Mega Shark Vs Giant Octopus*, or a three-disc Blu-ray with the previous two titles plus *30,000 Leagues Under The Sea*.

**Bits and pieces**

- If you’re craving more Tiffany, check out the bizarre and slightly disturbing documentary *I Think We’re Alone Now*, which follows two obsessed Tiffany fans as they try to meet her. Both are convinced she’s their best friend, but it’s clear the complete opposite is true. Proper 'eyes through the hands' stuff but gripping.

- 'Lead' actor Paul Logan has been in more than his fair share of shite, but some of his past films do at least have great titles. I’d love to see *Cannibal Taboo or American Tigers*, but by far the best title in his filmography is *L.E.T.H.A.L. Ladies: Return To Savage Beach*, in which he apparently plays Doc Austin. Tell me that doesn’t sound like a guaranteed five stars.
Mega Python Vs Gatoroid (2011)

Director: Mary Lambert

Starring: Debbie Gibson, Tiffany, Adolfo Martinez, Robert Shafer

“The pythons aren’t at the top of the food chain. I am. And I say we’re gonna take care of this problem, right now.”

Okay, enough is enough. A message to all low-budget filmmakers – it’s now time to stop using cheap CGI companies to make your special effects. These SyFy-financed creature feature films (see also Dinoshark and Sharktopus) have been coming thick and fast for a couple of years now and the effects are somehow managing to get worse. It saddens me to see Mary Lambert, the director of one of my favourite ‘80s horrors Pet Sematary, at the helm of this one.

Mega Python Vs Gatoroid stars ’80s music starlets Tiffany and Debbie Gibson in a movie that actually has them fighting more than the titular superbeasts. It’s set in the Florida Everglades, where a surprising number of alligators have been turning up dead. It soon emerges that the reason for this is some mutated giant pythons that were freed from a research lab, released into the wild and began to lay eggs.

Terry O’Hara (Tiffany), the local ranger, gives the go-ahead to legalise python hunting in the area while activist Dr Nikki Riley (Gibson), who freed the pythons in the first place, campaigns to stop people killing the animals. Eventually the pythons start getting so big that Terry decides to make the controversial decision to inject some dead chickens with steroids then chuck them in the river so the alligators will eat them and grow. And you thought “Gatoroid” would be a half-alligator, half-hemmorhoid. Well, I did at least.

Naturally, there’s a lot to be said for a film that lets you finally tell people: “Yes, I watched a movie with a scene in which that woman who used to sing ‘I Think We’re Alone Now’ injects uncooked chickens with steroids”, or ask them: “Have you ever seen a film where Mickey Dolenz from the Monkees is stepped on and crushed by a 30-foot alligator? I have”, but I can understand why that may not be enough for some people. Thankfully there are also a few sub-plots dotted around to keep things varied.

Most entertaining are the trio of hunters led by Robert Shafer (better known as Bob Vance of Vance Refrigeration from the US version of The Office), who wander round the forests with their shotguns while giving their best redneck “yeehaw” impressions. Then there’s Dr Diego Ortiz (Martinez), who spends most of the film telling an uninterested Tiffany that they need to destroy all the six-foot alligator eggs in caves around the area. And of course the rivalry with Tiffany and Gibson continues to simmer throughout the film, until it comes to a head with a ridiculous catfight that many 30-year-olds would have killed to see in the ’80s when they were rival popstars.
So what’s not to like? The “special” effects, that’s what (oh, they’re special alright, just more in a sort of “the teacher need to spend some extra time with them” way). I make no exaggeration when I say the CGI – in particular the giant pythons – are so badly rendered that it genuinely looks like something out of a video game. It’d be acceptable for gaming, sure, but in a movie alongside real life actors? It looks atrocious.

It’s worse when the CGI is used as a replacement when props would have worked better. I can just about understand using the CGI for the snakes and alligators while they’re alive, but when a large python is dead and you’ve got an actor lying underneath it you should really be using a big rubber prop. It’s cheaper and when the actor interacts with it (he struggles to try to get out from under it) it looks realistic because, well, it is. It’s a physical object.

Instead, here you have a man who was filmed struggling with nothing on him at all and then had a cheap-as-fuck CGI snake placed over him, sloppily animated to look like it’s moving as he does. There’s even some horrible glitching at times, where his hand goes through the snake when he moves. Just get a rubber one, seriously.

This continues throughout the film. When a snake attacks a dog near the start it looks like something out of Tekken. The climactic scene looks like it should have a “Player 2 press Start to join in” message at the top-right of the screen. And there are so many bad blue-screen scenes that they might as well have filmed the whole thing against someone’s bedroom wall and superimposed the actors over old episodes of The Crocodile Hunter.

In terms of general entertainment Mega Python Vs Gatoroid is one of the better SyFy-funded movies out there, though that’s not saying much. The atrocious video game-quality CGI is some of the worst I’ve seen, however, to the extent that it takes away from the otherwise cheesy fun on offer. Just stick Tiffany’s album on Spotify and play Tomb Raider instead.

Two out of five

How to see it
It’s DVD-only for the UK, I’m afraid. In the US it’s available in DVD or Blu-ray flavours.

Bits and pieces
• Gatoroid is really the worst name ever for a creature. It sounds like half-alligator, half-android or something, instead of just an alligator on steroids. I reckon the film should have been called Mega Python Vs Junkie Alligator.

• For those not in the know, Debbie Gibson was a star in the 1980s when her pop single Foolish Beat went to number one, making her the youngest artist to write, produce and perform a number one song (she was 17). Her rival, Tiffany, was 15 when her song I Think We're Alone Now hit number one. The two were considered teen pop rivals in the '80s and fans were divided. It was like an American '80s pop version of Blur vs Oasis or Team Edward vs Team Jacob.
Night Of The Bloody Apes (1969)

Director: René Cardona

Starring: José Elisa Moreno, Carlos Lopez Moctezuma, Norma Lazaro

“I’ll say that’s absurd, the proofs are circumstantial, it’s more probable that of late more and more you’ve been watching on your television many of those pictures of terror.”

Night Of The Bloody Apes is easily in my top ten Mexican-luchador-wrestling-ape-based monster movies, and I can assure you that’s a highly competitive list. Given its title though, it’s actually a little disappointing since there’s only one ape in the film and it’s not really a proper one. Let me explain.

The movie has two main plotlines. Lucy, a masked wrestler, is having problems living with herself after she puts another wrestler in hospital by throwing her out of the ring during a match. Meanwhile, in the same hospital, the mad scientist Dr Krellman is upset that his son is dying of leukemia and so decides that the only way to save his life is by giving him a heart transplant.

Maybe hearts aren’t too easy to come by in Mexico – I’m no Top Gear presenter so I’m not really touching that one – but for some reason Dr Krellman decides that, rather than waiting for a human heart to become available, he’ll kill a gorilla and take its heart instead. Because that’ll definitely work and won’t fuck things up.

After the transplant, it quickly becomes clear that it definitely hasn’t worked and things are very much fucked up when Krellman’s son becomes a sort of half-man half-gorilla. His face turns into that of a strange monkey man and he has the sort of rage that can only be matched by someone watching two hours’ worth of My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding.

Monkey chap then escapes the hospital and goes on the warpath, raping and mutilating various ladyfolk living nearby. It’s up to Dr Krellman to find out how to stop him... possibly by replacing his monkey heart with another human one. If only there was some sort of hospitalised female wrestler close to death with a heart that could be sneakily removed and used instead...

Night Of The Bloody Apes is just silly from start to finish and while it’s understandable why it was considered a video nasty at the time it’s still very tame compared to some of the others. The ‘rape’ scenes are thankfully clothed and very brief and the blood is a bit unrealistic. In fact, perhaps the most controversial moments in the film are the two heart transplant scenes, which actually use stock footage of real-life human heart transplants for added realism. If you’re a bit squeamish when watching operation footage then, this isn’t for you.

By far the best thing about the film is the terrible dialogue. Since it was originally filmed in Mexico it’s all dubbed, but the translation to English is so literal – almost as if it was handled by a 1960s ancestor of Google Translate – that many of the lines make no real sense (such
as the example at the top of this review). This results in some quotable classics, like the scene where Dr Krellman tries to convince his accomplice to take the injured wrestler’s heart: “A little slither of bone lies in her cerebrum. And if by some miracle she lives she’ll be an idiot for the rest of her life.”

If a big group of you want to have a laugh while watching something pleasantly crap, Night Of The Bloody Apes is a good shout. Watch it on your own though and the novelty will wear off about half an hour in.

Two out of five

How to see it
You can get Night Of The Bloody Apes on DVD in the UK, but if you have a region-free player I strongly recommend trying to import the American DVD from Something Weird Video. It comes on a double-bill along with the similarly nuts Feast Of Flesh and has loads of extras. If you’re feeling particularly flush, get Something Weird’s ‘Beauties & Beasts’ boxset, which features the above double-bill and four other brilliantly odd movies. It can also be found as part of the Crypt Of Terror series of DVD double-bill releases from Bci, along with Curse Of The Doll People. Again, this is a US disc.

Bits and pieces
• This is actually a remake of Doctor Of Doom, a film director Rene Cardona released ten years earlier. Cardona added in footage of women’s wrestling, some actual medical footage and a dollop of nudity and hey presto, Night Of The Bloody Apes was complete.

• Night Of The Bloody Apes was one of the 72 ‘video nasties’ banned in the UK in the early 1980s. It was finally re-released in 1999 with three minutes of cuts, and eventually released uncut in 2002. It’s the real-life surgery footage that did it, mainly.
Night Of The Living Dead (1968)

Director: George Romero

Starring: Duane Jones, Judith O’Dea, Karl Hardman

“If you have a gun, shoot ‘em in the head. That’s a sure way to kill ‘em. If you don’t, get yourself a club or a torch. Beat ‘em or burn ‘em. They go up pretty easy.”

Although the idea of the dead coming back to life had been covered a number of times before the release of Night Of The Living Dead, it was George Romero’s low-budget 1968 flick that essentially laid down the rules of the modern zombie movie and kicked off what is (along with the slasher) easily one of the most oft-produced subgenres in horror.

It starts with Barbara and her brother Johnny heading to a cemetery in Pittsburgh to visit their mother’s grave. There they’re confronted by a man who stumbles over to them and attacks Johnny, killing him, before chasing Barbara. Managing to escape, she finds solace in a small cottage in the middle of the countryside, but is shortly joined by another chap, a black man called Ben. Soon many other similarly stumbling maniacs join the crazy man outside and a small army of shuffling ne’er-do-wells begins to gather around the cottage.

As Barbara and Ben are joined by a few more people who’ve been hiding in the house’s basement, they manage to get the radio and TV working and tune into the emergency news broadcasts. They learn that the dead have started coming to life and are eating the living. Any people they eat in turn become one of these ‘ghouls’ (they’re never actually called zombies at any point during the movie). And thus the modern zombie film is born.

Two things spring to mind while watching Night Of The Living Dead – the first is how surprisingly grim and graphic it is given the era in which it was filmed, and the second is writer/director George Romero’s fairly obvious commentary on how we interact with one another.

The former is the most immediate – considering the furore surrounding some of the now-tame taboos broken by Hitchcock’s Psycho (such as the shot looking inside a toilet bowl and the suggestion of a clothed unmarried couple sharing a bed), to have a film only eight years later showing hundreds of mindless ghouls, some completely naked, eating flesh and entrails must have caused outrage at the time. Indeed, many of the scenes that stunned in 1968 still have the power to shock in 2011, in particular one involving a young girl and a trowel.

The latter is more subtle but lingers longer after the credits. Each instalment of Romero’s original Dead trilogy (Night/Dawn/Day) is laced with social commentary, and while it’s laid on thickest in Dawn Of The Dead there’s still plenty being preached by Romero here. As those in the house discuss their escape plan, it all starts to fall apart as arguments begin and fights break out. It’s clear what Romero’s telling us – even with faced with the bleakest of situations it’s still difficult at times for people to work together harmoniously. In a way, the
biggest threat to the human race isn’t the dangers outside, it’s the human race itself and our inability to trust each other.

This point wouldn’t come across nearly as well had it not been for the fantastic cast of unknowns who make up the occupants of the house. They all have their own very clear and distinct personalities and these personalities clash just as you’d expect. In your head you’ll form your opinions quickly, defining each of the characters—the good honest guy, the bastard who deserves to die, the one who means well but deep down you know isn’t strong enough to survive—and it’s a true testament to the cast’s abilities that every single character’s fate is of interest to the viewer.

You may wonder why I felt the need to mention Ben’s colour earlier in the review. Indeed, you might already have a Word document open, ready to scribe your no-doubt carefully-worded statement accusing me of all sorts of discriminatory shenanigans. The reason Ben’s colour is so important is that Night Of The Living Dead is one of the first mainstream movies that featured a black man as the hero.

Don’t forget, this was 45 years ago, a time when non-whites were very much considered a lesser class and the blaxploitation boom was still a few years away, so black audiences were barely seeing their colour represented on the big screen at all, let alone in lead roles. As a result, for Night Of The Living Dead to feature a black man as the protagonist in a movie aimed at mainstream audiences was a huge decision at the time, one that nowadays wouldn’t have us batting an eyelid (which, of course, shows the progress we’ve made since).

Then there’s the controversial and powerful ending, with its strong double-meaning barely hiding its racial undertones. Make no mistake, this is more than a mindless monster movie. Night Of The Living Dead is a true classic, a film that any self-respecting horror fan has to see at least once. It’s aged incredibly well and still packs a punch 45 years later, and Romero’s not-so-subtle social undercurrents should give budding sociologists something to sink their teeth into too.

Five out of five

How to see it
Because it has no copyright and is a public domain film, any old prick can release Night Of The Living Dead if they want to. For this reason, there are countless versions out there. If you live in the UK I recommend the Blu-ray from Optimum Releasing (it has a white cover), and if you live in the US then go for the Blu-ray from Forgotten Films. As for DVD, the definitive version is the Millennium Edition by Elite Entertainment, which is packed with extras. It’s an American disc but it’s region-free, so Brits can import it with no worries.

Bits and pieces
• By all means stay away from the 30th Anniversary version of Night Of The Living Dead, originally released by Anchor Bay. It removes 15 minutes from the film and replaces it with 15 minutes of newly-shot footage which claims to add more backstory. The problem is this new footage is horrendous, looks so out of place because it’s clearly been shot three
decades later, and features a bizarre new side-plot about a priest who survives the zombie attack because he believes in God. Imagine taking the Mona Lisa, rubbing out her face and repainting her in racist blackface and you’ve got a rough idea of how sacrilegious this new version is. Avoid it like the zombie plague.

• There are also colourised versions of the film available from various different companies. They range from laughably bad to surprisingly impressive, but come on – you should be mature enough to be able to handle a black and white movie.
Nightbreed (1990)

Director: Clive Barker

Starring: Craig Sheffer, Anne Bobby, David Cronenberg

“Miss Winston, everybody has a secret face.”

Despite being one of the UK’s finest horror minds (having written the likes of Hellraiser and Candyman), Clive Barker’s Nightbreed doesn’t really get much love in the UK. Maybe it’s because it’s not as scary as the stories he’s better known for, or maybe it’s because it’s the horror movie equivalent of Fraggle Rock, I suppose we’ll never know.

The story’s your typical “boy meets girl, boy has been having weird dreams while his shrink tells him he’s a serial killer when he isn’t really, boy goes to a cemetery and is killed but then becomes part of a weird underground-dwelling group of undead monsters” plot you’ve seen a million times before. It emerges early on in the film that Boone, the lead character, isn’t actually killing the families he’s been led to believe he has and that instead his psychiatrist (played with just the right amount of camp by genius director David Cronenberg) has been doing the killings while hypnotising Boone into believing it was him instead.

Due to his dodgy dreams, Boone finds himself drawn to a spooky graveyard where he is shot dead by police, but not before encountering a group of undead chaps and ladies who live under the ground and are generally keeping themselves to themselves. Boone’s quack discovers this and decides to tell the police, leading to an almighty clusterfuck later on where loads of cops fight hundreds of monsters in their underground lair.

For the most part Nightbreed’s acting does the trick but I was a bit unconvinced by Craig Sheffer in the lead role of Boone. Watching him change from a human to monster (as he does numerous times in the film) just isn’t believable because he doesn’t seem bothered by it, and though it isn’t his fault I was also distracted by the fact that every time he turns into his monster form he reminds me of a bad Kurt Russell lookalike.

To be fair, he’s not the only likely doppelganger in the film. When Not-Kurt-Russell eventually finds himself in the monsters’ underground lair, the film more or less turns into a game of Oh Look, It’s A Celebrity Lookalike. “Oh look! It’s metal icon Rob Zombie!” “Oh look! It’s Vanessa Feltz! (though she’s in everything these days so it’s no surprise to see her making yet another appearance) “And oh look! It’s Sportacus from children’s television keep-fit shitefest Lazytown! Well, a bit.”

Once you get past that, Nightbreed is fun. David Cronenberg is clearly the star of the show as Decker, the mental serial-killing psychiatrist, and his mask is fairly creepy too. Meanwhile, as you’d expect from Clive Barker, there’s also plenty of gore and nudity to be had (even though the former is about as realistic as Aberdeen’s chance of winning the Scottish Premier League and the latter is courtesy of some terrifying monster women) and Danny Elfman’s music helps give a Burtonesque feeling to certain scenes.
The best bit though is the scene where female lead Anne Bobby (who coincidentally shares the name of both my aunt and uncle) first enters the underground tomb, since this is the first opportunity viewers get to see most of the film’s countless weird and wonderful monsters. This was also the scene that gave me Fraggle Rock vibes, because it basically shows a bunch of muppets living under the ground.

There are times when the plot gets a bit mindless, and while the film clearly wants the audience to be on the side of the monsters it can be tricky when some of them are pricks (such as the pervy one whose face is falling off or the one who looks a bit like Knuckles from the Sonic games and is generally a wanker to Not-Kurt-Russell).

This may be partly due to the fact that the film was savagely cut and edited by the studio shortly before its release, something that irked Clive Barker according to later interviews because he didn’t get to tell the story the way he wanted to. Despite all this however, it’s still a good laugh to watch, if a little disjointed. It’s well worth a watch for the cheese factor and the monster designs alone.

*Three out of five*

**How to see it**

*Nightbreed* is only available on DVD at the moment in both the UK and the US. It might be worth holding fire for now though because at the time of writing Clive Barker has confirmed that the infamous Cabal Cut of the film will finally be coming to DVD in the future. I’ll explain the Cabal Cut below.

**Bits and pieces**

- *Nightbreed* was based on the Clive Barker novel Cabal. If you’d like to read it you’re in luck, because this little Kindle bugger you’re holding right now has access to it, since it’s in the Kindle store.

- *Nightbreed* was properly butchered by 20th Century Fox before it was released, and roughly 45 minutes of footage was removed as a result. Eventually Clive Barker’s friend decided to make his own ‘director’s cut’ combining the DVD version of *Nightbreed* with the workprint footage of the unused material. This greatly extended version is called the Cabal Cut and has been touring cinemas for the past year. It was announced in July 2013 that at the end of 2013 the Cabal Cut will be coming to DVD, which is pretty bloody exciting news.

- Many movies get video game tie-ins, but *Nightbreed* actually had two. *Nightbreed: The Action Game* and *Nightbreed: The Interactive Movie* both came out on the same day, though it was the former that received the most praise. Ultimately, since the film wasn’t as successful as Clive Barker’s previous film *Hellraiser* and since the games didn’t sell well as a result, a planned third game (an RPG) was scrapped.
**A Nightmare On Elm Street (1984)**

**Director:** Wes Craven

**Starring:** Robert Englund, Heather Langenkamp, Johnny Depp, John Saxon

“One, two, Freddy’s coming for you…”

It’s not possible for me to give a fair and objective review of this film because it was such a big part of my childhood. The majority of my years as a wee boy were spent shitting myself at the very sight of Freddy Krueger (unlike my fearless younger brother who idolised him). The Nightmare films affected me so much that they remain the basis for my love of horror to this day. Quite simply: no Nightmare On Elm Street, no That Was A Bit Mental (so it’s to blame if you think this e-book is pish). Therefore, anyone expecting this film to get any less than a full 5 out of 5 can stop dreaming (as it were) and just accept it. I fucking love this film, and I always will until the day I die. Now let’s dissect it.

Nancy and a couple of her other high school friends have started sharing the same bad dream about an impolite chap named Fred Krueger. Mr Krueger has a glove with long razors for fingernails, which must be an inconvenience when he has to use toilet paper. Naturally, he’s not a happy man (not necessarily because of bum-wiping issues though) and he terrorises Nancy and her friends every time they dream about him. Once Nancy’s friends start dying in their sleep, however, it soon becomes clear that whatever Freddy does to you in your dream affects you in real life, and if he kills you in your dream you’re fucked in real life too. It’s up to Nancy and her boyfriend Glen to figure out how to stop Freddy before all the Elm Street children die in their sleep.

It’s a commonly held belief that the original Friday the 13th isn’t scary anymore because (with the exception of Kevin Bacon’s death and the ending) you’re pretty much warned about all the deaths in advance (the shadow of an axe against a curtain before it’s slapped into someone’s head, for example). A Nightmare On Elm Street, on the other hand, still provides the odd chill to those who have yet to watch it; be it Freddy bursting out of a mirror, Tina’s death or Glen’s unfortunate bedroom experience. It’s safe to say that 29 years after its release, despite showing its age a little in terms of special effects, A Nightmare On Elm Street can still hold its own fright-wise against much of the emotionless bullshit that’s being released in cinemas these days.

Part of this is also down to the film’s concept in general. It’s often hard to care much about slasher films because not many of us have been chased down a street by someone wielding a knife (unless you’ve spent a Friday night in Glasgow of course). Everybody has nightmares though, and everybody knows how powerless they feel when they’re having them, so building a film around that idea was a genius move by Wes Craven.

Of course, this film would be nothing without Freddy Krueger, one of the greatest horror characters in history. The idea of a dodgy chap burnt alive by the vengeful parents of the children he killed is great, and the innuendo and suggestions that he may have been more
than simply a child murderer adds an underlying sense of nastiness without ever explicitly confirming anything.

Gore fans will be reasonably happy with *A Nightmare On Elm Street* because there’s a good deal of the red stuff spattered throughout the film, most notably during the famous first kill where Freddy drags the helpless Tina onto the ceiling. On top of this, Freddy seems intent on causing himself harm in every scene he appears in, be it by slicing his fingers off or cutting his stomach open. Quite gory then. The deaths are also extremely inventive given the film’s low budget. It’s a credit to the special effects crew that the aforementioned ceiling death is very surprising when it happens, because you don’t expect to see something as cool as that happening in a film that seems fairly cheaply made.

The acting is possibly the one area where the film could theoretically lose some points. As much as I love this film I have to admit that it’s undeniably ‘80s and most of the actors (with the exception of Johnny Depp, Robert Englund and John Saxon) either play their roles in an over-the-top manner or simply are’t convincing enough. As a lead actress, Heather Langenkamp is simply not good enough in this film and her shonky delivery of her lines tends to take the viewer out of Craven’s world and throw them back into reality. This is more due to her inexperience as an actress when she starred in this, however: indeed, her later roles in the third and seventh *Nightmare* films were much more believable as she gained maturity as an actress.

Maybe I’m being biased, maybe I’m being nostalgic, but I am of the honest opinion that anyone who doesn’t see *A Nightmare On Elm Street* before they die had better have a good reason like being Amish or something. Not many horror films can be considered true classics but among those hallowed few you have your *Dawn Of The Dead*, you have your *Halloween*, you have your *Friday The 13th* and you have your *Nightmare On Elm Street*. Yes, the acting is poor and the fashion is sometimes scarier than Freddy himself (witness the camp might of Johnny Depp’s crop-top and bouffant hairdo), but these are merely documents of the film’s history.

Does anyone question *Nosferatu*’s lack of sound? No, because all films at that time were silent. Therefore, should anyone question *A Nightmare On Elm Street*’s dodgy acting and dodgier clothes? No, because all ‘80s slasher films had Oxfam wardrobes and stars who couldn’t act their way out of a nutsack. It comes with the territory. What doesn’t however, and what makes *A Nightmare On Elm Street* better than its countless competitors, is that it’s a clever, well-directed horror with great special effects for its budget and inventive deaths that involve a lot more than just someone else getting their throat slit every five minutes. If you haven’t seen it, take it from me and remedy that situation.

*Five out of five*

**How to see it**

*A Nightmare On Elm Street* can be found on either DVD or Blu-ray in both the UK and America. In terms of boxsets, there are a few options. In the UK there’s a DVD and Blu-ray boxset called *A Nightmare On Elm Street Collection*, which contains all seven films (but not *Freddy Vs Jason* or the remake). There’s a similar collection on Blu-ray in the US, but if
you’re looking for an American DVD set, don’t go near the newer Nightmare On Elm Street Collection which features the seven movies and *Freddy Vs Jason*. Instead, go for the New Line Platinum Series set. This was released in 1999 and is still in print, mainly because it’s a fantastic box set with loads of extras including a DVD game packed with loads of other interview snippets.

**Bits and pieces**

- I realise the above review is horribly biased but you should also realise how little I care about this. I must have seen *A Nightmare On Elm Street* well over a hundred times and I still love it.

- It’s not quite clear how the story for the film came about. In some interviews Wes Craven says it was based on the story of an Asian kid who was terrified of sleeping. When his parents finally managed to mix sleeping pills into his drink and get him to doze off, he ended up dying in his sleep. In other interviews, he said it was based on stories of Cambodian immigrants coming to America and dying in their sleep because of their nightmares. Either way, they must have had one hell of an uncomfortable mattress.

- When Wes Craven was a child he was bullied at school by a kid called Fred Krueger. Not only is the razor-fingered, pizza-faced villain in *A Nightmare On Elm Street* named after this little prick, the leader of the gang in Craven’s earlier *The Last House On The Left* was also called Krug. Wonder if the guy knows what his hassle resulted in.
A Nightmare On Elm Street Part 2: Freddy’s Revenge (1985)

Director: Jack Sholder

Starring: Robert Englund, Mark Patton, Kim Myers

JESSE - “Grady, do you ever remember your dreams?”

GRADY - “Only the wet ones.”

Jack Sholder didn't know he was making a gay movie. As far as he was aware, he was simply making a sequel to A Nightmare On Elm Street, which had been a huge box office success the previous year. It was only when the film started getting recognition and critical praise from the gay media that he slowly realised he may have unwittingly created the greatest homoerotic horror film of the 1980s.

Freddy’s Revenge tells the tale of Jesse (Mark Patton), an effeminate young chap who’s new in town and already trying to win over his new high school lady friend Lisa (Kim Myers, looking remarkably like a young Bette Midler). The problem is, Jesse’s family have unwittingly moved into 1428 Elm Street, the house where Nancy lived in the previous movie, and in doing so have provided Freddy with new victims to stalk.

As Jesse sleeps at night, he dreams about Freddy. Rather than killing him though, Freddy wants to take over Jesse’s body so he can come into the real world and kill all the teenagers in Elm Street. Jesse tries to resist, but finds himself unable to control his body. He goes into his little sister’s room wearing a Freddy glove and only just manages to stop himself attacking her. He sprouts a huge demon tongue while he’s getting down and dirty with Lisa but manages to hide it and leave without her seeing. Freddy’s taking over his body and there’s not much he can do about it.

Of course, as far as the cast and crew of the movie were concerned (well, most of them at least – nowadays Mark Patton, himself a gay actor, claims he knew all along what was happening), this was nothing more than a straight sequel (in every sense of the word) to the previous year’s big horror blockbuster. That wasn’t how the gay community saw it, however. In their eyes, Freddy’s Revenge was a film about a young man struggling to accept his own sexuality and trying to fight it. The funny thing is, if you watch the film with the assumption that Freddy is supposed to be Jesse’s gay side, it’s hard to argue with them.

Everything Freddy does to Jesse can be interpreted as an attempt to bring out his gay side. The aforementioned tongue scene is Freddy’s attempt to stop him being intimate with a woman. At one point, Jesse runs to a male friend’s house, climbs through his bedroom window and tells him there’s someone inside of him trying to get out (the innocent response: “Yeah, and she’s female, and she’s waiting for you. And you want to sleep with ME”). When Freddy finally completely takes over Jesse’s body, the only way Jesse can be freed is for Lisa to kiss Freddy, essentially killing off his homosexual side.
All these are mere foreplay, however, compared to the scene in which a sleeping Jesse, under Freddy’s control, walks to the nearest gay S&M club and finds his gym teacher there wearing a tight leather outfit. The teacher takes Jesse back to the school and makes him run laps in the gym, but afterwards Jesse, as Freddy, ties him up with skipping ropes in the shower, strips him, whips his bare arse with a towel then gives him the old fingernails in the back (penetrating him from behind, if you will). If the cast and crew genuinely weren’t trying to make a gay movie, you have to wonder what the hell they were thinking here. I’m not just making this up, you know – the recent (and outstanding) DVD documentary Never Sleep Again features interviews with the film’s cast and crew admitting they had no clue. They’re genuinely honest and stunned at how homoerotic the film they made ended up looking.

Either way, the homosexual subtext is neither here nor there – Freddy’s Revenge is simply an odd film however you take it (so to speak). Odd, unexplainable things happen throughout the film, each doing their bit to undo the “rules” and mythology laid out by Wes Craven in the wonderful first film. Jesse’s house suddenly becomes incredibly hot for some reason, to the extent that his pet budgie goes mental, attacking Jesse’s sister and then spontaneously combusting into a tiny explosion of flames and feathers.

Then there’s the part where Freddy freely comes into the real world, something that was a big no-no in Craven’s original (only Nancy could bring him out of her dream). This leads to a ridiculous scene at a pool party where Freddy confronts 50 or so teens, most of whom are taller than him and could probably kick his arse.

In a series famous for its bizarre moments and bending of reality, for Freddy’s Revenge to somehow feel a little odd is something of an achievement. It’s entertaining enough however you choose to interpret it, but it’s by no means one of the better entries in the Nightmare saga.

Three out of five

How to see it
If you want to buy A Nightmare On Elm Street 2 on its own then you’re limited to DVD. Otherwise, I recommend going for one of the boxsets mentioned in the above A Nightmare On Elm Street review. Alternatively, Americans can buy a Blu-ray containing a double-bill of A Nightmare On Elm Street 2 and 3.

Bits and pieces
• If you want to find out more about Nightmare 2’s unintentional homo-eroticism (or any of the other films for that matter) check out the incredible four-hour documentary Never Sleep Again.

• As curious as Nightmare 2 is, it could have been even more interesting – Christian Slater and Brad Pitt both auditioned for the lead role.

• There was a two-week spell during filming when Freddy was played by a stuntman. This was because Robert Englund wanted more money and New Line refused. After quickly
realising that you could see Freddy’s face and as such he needed to be an actual actor (unlike Jason or Michael Myers who were regularly played by stuntmen), New Line caved and gave Englund his pay rise. Just as well, really.
A Nightmare On Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors (1987)

Director: Chuck Russell

Starring: Robert Englund, Heather Langenkamp, Patricia Arquette, Laurence Fishburne, John Saxon

“Let’s go kick the motherfucker’s ass all over dreamland.”

After New Line Cinema balled up the sequel to its biggest-grossing hit with a film that tore apart the mythology the original took great pains to create, it was decided that the third Nightmare movie would right the wrongs of Freddy’s Revenge and provide the true sequel Freddy fans wanted the first time around.

Back came Wes Craven, then, who had been shunned for the second film. Craven wrote a first draft of the script then moved on to a different project, but not before also convincing Heather Langenkamp, who played Nancy in the original film, to return. The combination of Craven’s story and Nancy’s return laid the groundwork for what would ultimately prove to be the best of the Nightmare On Elm Street sequels.

With Elm Street exhausted of teenagers, Dream Warriors moves its setting to a psychiatric hospital where a fresh batch of potential teenage victims are housed. While each of these teens is in the nuthouse for their own personal reasons – one doesn’t talk, one self-harms, another is a drug addict – they also share a common problem: they’re all being stalked in their sleep by Freddy Krueger.

Naturally, the staff aren’t having any of it, and the kids are getting annoyed that their pleas are going unnoticed – that is, until Nancy joins the hospital as a group therapist.

After finding out what they’re all going through, Nancy explains to the teens that they’re the last of the Elm Street children – the kids of the parents that burned Freddy alive – and that he wants to kill them so he can finally get his revenge once and for all. Nancy teaches the group that they’re in control of their own dreams, and that as long as they keep that control they can give themselves any special powers they want to help them defeat Freddy. And so they set about preparing to take on Freddy in the dream world.

The reason Dream Warriors is the best of the Nightmare sequels is because it marks the final high point of the series just before Freddy’s popularity exploded and the Nightmare movies descended into self-parody and MTV jokes. This is the first film where Freddy starts wisecracking as he offs his victims but the actual plot is still somewhat serious – the backstory telling how his mother, a nun at an asylum, conceived him after she was accidentally locked in a room with a hundred maniac inmates and raped over and over verges on the obscene – and ensures the film remains a firm member of the horror genre as opposed to the black comedies its sequels essentially were.
The deaths are also among the most varied and memorable in Nightmare lore. One telly-addicted victim pegs it when her TV sprouts a Freddy head and arms, picks her up and slams her head into the screen, while another nearly meets her end at the hands (well, gums) of a giant Freddy snake which looks not unlike a huge penis. Not that I noticed, I’m just saying.

By far the most talked-about scene in the film however is the puppet suicide. One of the patients builds puppets as a hobby and so Freddy uses this against him by ripping his veins out of his wrists and feet and turning him into a giant puppet, using the veins as strings and operating him from above. To everyone else it looks like he’s just sleepwalking, but in his dream Freddy is in control, leading him to the top floor and chucking him out the window in what appears in the real world to be a suicide.

Even the film’s ending is effective, as some characters you expect to live don’t make it and Freddy’s demise actually makes some sense given his religious backstory. It’s an appropriate end, and had the series finished there it would have been a fitting way to draw a line under things and atone for the poor second film. Of course, it didn’t quite happen like that, but that’s for another time.

If you want to watch only the best films in the Nightmare On Elm Street series then watch Dream Warriors. It’s second only to the original movie in terms of plot and creativity while also presenting a Freddy that, while more charismatic, is still somewhat scary. In short, it was the last truly fantastic film in the main Nightmare On Elm Street series.

Five out of five

How to see it
Same deal as Nightmare 2. It can only be bought solo on DVD, otherwise you’ll need to get it as part of a boxset – either a full DVD or Blu-ray one with the other films in the series, or a double-bill Blu-ray along with the second film.

Bits and pieces
• Get on YouTube and search for the music video to Dream Warriors by ‘80s heavy metal band Dokken (alternatively you can find it as an extra on most versions of the film). It’s a bloody catchy tune with a brilliantly silly video.

• Max, the friendly hospital guard, is played by a pre-Matrix Laurence Fishburne (also known as the African-American Charlie Brooker), though he’s credited as Larry Fisburne, which is clearly cooler.
The Omen (1976)

Director: Richard Donner

Starring: Gregory Peck, Lee Remick, David Warner, Harvey Stephens, Billie Whitelaw

“Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666” (Revelations 13:18)

After the phenomenal success of The Exorcist it was inevitable that some imitators would appear to try and cash in on all the “yay God, boo the devil” sentiment among moviegoers. While a number of low-budget attempts failed miserably it would be The Omen, released three years after The Exorcist, that would successfully manage to effectively compete for the coveted crown of Best Horror Film About A Little Child With Links To Satan But It’s Not A Horror Film Honest Mate It’s A Faith-Based Thriller.

The Omen follows Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck), an American Ambassador and potential future President of the United States. His wife has a stillborn child at the start of the film but she remains unconscious for a while after the delivery and so isn’t immediately aware of this. A priest offers Robert a solution – a healthy orphan newborn whose mother has died in childbirth and has no immediate family. Thorn takes the baby and tells his none-the-wiser wife it belongs to them.

Fast-forward five years and weird things start happening. At their son Damien’s fifth birthday party their nanny hangs herself in front of all the guests, declaring to Damien that it’s “all for you”. A replacement nanny turns up out of the blue and, along with her rottweiler dog, show an unhealthy interest in taking care of Damien.

Things start going tits-up when Thorn is approached by a priest, who claims he was there when Thorn’s adopted son was born. He tells him Damien is actually the Antichrist, the Devil’s son, and that Thorn has to start accepting Christ if he wants to survive. Thorn isn’t having any of it, and shortly afterwards the priest dies in a freak accident where he’s impaled with a spear-like church spire.

A journalist called Jennings (David Warner) shows Thorn photos he took of the nanny and priest before they died. Both have dark marks over them in the shape of a noose and a spear respectively. What’s more, Jennings had taken a photo of himself and in it there’s a dark line across his neck. DUN DUN DUNNNNN.

Despite the whole spooky child premise and the Satanic element The Omen doesn’t really have much in common with The Exorcist. Damien doesn’t ever really do anything particular shocking or unusual in the way Reagan does, it merely seems to be the case that odd things happen around him. Instead the film feels more like a predecessor to more modern movies like Final Destination and The Ring in that it revolves around premonitions of deaths about to occur (or omens, if you will).
As a result of this, despite any preconceptions you may have The Omen actually isn’t that scary at all. The fear comes in the concern that Damien is about to suddenly snap, expose himself as the devil’s son and do something evil, a concern that ultimately leads to nothing. Its few deaths, while effectively directed, are still handled in a way that they’re not too shocking with the possible exception of the film’s most famous scene, involving a stray pane of glass. Instead it’s more of a paranormal thriller, a race against time to figure out why these deaths are happening and how to put an end to them before any more occur.

Perhaps the most effective aspect of the film is the soundtrack. Jerry Goldsmith’s iconic Latin chanting and dramatic orchestral score is so striking and adds so much to the film’s atmosphere it won him his only Oscar, impressive considering his life’s work included scores for the likes of Poltergeist, LA Confidential, Chinatown, Gremlins, First Blood, Alien, Mulan and Planet Of The Apes.

If you’re expecting spinning heads and an evil kid going on a rampage, that’s not what The Omen is all about. If you’re looking for a creepy movie with an underlying sense of unease rather than a balls-to-the-wall demonfest, then The Omen is a mini masterpiece.

Four and a half out of five

How to see it
The Omen is available on both DVD and Blu-ray. It’s also available in a number of different box sets. In the UK, the best sets are The Omen Trilogy on Blu-ray (featuring the first three films), and the Omen Pentology on DVD (all four films plus the 2006 remake). In the US the Omen Collection DVD set is similar to the UK Pentology, while the Blu-ray collection has the first three films and the remake, while conveniently ignoring the fourth film.

Bits and pieces
• Many films are based on books, and The Omen is no different. Well, sort of. You see, David Seltzer wrote the novel at the same time as the screenplay, and the book was released only two weeks before the film. The book’s a good ‘un but it’s not available on the Kindle store.

• Spare a thought for Jerry Goldsmith, who composed the memorable Omen soundtrack. He’d been nominated for numerous Oscars before and lost out each time, so when he was nominated for The Omen he decided not to attend the ceremony because he didn’t want to go through the heartache of losing again. What happened next should be obvious: he ended up winning and wasn’t there to collect his award. It was the only Oscar he would ever win, despite his brilliant scores for the likes of Poltergeist and First Blood.
Damien: Omen II (1978)

Director: Don Taylor

Starring: William Holden, Jonathan Scott-Taylor, Lance Henriksen

“For such are false apostles. Deceitful workers whom lie and transform themselves to look like real apostles of Christ.” (Corinthians 11:13)

When you’ve already revealed in the original film that the main character is the Antichrist, how do you deliver a similar revelation in the sequel? Simple – make it so the nasty little bugger in question has grown up and still doesn’t know it yet.

That’s the premise in Damien: Omen II, which is set seven years after the events of its predecessor. Now 13 years old and living with his uncle and aunt, Damien has been protected from the past and as such doesn’t know what happened to his mother and father in the events of the first movie. He’s just a normal, cheery boy who happens to be part of the wealthy Thorn family.

It’s only when he goes to military camp with his cousin and starts hurting a bully by simply staring at him that Damien begins to notice something out of the ordinary is happening. Others – including his sergeant (the awesome Lance Henriksen) and the vice-president of Thorn Industries – seem to know who Damien really is, and are keen to help him discover his true identity.

Meanwhile, as in the original film, anyone who suspects Damien’s secret and tries to put a stop to it inevitably meets their fate in all manner of horrific ways. Trucks, trains, elevators… they’re all involved in some of the gruesome deaths this time around.

Indeed, Omen II feels a bit like an attempt to recreate much of what made the original film so memorable. There are the nasty deaths, the doom-and-gloom “he will destroy us all” people who are shunned by Damien’s uncle, the eventual realisation that it’s true and the subsequent attempt to stop him – all of which feel very similar to events in The Omen. There’s even an evil animal in there, though it’s a raven this time instead of the first film’s dogs.

While it doesn’t quite have the same storytelling flair, chilling moments and impressive cast as the original film (Henriksen aside), Omen II is still a decent little film. The acting’s solid enough for the most part – although the young chap playing Damien is irritating for the first 20 minutes – the story moves along at a fair pace and there’s a reasonably satisfying conclusion to the whole thing.

It just feels at times a bit like The Omen Lite, an attempt to replicate the impact of the original but one that cuts out vital ingredients in doing so. There’s no equivalent of the first movie’s mental Mrs Baylock to keep viewers on their toes, there’s no big shock as to the lead character’s secret identity because we already went through that in the previous film,
and – ironically – since the ‘smears on photos predicting deaths’ idea from its predecessor is no longer present here, there aren’t actually any omens to speak of either.

That said, it’s still an interesting follow-up to the original film, and one that provides a decent midway point between The Omen and the significantly different third film, The Final Conflict. Just don’t go rushing out to see it if you haven’t seen the original first.

Three out of five

How to see it
The situation with Damien: Omen II is similar to that of the first film, except it isn’t available to buy as a standalone Blu-ray. In the UK, it’s found in the Omen Trilogy Blu-ray set and the Omen Pentology DVD set. In the US you can get it on the Omen Collection DVD set or the Blu-ray Omen Collection.

Bits and pieces
• Lance Henriksen is most well-known for being in numerous Alien movies but it’s amazing just how many iconic film franchises he’s starred in. Omen II, The Terminator, House III, Scream 3, the Pumpkinhead series... he’s a cult film legend, basically.

• William Holden, who plays Damien’s uncle, was originally the first choice to play his dad in the first film but he turned it down and the role went to Gregory Peck instead. When The Omen became a huge success Holden realised what a knob he’d been and went back with his tail between his legs to get a part in the sequel.
The Final Conflict (1981)

Director: Graham Baker

Starring: Sam Neill, Rossano Brazzi, Lisa Harrow, Don Gordon

“Your pain on the cross was but a splinter compared to the agony of my father. Cast out of heaven, the fallen angel, banished, reviled. I will drive deeper the thorns into your rancid carcass, you profaner of vices. Cursed Nazarene. Satan, I will avenge thy torment, by destroying the Christ forever.”

It can’t be denied that Damien Thorn has done well for himself given the circumstances. After being born as the Antichrist, surviving his adopted father’s attempt to murder him in The Omen and later doing the same with his uncle in Damien: Omen II, by the start of The Final Conflict the now-adult Damien (Sam Neill) has become CEO of Thorn Industries and is the American Ambassador for Great Britain. Not bad for the son of the devil.

As you may expect by the film’s title however, shit’s about to go down for Damien, and said faecal matter comes in the form of the Nazarene, the second coming of Christ. Damien figures out that Christ is due to be reborn on 24 March 1982, so he orders one of his disciples to kill all the baby boys born on that date.

Meanwhile, a group of monks have managed to get hold of the seven holy daggers that are to be used to kill the Antichrist, and so they set about trying to kill Damien. In short, things could be going better for D-Tho.

Sam Neill is undoubtedly the star of the show. This is the first Omen movie in which Damien starts fully aware of who he is and what he’s capable of, and at times Neill’s performance is unsettling to say the least. It also helps that his character is a complete prick (it goes with the territory, after all) – he seduces a journalist trying to get close to him, while at the same time turning her young son into one of his disciples and getting him to do errands for him.

That aside however, The Final Conflict is disappointing. It’s a hell of a slow burner – it’ll be half an hour before anything of note starts to happen – and the scenes clearly intended to be the chilling high points are so sloppily handled that they’re fairly ineffective. A car slamming into a baby’s pram should be a shocking moment, but the film is almost impressive in how dull it manages to make what should be a memorable scene.

Rather than the gripping climax to the Omen series it should be, The Final Conflict is a bit of a damp squib. It’s not a terrible film by any means but it’s so devoid of anything truly gripping or memorable (Neill’s performance aside) that it’s ultimately an underwhelming end to an otherwise great trilogy.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it
You guessed it: finding *The Final Conflict* is the same process as finding *Damien: Omen II*. It’s only available on standalone DVD, not Blu-ray. In the UK, it’s found in the Omen Trilogy Blu-ray set and the Omen Pentology DVD set. In the US you can get it on the Omen Collection DVD set or the Blu-ray Omen Collection.

**Bits and pieces**

• Apparently Jack Nicholson was originally considered for the part of Damien, until it was decided he should be younger. What I wouldn’t give to see Jack Nicholson screams like a maniac as Sam Neill does near the end of the film.

• Stuntman Vic Armstrong was considered something of a professional faller and was no stranger to falling at heights of up to 70 feet for films. One scene in *The Final Conflict*, though, required him to fall 100 feet off a bridge – backwards. He says it was easily the scariest stunt he’s ever done.
Piranha 3D (2010)

**Director:** Alexandre Aja

**Starring:** Steven McQueen, Elisabeth Shue, Kelly Brook, Jessica Szohr, Jerry O’Connell

“Get the fuck out of the water!”

Nudity and gore are the key components of many horror films aimed primarily at a teenage audience, but in my eyes the latter always has to be the more prevalent. It seems that Alexandre Aja, the director of the excellent *Switchblade Romance* and the not-so-good *Hills Have Eyes* remake, forgets this during the first half of *Piranha 3D* and instead thinks he’s shooting a porno.

Even the plot sounds like top-shelf titillation. After befriending and falling for English model Danni (Brook), Jake (Steven McQueen, grandson of Steve) dodges his babysitting duties to go with her on a boat, where she’s part of a ‘Wild Wild Girls’ filmshoot. His young, attractive friend Kelly (Szohr) gets caught up in the invite, so Jake has to juggle enjoying the rampant nudity going on around him while assuring Kelly he’s not interested in all this hooey.

This plot basically gives *Piranha 3D* a good half-hour to cram in as much nudity as possible. A lengthy Spring Break scene shows lots of girls flashing their tits for no reason, there’s a wet t-shirt competition with loads of mammary close-ups and the ‘Wild Wild Girls’ shoot culminates in what feels like a solid five-minutes of Kelly Brook and a genuine porn star swimming underwater fanny-naked and lezzing around while classical music plays. Now, I’m all for a bit of bappage but *Piranha 3D* took it so far that I found myself in the unlikely situation of thinking “okay, put them away now love. I paid to see killer fish, not smell it”.

Eventually Aja comes to his senses, remembers he’s making a horror film and unleashes the titular piranha. This is when *Piranha 3D* gets properly impressive, especially when the killer fish reach the aforementioned Spring Break scene and carnage unfolds in a *Saving Private Ryan*-style frenzy. *Piranha 3D* has easily some of the most superb (and disturbing) gore effects I’ve seen in a long time, with leg stumps dragging on floors, heads getting squashed by motorboats, faces being ripped off and other such delights. It soon becomes clear that this is a movie obsessed with excess – after satisfying its teenage audience (and boring its older one) with absurd levels of nudity, it then goes on to present similarly ridiculous levels of bloodshed.

During this preposterousness there are a few funny cameos dotted around. Richard Dreyfuss appears in the first scene of the film, reprising his role from *Jaws*, while Christopher Lloyd and Eli Roth also make fleeting appearances. Don’t let the movie’s advertising – which proudly proclaims that it ‘stars’ both Dreyfuss and Lloyd – fool you however, as combined both actors probably contribute to a total of about three minutes’ screen time.
Originally shot on 3D (this review was based on the Blu-ray’s 2D version), watching *Piranha 3D* in 2D can be an off-putting experience because of the countless times things are flung right into the screen, no doubt in an attempt to startle 3D viewers. Milkshake cups, piranha fish, breasts and even a severed penis all threaten to knock your popcorn off your lap, and while this would have no doubt looked impressive in 3D as it was intended, in 2D the effect is hokey, ineffective and simply has you saying “ah, that was supposed to be a 3D bit”.

If you’re male and plan on watching *Piranha 3D* with someone of the fairer sex, be sure they’re not the type to judge your character on the movies you watch because the first 30 minutes will have them convinced you’re a pervert who’s talked them into watching a porno instead. Once it loses its half-hour teenage erection and gets the obsession with boobs and beavers out of its system though, the other 50 minutes provide a fantastic creature feature with loads of gore, heaps of laughs and a fun conclusion.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

*Piranha 3D* is available on both Blu-ray and DVD. The DVD comes with both the 2D and 3D versions and comes with two pairs of red/blue 3D glasses. The Blu-ray features three versions of the film – 2D, 3D with red/blue glasses and Blu-ray 3D for 3D TVs.

**Bits and pieces**

• If you fancy seeing more of Kelly Brook trying to act – and if you have no shame – then why not try out the 2004 romantic comedy *School For Seduction*? In it, Brook plays an Italian temptress who gets a job at a school in Newcastle and teaches a group of Geordies about the art of romance.

• This isn’t the first film titled *Piranha*. There were two other films back in the day that were actually directed by some then-unknowns who became respected directors. The first *Piranha* (1972) was directed by Joe Dante, who went on to direct Gremlins. Meanwhile, *Piranha 2* (1981) was helmed by a young upstart called James Cameron.
Planet Of The Apes (1968)

Director: Franklin J Schaffner

Starring: Charlton Heston, Roddy McDowall, Linda Harrison, Kim Hunter, Maurice Evans

“Get your stinking paws off me, you damned dirty ape!”

The last time I saw a film with an ape riding a horse the police came to my house, confiscated it and fined me £1000. I wasn’t willing to take the same chance again so I did plenty of research beforehand to ensure Planet Of The Apes was above board.

Planet of the Apes is one of those movies that most people know a lot about but many haven’t seen. Many know the twist ending, partly due to the numerous spoofs of it that have emerged over the past years with the likes of The Simpsons and Kevin Smith taking their own crack at it. Yet not many people who haven’t watched it are aware that there’s actually a lot more to this film than Charlton Heston being kidnapped by apes, escaping and then realising where he actually is. It’s also rife with social commentary and other such shenanigans, you see.

An astronaut crew led by Commander George Taylor (Heston) crash-lands on a mysterious planet 2000 years in the future. For the first fifteen minutes things are fairly dull, reminiscent of the sci-fi B-movies of the ‘50s where a crew of two or three men crash-land on a planet then look at all the strange things on said planet. Thankfully Taylor’s crewmembers are disposed of quickly (leaving us in no doubt as to who the star is here) and the film begins to swing in a wildly different direction when he’s kidnapped by apes on horses.

Taylor is thrown into a cage alongside some fellow humans, and soon realises that such is the bitter irony of this new world, the humans can’t speak and the apes can, meaning their roles are reversed somewhat. The apes see the humans are mere pets, mindless animals incapable of communication. Conveniently, Taylor’s voicebox was damaged while he was being kidnapped so he can’t speak when he’s initially captured.

I would say that to give more away would be spoiling it but let’s face it, we all have a rough idea where this is going. We know he’s eventually going to speak and that all hell’s going to break loose. We know he’s going to be seen as some freak of nature and he’s going to end up splitting the apes into those who believe he’s a special case that needs to be treated with dignity and those who don’t. And if you don’t, well, you do now.

One frustrating annoyance in the film is the character of Nova, played by Linda Harrison. As a love interest she’s pretty weak, mainly due to the fact that she’s mute and doesn’t really seem to understand what Taylor is saying. Indeed, it almost feels wrong to me whenever he tries to instil some sort of romance in her, because as she’s essentially a beast in this world she doesn’t really know what she’s doing. It’s pretty close to animal porn in my opinion (and, as noted above, I would know).
One cliché we do expect with mute characters in films, however, is that in a dramatic scene near the end (usually when the hero’s getting the shit kicked out of him) they’ll suddenly talk, or at least make some kind of “ugh” sound. This isn’t the case here. You keep waiting for it, but once the credits hit you think “well what was the point of her?”. Unsurprisingly, this was corrected in the sequel.

Heston gives a performance that’s as needlessly dramatic as you’d expect from a ‘60s sci-fi film, regardless of its otherwise high budget. In the scenes where he can speak, every line’s chewed and spat out through gritted teeth in order to make him seem like a determined hero who takes no shit. Her annoying lack of chat aside, Linda Harrison also does a decent job at times. And despite the makeup, the ape actors are still convincing, in particular Maurice Evans as Dr Zaius and Roddy McDowall as Cornelius.

If you still haven’t seen it Planet Of The Apes is highly recommended, as long as you don’t mind overdramatic sci-fi. The make-up effects on the apes have stood the test of time, looking as impressive 45 years on as they did back when they were created. It’s therefore still somewhat believable (within reason), as opposed to merely a historic landmark in film history that our generation can look back at and giggle at how cheap it all looked. If you’re after a good science fiction film with moral undertones and spectacular cinematography for its time, then Planet Of The Apes is the one for you. Besides, it’s got monkeys on fucking horses.

Four and a half out of five

How to see it
Being a sci-fi classic that spawned numerous sequels it should come as no surprise that Planet Of The Apes is available in numerous forms, the most obvious being standalone DVD and Blu-ray. Blu-ray and DVD collections featuring the first five movies (missing out the Tim Burton remake and the recent Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes) are easy to find in both the UK and America, but the best of the bunch is easily the Evolution Collection, which is a UK Blu-ray exclusive. This features all seven movies.

Bits and pieces
• The classic “damn dirty ape” line has been aped (ho ho) numerous times in other movies, including other Planet Of The Apes films. The Tim Burton remake has a scene in which an ape shouts “take your stinking paws off me, you damn dirty human”, while Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes has a worker at the monkey ‘sanctuary’ reprise the line as a tribute to the original film.

• The make-up was incredible, but there's a good reason for it: a fuckton of money was spent on it. The make-up team consisted of 80 artists, and the total cost of makeup was over £345,000, which was an enormous sum in the '60s and was around 17% of the film's total £2 million budget.
**Pumpkinhead (1988)**

**Director:** Stan Winston

**Starring:** Lance Henriksen, Jeff East, Matthew Hurley

*MAGGIE* - “Don’t worry, God will help us.” *(loads shotgun)*

*TRACY* - “Then what’s that for?”

*MAGGIE* - “In case God doesn’t show up.”

Ed Harley (Lance Henriksen) is a bit of a hillbilly. He lives in a house with his young son, a nice young chap who don’t mean nobody no harm or nuthin’. The next day a few bikers come to the village and run Ed’s son over, killing him. Ed is clearly pissed off (and rightfully so), so he seeks out a crazy old woman who teaches him how to make a demon based on his rage that will seek vengeance. And so Pumpkinhead is born. Cue mindless biker killing.

I had always wanted to see *Pumpkinhead* ever since I found out there was an action figure of the monster. After all, it had to be memorable if someone took the time to license a toy version. As it turns out, *Pumpkinhead* is at best an average film which, much like the monster itself, lacks a set of balls.

Pumpkinhead is a huge beast (even the action figure dwarves the other monsters in the series), but all it seems to do to the people it kills is put its hand over their head and pick them up a bit. That’s extremely fucking weak. The plot’s also a bit simple. Boy dies, man goes mad, enlists the help of a demon which then kills people. Meh.

There are two ‘jump’ scares in the film. One just isn’t scary (Henriksen’s dead son sits up in the car next to him) and the other’s poorly timed (a dog wanders slowly into the frame to a dramatic musical sting). And as impressive as Pumpkinhead looks, it doesn’t seem that it could do any harm at any point, especially given that its main party trick is the old ‘picking people up by the head’ routine. Give me a pointy stick and I could probably take the bastard.

Yes, there are a couple of deaths, but they all happen off-screen so we don’t really know what happens. The only one that’s sort of shown is when Pumpkinhead uses the tried and tested ‘pick up by the head’, climbs a tree then drops the person he’s carrying. Naturally however, we don’t see the impact. To be fair, there’s one clever moment where an unfortunate chap is impaled on a rifle, but that’s about it.

Incidentally, the story for *Pumpkinhead* was based on a poem by Ed Justin. Here’s how it goes:

Keep away from Pumpkinhead,
Unless you tire of living
His enemies are mostly dead,
He’s mean and unforgiving
Bolted doors and windows barred,
Guard dogs prowling in the yard,
Won’t protect you in your bed,
Nothing will, from Pumpkinhead

Oddly, it doesn’t mention anything about Lance Henriksen’s son getting his head caved in.

Sorry to say, *Pumpkinhead* isn’t too great. If you’re a special effects junkie it’s certainly worth a watch to see the great Pumpkinhead puppetry (with Stan Winston directing it’s no surprise the monster looks great), but I wouldn’t make it top of the priority list if I were you.

*Two out of five*

**How to see it**

*Pumpkinhead* is only available on DVD in the UK and US. Although it spawned three sequels there’s sadly no box set comprising all the films.

**Bits and pieces**

- If you’re a fan of comic books and bitter disappointment check out *Pumpkinhead: The Rites Of Exorcism*, a Dark Horse mini-series that was supposed to run for four issues but only ran for two, meaning the story ended up unfinished just as it looked like a winged Pumpkinhead was about to turn up.

- Less disappointing is the aforementioned Pumpkinhead action figure released by McFarlane Toys as part of its Movie Maniacs line in 1999. Since it was never a popular character it can still be found online but expect to pay around £20 for a decent quality one. If you’re a serious collector there’s also a massive 20” Pumpkinhead figure from SOTA Toys which is almost impossible to find at a reasonable price (the cheapest I’ve seen is $120).
**Rare Exports: A Christmas Tale (2010)**

**Director:** Jalmari Helander

**Starring:** Onni Tommila, Jorma Tommila, Tommi Korpela, Rauno Juvonen

> “The real Santa was totally different. The Coca-Cola Santa was just a hoax.”

In some Scandinavian cultures, Santa Claus wasn’t always the cheery chappy he’s known as these days. Back in the bad old days, he was known as Joulupukki (the Yule Goat) and according to some versions of the legend he would torture and kill any little children who were naughty. Why give you this rather grim history lesson? Because this evil Scandinavian Santa is the subject of *Rare Exports*, a Finnish horror film with a dark sense of humour.

The film starts a month before Christmas, with a group of excavators about to create a huge hole in a Finnish mountain in order to find some top-secret cargo frozen in its depths. Unbeknown to the excavators, young Pietari and his friend are spying on them to see what’s going on. Realising the workers are about to use dynamite, Pietari and chum leg it and return home, escaping through the hole they cut in the fence to reach the off-limits excavation site.

Fast-forward to the day before Christmas and Pietari’s dad discovers that all their reindeer have been slaughtered, losing them thousands of pounds. Noticing the hole in the fence, Pietari’s dad thinks the excavators have done it so he goes to the dig site to confront them but instead finds an old man frozen. After Pietari’s dad takes the human ice lolly back to his workshop the old man thaws out, comes back to life and starts going mad, attacking everyone. Could this be the evil Santa, back to life and ready to kill any bad children he finds? Pietari certainly thinks so, but all is not as it seems...

*Rare Exports* is pretty. The scenery is impressive, and the scenes in which snow is constantly falling are hypnotic at times. This is one well-shot film. It gets even better during the final half-hour, where the true Santa is revealed and the surprisingly decent CGI kicks in.

Despite this high quality CGI though, the finale is the film’s main letdown. After building up to a potential encounter with a huge, dormant beast, the way in which it’s dealt with is too convenient and seems like it was done that way to avoid more difficult CGI work. As a result the big moment the whole film seems like it’s building up to never really happens. Add to that a silly final scene and you’ve got a generally disappointing conclusion.

That aside, *Rare Exports* is a decent little film. While it never really gets as tense or scary as it threatens to, it still tells a fun and slightly silly story that makes it worth a watch over the festive period.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**
A straightforward one, this. *Rare Exports* is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US. Ah, it’s always nice when it’s uncomplicated like that.

**Bits and pieces**

• Rare Exports came about after positive internet reaction to *Rare Exports Inc*, a seven-minute short film Jalmari Helander created. It was basically the same story, about a trio of hunters going into the woods to catch Santa Claus. This was followed by *The Official Rare Exports Inc Safety Instructions*, another short film featuring a spoof instructional video showing how to handle Santa once he’s been caught. Both short films were so popular they led to the creation of the full-length *Rare Exports* film. Both can be found as extras on the DVD and Blu-ray.

• I should warn you that *Rare Exports* seems to be something of a love-it-or-hate-it film. While I know some who think it’s great, I have also had others demand an apology from me for recommending them this “pile of old arse”. So don’t go blind-buying it for £20 or anything like that, just in case.
Ringu (1998)

Director: Hideo Nakata

Starring: Matsushima Nanako, Sanada Hiroyuki, Nakatani Miki, Sato Himoti

“Frolic in brine, goblins be thine.”

Rumour has it that a dodgy video tape exists, one that’s even more dangerous to have in your video library than Jesus Christ: Serial Rapist (which sadly does exist). If you watch this mythical tape, you’ll be treated to five minutes of weird and creepy imagery – people crawling backwards out of the sea, moving mirrors, worms and the like – then a shot of a well in a field, ending with static.

When the tape ends the viewer gets a phone call immediately afterwards, telling them that they’ll die in seven days. Sure enough, a week later they die in a gruesome, mysterious manner. I know what you’re thinking – Blockbuster’s late return policy is getting a bit overdramatic – but the tape has actually been cursed. At least, that’s what ‘they’ say. And you know what they’re like. If you’re curious and you want to see it for yourself, it can be found easily enough on YouTube (just search for ‘Sadako curse tape’) – but of course, you may die a week later. It’s your choice.

Cynical journalist Asakawa doesn’t believe in the curse, so after her niece and her friends all die with horrific expressions on their faces a week after watching the tape she decides to investigate to find out what’s really going on.

Ringu was the film that mainly kick-started western audiences’ obsession with Asian horror, an obsession that continued with the likes of The Eye, Dark Water, The Grudge, Pulse and Shutter. It, and the other films listed, proved that big budgets and fancy CGI weren’t necessary to create a terrifying experience (though of course, it and all the above films were later remade in the US, complete with big budgets and fancy CGI). While constant jump scenes and slasher stalking sequences saturated western horror throughout the 90s, Ringu was a quiet, atmospheric, slow-burning Yin to the west’s noisy balls-to-the-wall Yang.

This is a mood that endures throughout the film, its key scenes messing with the viewer’s mind rather than their reflexes. When Asakawa gets hold of her niece’s photos and sees that her face and those of all her friends have been blurred – a scene reminiscent of The Omen – this simple effect, which must have taken all of twenty seconds in Photoshop, is truly chilling. It’s far more effective than any ‘boo’ scare (don’t worry though, ‘boo’ scare fans, there’s one in there near the start).

Looking back, it’s likely that some of the love gushed towards Ringu at the time was mainly because horror in the west at that point was at a low point and Ringu was the first big example of how it could be done in Asia. Looking at it more than a decade later, with Asian horror very much a common part of many filmgoers’ diet, it’s easier to see Ringu for what it is – a film that, while undeniably atmospheric and chilling, could probably be told as a 45-
minute TV drama. While the slow pace manages to stretch it out to 90 minutes, it may be a bit too plodding for some especially given the ‘scare them every five minutes’ strategy used by other Asian horrors like *The Grudge* and *The Eye*.

Still, perhaps that’s a little unfair, since that was never the sort of film *Ringu* was trying to be. As long as you don’t mind a slow burner this still tells a gripping story and the famous twist ending – assuming nobody’s spoiled it for you, and I’m deliberately not mentioning it for a reason – will knock you on your arse. Just bear in mind that, like an ageing heavyweight boxer, it takes a while to wind up for its knockout punch.

Four out of five

How to see it
To date, *Ringu* has never been released on Blu-ray in the west. In the UK you can either buy it as a standalone disc from Tartan Video (under its westernised title *Ring*) or as part of a box set, also from Tartan, which includes *Ring 2* and *Ring 0*. In the States it’s a slightly better situation – the standalone DVD comes courtesy of Dreamworks (it was released to tie in with the US remake), while the box set, entitled *Ringu: Anthology Of Terror*, includes *Ringu*, *Ringu 2*, *Ringu 0* and black sheep sequel *Rasen* (see the next review).

Bits and pieces
• *Ringu* is based on the book of the same name by Koji Suzuki. The book is very different to the film and sees victims developing a smallpox virus which kills them after seven days, rather than the more dramatic way they’re killed off in the movie. The famous 'TV scene' at the end of the film doesn't feature at all in the book. Fancy reading it? You're in luck: you can buy it from the Kindle store.

• Sadako has become something of a mainstream horror icon in Japan much in the same way Freddy and Jason are famous in the west. Most recently she’s 'starred' in 3D ghost film *Sadako 3D* and its sequel *Sadako 2 3D*.

• The famous shot of Sadako’s eye near the end of the film wasn’t performed by the actress playing her. Instead, the eye belonged to one of the male crew members.
Rasen (1998)

Director: Joji Iida

Starring: Koichi Sato, Miki Nakatani, Hinao Saeki, Hiroyuki Sanada

Also known as: The Spiral

“You can’t even slit your own wrist. How are you supposed to perform an autopsy on me?”

(Warning: there are spoilers for Ringu below!)

While both the Japanese and American versions of The Ring and its sequels were big successes among horror fans, Rasen was the black sheep in the series. The sequel to Ringu, both films were oddly released on the same day because the story was already well-known in Japan (imagine if they’d released the first two Harry Potter films on the same day: this was the Japanese equivalent). Ringu became a huge worldwide success while Rasen died on its arse and was forgotten about, to the extent that a different sequel to Ringu (Ringu 2) was released a year later.

Rasen takes place immediately after the events of Ringu. Pathologist Dr Ando has been assigned the task of performing an autopsy on his friend Ryuji to determine the cause of his death. After finding a message on a piece of paper secreted in Ryuji’s stomach he soon uncovers the mystery of Sadako Yamamura’s curse tape which kills people seven days after they view it. However, after watching the tape, it soon becomes clear to Ando that Sadako has other plans for him. Joining up with Takano Mai (Ryuji’s student girlfriend in the first film), Ando tries to solve the tape’s riddle.

Despite the critical blasting Rasen has received, I didn’t think it was too bad. It certainly goes in a different direction from Ringu, with Sadako getting plenty of screen time and even getting to have occasional chats with some of the characters. She even has a sex scene, so that should give you some idea as to how much her role has changed. Anyone expecting another chilling Japanese horror film will be bitterly disappointed with Rasen, and I think this is why it’s received the unfair treatment it has.

Granted, it’s no Citizen Kane, but it’s a nice little film that gives an alternative take on the events after Ringu (and, indeed, one that stays more faithful to the original novel). It was good to see Sanada returning as Ryuji, even if it was only for the occasional flashback or dream sequence. I suppose you can only do so much with a corpse.

One thing potentially troublesome about the film however is that the classic ending to Ringu is practically forgotten about. The conclusion is made at one point that the tape transmits a strange smallpox virus to the watcher, which takes seven days to kill you. This is emphasised by a number of characters throughout the film coughing and getting rashes on the backs of their necks. It’s somewhat strange that this never happened in the first film, though it’s probably a good thing because we’d have missed out on that classic TV-crawling scene.
Also odd is the ending. Perhaps it loses something in the translation, but I was left confused and ultimately having to come to my own conclusions as to its meaning. Although it is sometimes not a bad thing for a film to have an ambiguous ending (*Donnie Darko* springs to mind), this is not the case for all films and in *Rasen* it just felt bewildering.

Still, despite this it’s probably one to see if you’re a fan of the *Ring* cycle, if only to see what *Ringu 2* could have been had this received more praise when it was released.

*Two out of five*

**How to see it**
In the UK you can find *Rasen* on DVD under its other name, *The Spiral*. In the US it retains its *Rasen* title and can't be bought alone – you either need to get it as part of the four-film *Ringu: Anthology Of Terror* DVD set, or on a double-bill disc along with *Ringu 0*.

**Bits and pieces**
- As with *Ringu*, *Rasen* is also based on a book by Koji Suzuki. Whereas *Ringu* was very different from its book version, *Rasen* is similar to its original source. It too is on the Kindle store – search for *Spiral*.

- If you really want to get stuck into the *Ringu* universe, you might want to trawl the internet for two Japanese TV series that aired in 1999. The first was the 12-episode show *Ringu: Saishusho* (The Final Chapter), while the 13-episode *Rasen* followed shortly afterwards.
The Ring Virus (1999)

Director: Dong-Bin Kim

Starring: Eun-Kyung Shin, Doonah Bae

“The time has passed! We are winner the game!”

You’re probably aware of The Ring, the American remake of Japanese blockbuster Ringu, but before that Korea had a crack at it with The Ring Virus, a film that is interesting if a little disappointing.

The plot is similar to that of the original version of the film. A female journalist decides to investigate the deaths of four teenagers who mysteriously died at the same time. It emerges that they all watched a strange video tape exactly seven days before their deaths. Intrigued, the journalist watches the tape (as does her ex-lover and her daughter) and thus begins a race against time to solve the tape’s hidden secret.

Obviously being a Korean film the character names have changed. Female Journalist Reiko Asakawa/Rachel Keller is now Sun-ju, her ex-husband Ryuji/Noah is now Choi Yeol and the creepy Sadako/Samara has been renamed Eun-suh. Replace the annoying too-smart-for-his-own-good son with an annoying too-smart-for-her-own-good daughter and your Korean remake is complete.

The whole film gives off a strangely calm vibe throughout, with characters acting as if dying at the end of the seven-day deadline isn’t actually that bad. Whereas Ringu/The Ring had corpses with faces displaying either sheer terror or grotesquely warped features, the dead folk in The Ring Virus seem to just sit there uninterested.

The characters are also ultimately unlikeable. In Ringu, Ryuji (the main male character) may have doubted the existence of the tape but took little persuasion to be convinced and became a hero. In The Ring, Noah also didn’t believe in the tape until he saw himself smudged in a security camera, at which point he decided to help his estranged partner. Instead, The Ring Virus has Choi Yeol, the most annoying prick in the history of film. I don’t care if he is the hero male, I will never like this man.

The Korean version of the cursed tape looks like shit (though the accompanying sound effects are excellent, much better than the “bees” sound from the Ringu tape and the sound of Samara singing in the US remake tape). It also stays faithful to the book by providing a message at the end that says “if you watch this tape, seven days later you will die. To prevent the curse you must...” with the end taped over by a TV programme. While that happened in the book, the Japanese and US film versions left it out.

The ending of the Japanese film is also intact, and is actually handled slightly better until the bit where Eun-suh shows the ‘eye’. You know that trick where someone turns their eyelid inside out? That’s all they’ve really done here. It really isn’t horrific in any way and instead
of being a great ending to an interesting film it ends up as a weak ending to a boring film that’s badly acted to boot.

Basically, the whole film lacks emotion. Even as the final famous death takes place, the victim does not look scared for his life. Instead, he seems somewhat bored with the whole thing and is probably imagining what his next TV or movie role will be (and judging by the quality of his performance throughout, he’d be lucky to star in a tampon commercial).

In all, *The Ring Virus* is an adequate and by-the-books attempt at adapting the *Ringu* storyline, but when you have a book and two films out there that do the same job infinitely better, this really isn’t worth wasting your time with. It’s worth a watch if you’re interested in seeing a different take on the source material, but of the three versions of *The Ring* this is by far the weakest.

Two out of five

How to see it

*The Ring Virus* was released on DVD in the UK and America by publisher Tai Seng. Stupidly, they put a big spoiler image on the front cover.

Bits and pieces

• When challenged that their film was very similar to the *Ringu* film, the makers of *The Ring Virus* declared their innocence and said it was based on the book instead. This argument didn’t really hold water, as the 'TV' ending to *The Ring Virus* also featured in the *Ringu* film, but not the book. Caught!

• One rather odd aspect of the book's story is kept intact in *The Ring Virus*, in that Eun-suh is a hermaphrodite. Apparently, she's anatomically female, except for a pair of balls beneath her lady bits (no knob, though).
**Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes (2011)**

*Director: Rupert Wyatt*

*Starring: James Franco, Andy Serkis, Freida Pinto, John Lithgow, Brian Cox, Tom Felton*

“Ape alone... weak. Apes together... strong.”

It’s always dangerous messing around with the classics. When you take a film as well-loved as Planet Of The Apes and try to give it a modern twist, the results can piss off a lot of people – just ask Tim Burton. As a prequel rather than a remake Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes takes a different approach, albeit one that could still have upset a lot of fans if it had been handled badly. Thankfully, they needn’t have worried – it’s a fantastic movie that in no way sullies the name of its predecessor.

The film follows Will (James Franco), a scientist working on a drug that he believes will cure Alzheimer’s disease by repairing the brain. After trying it on apes, Will finds that the drug does more than simply repair, it improves, making its recipient smarter than they were before they even had the disease.

When one of his test monkeys dies, leaving behind a baby, Will takes the baby home and discovers that its mother’s enhanced brain has passed down genetically to its son. Calling the ape Caesar, Will decides to keep him as a pet and monitor his progress over the years as he gets smarter, learning sign language and essentially acting like a young human boy.

To say any more would spoil a movie that you really need to discover for yourself, but that so much of the film is spent following Caesar's development over the years is a telling sign that Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes is more emotional and intelligent than your typical summer blockbuster. You care for this ape, you’re upset for him when things are looking bad and, while the other Planet Of The Apes movies mean we all know the ‘rise’ of the apes will ultimately result in the end of the human race as the dominant species, such is the power of this film that you almost sympathise with our so-called enemy.

If ever there was a man who could reignite the debate over actors winning awards for motion capture roles, that man is Andy Serkis. Having previously played such memorable motion capture characters as King Kong and Gollum, Caesar is his most impressive performance yet. Within ten minutes of Will taking Caesar home you forget you’re watching a CGI ape and start to completely believe it – an achievement very few CGI characters manage to accomplish. The scene later on where he reacts to the realisation that Will is leaving him for a while is heartbreaking, and his interactions with other simians later in the film are completely believable.

It’s one scene in particular however that steals the show. I refuse to give it away (you’ll know it because it happens right after the obligatory “damn dirty ape” reference), but it sent a chill up my spine I haven’t felt for years. There was such a sharp intake of breath
among the cinema audience I watched the film with that if there had been more people in attendance we might have been able to suck the screen off the wall.

I strongly recommend you see *Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes*. You don’t have to have seen the original film to ‘get’ it, it works perfectly well as a standalone movie. Of everything else I’ve seen this year, this one blows it away in terms of sheer emotion alone. And now, as is a fitting way to conclude a review of an incredible film, I end with a poor joke – you’d be (monkey) nuts to miss it. Sorry.

*Four and a half out of five*

**How to see it**
*Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes* can be found on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and the States. If you want to find it in a box set then you’ll need to get the UK Planet Of The Apes Evolution Collection (on DVD and Blu-ray), which features all seven movies. There’s no equivalent in the US.

**Bits and pieces**
- You’d think Andy Serkis would be sick of playing CGI creatures by now. As well as doing the motion capture for Caesar in *Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes*, he's best known as the motion capture actor for Gollum / Smeagol in the *Lord Of The Rings* films. Before that he was involved in more monkey business (chortle) when he 'played' *King Kong*, once again using motion capture trickery. It’s probably just as well there’s no Oscar for Best Motion Capture performance or he’d sweep up every year like a janitor on amphetamines.

- There’s a clever reference to the original film which takes place over a couple of scenes. During one scene a TV news programme in the background refers to Icarus, the first manned craft headed to Mars. Later, another report says the ship and astronauts have disappeared. This is supposed to be Charlton Heston’s ship from the first film, entering the timewarp from which it will emerge thousands of years in the future after the apes have taken over.
Rubber (2010)

Director: Quentin Dupieux

Starring: Stephen Spinella, Jack Plotnick, Wings Hauser, Robert The Tyre

“My God, the kid was right. The killer was the tyre.”

Slasher movies often have bizarre killers. Child’s Play has a possessed doll, A Nightmare On Elm Street features a dream demon and Sleepaway Camp’s killer... well, that would be ruining it. Rubber blows them all away with easily one of the oddest villains in movie history – a rubber tyre.

For no reason whatsoever (something reinforced in no uncertain terms during the film’s opening monologue), the film mostly follows a car tyre happily rolling down a desert road, killing anything it meets. At first it simply crushes things – a scorpion, for example – but soon it encounters a plastic bottle and realises that not everything can be destroyed by rolling over it. This is when it shows its hidden talent, the ability to make things explode using the power of its mind.

As it continues its trail of destruction the tyre starts offing humans as well, using its psychokinetic powers to make their heads explode in a shower of brains and gore. Why? It’s never explained.

As fun as the concept of Rubber is, it would be very difficult to make something like this last for 80 minutes on its own. That’s why there’s a bizarre sub-plot involving a crowd of people all standing in the desert, using binoculars to watch the same movie we’re watching. They discuss things that don’t make sense (in one scene the tyre rolls into a swimming pool and sinks to the bottom, at which point the group start arguing about the physics and whether it should have floated), they talk about what they think will happen next, and they generally add a bit of much-needed personality to a film where the mute main character is limited to rolling and making things explode.

It’s an unusual decision but a fun one too. It shows that the film realises the story of the rolling tyre makes very little sense, which is why this crowd of people are just as bemused as us, and when the joke starts to run thin they’re disposed of in a silly manner, allowing us to focus on the tyre again as it starts to outrun the police.

Rubber is a truly unique film, and one you really need to see to appreciate. There are times when the pacing is too slow and the ending leaves a lot to be desired, but get a few people who know nothing about it together and give it a watch and you’ll all be laughing at how ridiculous the whole thing is. Rubber is proof that any actor, no matter how lifeless, can play a lead roll. Sorry (again).

Four out of five
How to see it
It's a standalone DVD or Blu-ray situation for Rubber in the UK and US. It can be found pretty cheap on either format.

Bits and pieces
• The first 30 minutes or so of Rubber can be painfully long if you're not a fan of lengthy shots and scenes where not a lot happens. If you fall into this category and find yourself getting bored while watching it, stick with it (or watch it sped up if you want to be a complete philistine) because much like the titular tyre it does eventually pick up speed.

• According to the credits, the tyre's name is Robert, and was played by 'Goodyear'. So now you know.
Scream (1996)

Director: Wes Craven

Starring: Neve Campbell, Jamie Kennedy, Matthew Lillard, Rose McGowan, Drew Barrymore, David Arquette, Courteney Cox

“Never say ‘who’s there’. Don’t you watch scary movies? It’s a death wish. You might as well come out to investigate a strange noise or something.”

_Scream_ is to modern horror films what the Beatles were to rock music. Look at it now and it’s easy to forget the impact it’s had on so many of the films we’ve seen since. Nowadays almost every slasher movie has some sort of “clever” post-modern fourth wall-breaking scene where the black guy says he knows he’s going to die first, a hysterical teen screams that their situation’s “like something out of a Jason film” or someone says “we shouldn’t split up, that’s how people die in movies”. _Scream_ did it first, and while it’s been imitated countless times since it’s somewhat telling that _Scream_ still does it better than most, more than a decade and a half since its release.

The film centres around Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), a teenager still trying to come to terms with the murder of her mother a year ago. Her boyfriend is trying to pressure her into having sex, which doesn’t help matters, and if that wasn’t bad enough some or her fellow classmates have started turning up dead. Sidney soon realises she’s the killer’s next target, and that her mother’s murder may in some way have something to do with it. She has to find out who’s committing the murders and stop them before she ends up giving the local gravedigger some extra overtime.

The real genius of _Scream_ lies in the character of Randy (played by the otherwise irritating Jamie Kennedy). A die-hard slasher film fan, Randy knows all the “rules” to surviving a horror film – if you have sex you die, if you say “I’ll be right back” you won’t be – and spends a good part of the film discussing with other characters who the killer may be if they were going by horror convention. While primarily paying tribute to the countless slashers that paved the way for _Scream_, these horror “rules” are also in a way mocking the genre for its lack of originality.

It’s perhaps no surprise then that _Scream_ sets about breaking a lot of these rules. The girl who has sex doesn’t always die, the villain doesn’t necessarily come back to life for one final showdown and the identity of who’s doing the killings can’t really be worked out due to the numerous red herrings and double-bluffs the film chucks at the viewer throughout. While making fun of the predictability of the slasher genre, in the same breath _Scream_ provides something truly unpredictable.

There’s no way of guessing who’s killing everyone or what their motive is, and with the death of top star Drew Barrymore right at the start of the film (a nod to Hitchcock’s _Psycho_, which also killed off its most famous face Janet Leigh early on to throw audiences) it’s difficult to know for a fact who’s going to survive either.
Barrymore’s death isn’t the only knowing wink to the horror classics. John Carpenter’s *Halloween* constantly plays on a TV in one house during the film’s final half-hour, with many of the goings-on in the house mirroring the action on the telly.

More subtle moments include a brief cameo from director Wes Craven as Fred, the school janitor with a striped sweater that’s oddly familiar. Another short scene sees Sidney getting hassle from a news reporter played by Linda Blair (Regan from *The Exorcist*), complete with huge crucifix earrings. They’re cheeky little moments that, while unnoticed by mainstream audiences, reassure horror fans that *Scream* is really a love letter to their favourite genre.

While it may not necessarily be the case nowadays thanks to its many imitators, at the time of its release *Scream* was a breath of fresh air in a genre suffocating itself with a plastic bag of predictability. It may have lost some of that impact 15 years later but it’s still a great slasher film that should entertain from start to finish.

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**
You can get *Scream* on DVD and Blu-ray, either on its own or as part of a trilogy collection with *Scream 2* and *Scream 3*. US fans looking for the ultimate set should import the Canadian 'Complete Scream Collection', because it’s the only way to get all four films in one boxset.

**Bits and pieces**
- I generally don’t like David Arquette much, mainly because he helped destroy one of the things I used to love, WCW wrestling. When WCW began going downhill it started trying all manner of bizarre stunts to get the fans watching, and by far the most ridiculous of these was the decision to have David Arquette win the prestigious WCW Heavyweight Title. He might as well have smeared faeces on the ringposts.

- There’s a rather nice, moody acoustic cover of Blue Oyster Cult’s Don’t Fear The Reaper (performed by Gus) on the *Scream* soundtrack. This is a sort of in-joke for slasher fans because Laurie and Annie play Don’t Fear The Reaper in their car in a scene in *Halloween*. 
Scream 2 (1997)

Director: Wes Craven

Starring: Neve Cambell, Courteney Cox, Jamie Kennedy, David Arquette, Liev Schrieber, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Jerry O'Connell, Timothy Olyphant

KILLER - “What’s your favourite scary movie?”
RANDY - “Showgirls.”

After slicing apart the horror genre and aiming knowing winks at many of its foibles in Scream, some felt that there wasn’t much opportunity to do the same in Scream 2 since so much had been covered already. By its very nature though Scream 2 provided Wes Craven and writer Kevin Williamson a chance to poke fun at one very important aspect of horror films that went unchallenged in the first film – sequels.

Set two years after the events of the first film, Scream 2 sees Sidney (Neve Campbell) at college with a bunch of new vict... um, friends. Sidney’s been getting hounded by the press because of a new movie called Stab, a ‘true story’ based on the events of the first film. As if that wasn’t bad enough, more students have been getting murdered too. Could there be a new killer following in the footsteps of the previous ones? Of course there is, it’s Scream 2.

While the clever digs at horror convention and the ‘nudge nudge wink wink’ lines aren’t quite as frequent, fresh or obvious as they were in the original film, Scream 2 still has a bit of fun with the genre. The most entertaining dialogue-based scene in the first film – in which Randy teaches his fellow students the rules of horror movies – gets its own follow-up in which, during class, Randy and his peers discuss which movie sequels are better than the originals. Clearly they’ve never seen Return Of The Killer Tomatoes.

As in the first film, there are also a bunch of cameos stashed away for eagle-eyed viewers. Some are obvious – the Drew Barrymore role of ‘famous person who dies before the opening titles’ is this time taken by Jada Pinkett-Smith and Omar Epps – whereas others are more subtle. Keep an eye out for Heather Graham, Tori Spelling, Luke Wilson and the film’s screenwriter Kevin Williamson all making brief appearances.

The ‘film within a film’ subplot also offers the filmmakers the chance to put the boot into another tired horror cliché, this time one propagated by the media – the copycat killer phenomenon. Wes Craven has covered press attitudes toward horror and its influence before in Wes Craven’s New Nightmare, and he’s no easier on the subject here. It’s claimed by the various new reporters throughout the film that the killer is doing this because they’ve been inspired by the Stab movie, a theory that (while understandable in this case, given the Ghostface mask and the like) is ultimately shot down when their true identity and motives are revealed. Take that, journalists!

Speaking of the ending, it’s underwhelming. While the film – much like the first Scream – is essentially a whodunit, with the audience trying to guess which of the supporting characters
is the murderer, the revelation here is nowhere near as shocking as it was in the original movie with the same twist getting churned out again. What’s more, the killers’ identity turns out to be disappointingly predictable, as it turns out the guy who had the evil grin and looked like a killer all the way through the film ends up revealing he was the man behind the mask all along. In fact, he was so blatantly a killer that by the end of the film most audiences will have already passed him off as a red herring because he was too obvious.

_Scream_ 2 is fun. It’s by no means as fresh, mould-breaking or engaging as the original film and many of the kills are about as tame as an abused pet (throwing someone off a roof off-screen? Come on), but when a film openly admits in its dialogue that sequels are never better that should come as little surprise. Check out the first film instead and if you enjoyed that then give this a go, it’ll still keep you amused throughout its two-hour duration.

**Three out of five**

**How to see it**
See _Scream_, because it's the same deal. DVD and Blu-ray, either on its own or as part of a trilogy collection with _Scream_ and _Scream 3_. And no, the Canadian 'Complete Scream Collection' boxset hasn't lost its crown as the best of the bunch in the fifteen minutes since I last mentioned it.

**Bits and pieces**
- An annoying horror sequel 'rule' that _Scream_ 2 thankfully chose not to follow is the sneaky technique of getting an easy 5-10 minutes of runtime by showing a lengthy flashback of the previous film’s ending. _Friday The 13th Part 2_ and _Halloween II_ are both guilty of this, but the worst offender is _Puppet Master vs Demonic Toys_, of which roughly 40% is footage from previous _Puppet Master_ and _Demonic Toys_ movies.

- Most horror film villans have elaborate costumes or special effects make-up applied to make them look truly unique and gruesome. The original _Scream_ 'Ghostface' costume wasn’t even custom-built – it was a store-bought costume called Father Death. This means some people had been unwittingly trick-or-treating as the killer from _Scream_ before _Scream_ even existed.
Scream 3 (2000)

Director: Wes Craven

Starring: Neve Campbell, Courteney Cox, David Arquette, Parker Posey, Patrick Warburton, Lance Henriksen

“Is this simply another sequel? If it is, same rules apply. But if you find yourself dealing with an unexpected backstory and a preponderance of exposition, then the sequel rules do not apply. Because you are not dealing with a sequel, you are dealing with the concluding chapter of a trilogy.”

“All I know about movie trilogies is that in the third one, all bets are off”. In a roundabout way, this single line of dialogue attempts to account for Scream 3’s plot but instead sums up everything that’s wrong with it. Gone are the clever references to horror films from the first Scream and the cheeky nods at sequel clichés in its follow-up, replaced by confusing plot points, tired fourth wall references and an ending that’s about as satisfying as using beehives as football boots, with the simple explanation each time that “hey, it’s the third one, we can do any old shite and it’s fair game”.

Taking place a couple of years after the events of Scream 2, Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) is now living out in the middle of nowhere. Along with her change of address comes a complete change of identity, her name and job altered in an attempt to avoid any more crazed killers who might want to call her up and give her hassle. Ironically, her new job is telephone counselling, in which she gives advice to women suffering from sensitive problems. Guess what happens next?

The whole “film within a film” thing from Scream 2 is copied again in Scream 3 but it’s taken to the nth degree by setting the majority of the action on the set of the next Stab movie. All the ‘disposable’ characters are actors playing the real-life Sidney, Gail Weathers and the like, making for a silly sub-plot in which the killer is seemingly killing the actors in the same order the real characters died – a sub-plot that mysteriously disappears halfway through the film when the writers seemingly realise that most of the real characters aren’t actually dead yet.

It’s just a mess, really. The instances of humour are clumsy (look, it’s Jay and Silent Bob taking a tour of the film set! It’s real actors playing fake characters in a fake real film set of a fake movie based on fake real events! And look! It’s Carrie Fisher playing a woman who looks just like Carrie Fisher!), the secondary characters have as much personality as a stapler, the blatant shoehorning of Randy into the film – because he was the only interesting character in the previous two instalments – is unsatisfying and the whole thing in general is just underwhelming.

By far the most disappointing aspect, however, is the ending. The whole point of the Scream movies is trying to figure out the identity of the killer and their motive, but when it’s revealed to be one of the least interesting characters in the film and they then go on a
boring rant about something or other that nobody really gives a shit about, then Scream 3’s status as a crushingly inadequate end to an otherwise great trilogy is cemented.

My advice is to watch Scream and Scream 2 back-to-back then pretend the third one didn’t exist. As for Scream 4? Well, read on...

One and a half out of five

How to see it
You guessed it: DVD and Blu-ray, either on its own or as part of a trilogy collection with Scream and Scream 2. And if you haven’t had it drilled into your head by now that the best option is the Canadian ‘Complete Scream Collection’ set then I feel genuinely bad for you.

Bits and pieces
• If you watch Scream 3 on DVD or Blu-ray and aren’t fully satisfied that you’ve had your fill of shite, head to the extras where you’ll find a music video by Creed. That should do the trick.

• Have a look at the back of the VHS cover of Kate Hudson movie Desert Blue. What’s that? You don’t have Desert Blue on VHS? That’s odd, I thought everyone did. Anyway, on the back it says Kate Hudson starred in Scream 3. That’s because she was originally signed up to star in the film (during which time the video cover was produced), but was replaced just as principal photography started.
Scream 4 (2011)

Director: Wes Craven

Starring: Neve Campbell, Emma Roberts, Courteney Cox, David Arquette, Hayden Panettiere, Rory Culkin

“All there are now are remakes. It’s the only horror studios green-light. I mean, there are still rules, but the rules have changed. The unexpected is the new cliche.”

A lot has changed in horror cinema since the release of Scream 3 back in 2000. Remakes and ‘torture porn’ films like Saw and Hostel are now the big box-office hits, and new film monsters like Jigsaw and Samara from The Ring are the ones that get today’s teens pulling their covers over their eyes in fear at night.

What’s more, the clever post-modern ideas made popular by Scream – that the characters in the movie reference the rules and situations in other horror movies – are now freely imitated in many of today’s films, with almost every slasher these days containing one wisecracker going on about how you’re never supposed to say “I’ll be right back”, how the black guy always dies first and so on and so forth.

Scream 4, then, had an uphill battle to be relevant in this new all-knowing, self-referential, nudge-nudge-wink-wink horror landscape, one the Scream series itself essentially created in the first place. It’s impressive, then, that writer Kevin Williamson and director Wes Craven have taken these decade-old characters and ideas and brought them into the 2010s so convincingly, giving them more modern sensibilities but still keeping the elements of what made the original trilogy so popular in the first place.

And so the usual “what’s your favourite scary movie” spiel continues, with newer films added to the killer’s trivia repertoire and more graphic threats made over the phone. The killer is made harder to identify now because it’s revealed early on (when someone calls their friend to trick them) that there’s a voice-changing phone app, one that potentially anybody could be using. The film geeks this time are a couple of horror nerds who screen annual movie marathons of the eight Stab films.

And yes, those classic ‘rules’ once again return, but this time they’re updated for this new generation with new rules about remakes, which Scream 4 seems to focus most of its criticism on – I wonder if the remake of Craven’s A Nightmare On Elm Street had something to do with it. Indeed, the whole third act of the movie, without giving too much away, is very much influenced by the deluge of horror films we’ve seen recently, with one humorous moment in particular seeing a distressed Hayden Panettiere answer one of the killer’s phone questions by screaming out a seemingly endless stream of films that have been remade in the past decade, drawing stark attention to the sheer number of them.

While three cast members from the original trilogy – Neve Campbell, David Arquette and Courteney Cox – all return for Scream 4, it’s perhaps surprisingly Cox who steals the show.
Campbell is her usual drab, miserably-voiced self, while Arquette’s character seems to have shaken off his permanent limp from the previous film and is now the sheriff, essentially making him a bit of a dick.

Cox, however, is hilarious as Gale Weathers, suffering writer’s block as she tries to get back in the spotlight while jealously watching on as Sidney (Campbell) has success with a book of her own and her husband Dewey (Arquette) flirts with his new female deputy. Almost all of the best lines belong to Gale, to the extent that it’s almost exciting to see her turn up in another scene because you know something else is coming. I never thought I’d be praising Courteney Cox as the star in a school play, let alone a film, but fair play to her.

Of course, it wouldn’t be a *Scream* film without a whodunit plot, and while the red herrings are perhaps a bit too obvious and clearly overacting to make you think it’s them, the real killer’s identity is a nice twist that actually makes sense and results in a great performance from the cast member in question.

It’s worth pointing out that the final act of *Scream 4* does assume some prior knowledge of at least the first film in the series at times, so while it’s not essential I’d recommend you at least go into this one having seen at least the original *Scream* (if not necessarily all three) because you’ll get more out of *Scream 4*’s references, particularly those near the end of the film.

While *Scream 4* could never be the revelation and genre-changer the original film was, it still does a great job updating the series to address the changes in horror cinema since the trilogy ended. It’s probably the best of the sequels, and well worth a watch if you enjoyed the first *Scream*.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

In the UK and US, *Scream 4* is only available individually on DVD and Blu-ray. It doesn’t feature in any of the trilogy boxsets (for obvious reasons). If only there was some other North American country with a ‘Complete Scream Collection’ set featuring all four films... oh, that’s right, there’s one in Canada that I’ve mentioned four fucking times now. Get in amongst it.

**Bits and pieces**

- You know, there aren’t many horror series that have all their main cast appear in four films. Major props and such must go to Campbell, Arquette and Cox for sticking around when so many others have said “fuck it, I’m done with that one” in the past (even though cynical types may argue it’s not as if the three of them have anything better to do these days).

- In a way, *Scream 4* is sort of the black sheep of the series. Sidney’s boyfriend Cotton (Liev Schreiber) doesn’t feature at all, Jamie Kennedy’s character is nowhere to be seen (thank Christ), and while the song ‘Red Right Hand’ by Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds featured somewhere in the first three films, it’s absent from *Scream 4*. 
Scream Bloody Murder (2000)

Director: Ralph Portillo

Starring: Jessica Morris, Peter Guillemette, Crystalle Ford

Also known as: Bloody Murder (USA)

“Misery comes in lots of forms... it’s all miserable.”

Once in your life you experience a film that is so bad you have to tell the world. This is what happened to me when I saw Scream Bloody Murder for the first time.

Everything about this film made me laugh in a way that I’m sure the director didn’t intend. As a result of this, when I was a younger chap at the sprightly age of 18 I decided to analyse every single second of the film in a 28,500-word essay. Look, it was a lonely time in my life (actually, I still have the whole thing saved on my PC somewhere... maybe I'll tidy it up and re-release it at some point).

The plot is a white hot rollercoaster of emotion. A group of camp counsellors turn up early at Camp Placid Pines to prepare for the children arriving. While there they learn about the legend of Trevor Moorhouse. Soon the counsellors start dying one by one. Surely Trevor can’t be behind the killings? Actually, he isn’t, so it’s up to Julie (one of the counsellors) to find out who’s actually doing it.

From the get-go, Scream Bloody Murder does a great job of highlighting the sheer ineptitude of the director, screenwriter, crew, special effects department (Trevor’s chainsaw isn’t even on so instead of cutting down leaves and branches, he gingerly bats them out of the way) and actors (the idiot playing Trevor walks like a drunk and the first victim runs in an S-shape through an open field while falling over three times).

Once we meet the counsellors, we realise quickly that they fit into the stereotypes we all know and hate (virgin girl who we know immediately will live, her boyfriend who we know will turn out to be an arsehole and die, probably cheating on her in the process, and so on). Ironically, the film can’t even do this properly, because the stereotypically zany teenage boy who happens to be a horror fan and knows all the rules of horror films (a not-so-subtle nod to Scream and every film made after it) has a worryingly poor grasp of horror trivia.

And then there’s Trevor. Without a doubt, Trevor Moorhouse is the single worst slasher movie bad guy of all time. He is an amalgamation of rip-offs from every corner of the celluloid world – his hockey mask is from Friday The 13th, his boiler suit is from Halloween, his chainsaw is from The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, his walk is from Drunken Master. And the name sounds enough like Jason Voorhees to make it clear it’s a rip-off, but different enough to be the least terrifying name in motion picture history. Trevor is not and never will be a scary name (Trevor Jordache from Brookside aside, of course).
The acting is consistently wooden throughout. The lead female walks like she’s got a cactus lodged in her drawers, her friendship with the token black female best friend is so unconvincing their chemistry unwittingly verges on lesbianism, and the boyfriend character is so obviously going to be unfaithful at some point in the movie that he might as well have been played by Ashley Cole.

The story isn’t any better. It’s filled with gaping plot holes that you could drive two tanks through side-by-side without fear of scraping the edges, and once the “killer” is revealed you can’t help but laugh because chances are you thought it was him in the first place but dismissed it because it was too obvious. Finally, the ending is meant to provide a great shock but instead is more likely to have you giggling through the typo-riddled credits.

I’ve shown Scream Bloody Murder to many of my friends over the years and they’ve all more or less agreed that it’s an almighty piece of shit, albeit an entertaining one. If you’re judging it on its technical merits you might as well buy a bag of frozen peas, sit it on a table and watch that for an hour and a half. If you’re judging it on entertainment value though, get a group of mates together and take the piss out of it and you’ll have a great time. If Ed Wood had made this film, he’d have been mortified.

One out of five (as a serious horror film)
Four out of five (as an unintentional comedy)

How to see it
You can get Scream Bloody Murder on DVD in the UK, or in the US under its American title Bloody Murder. Given the choice, I’d go for the US version if you can because it has a hilariously serious commentary in which director Ralph Portillo chats away as if he’s made a masterpiece.

Bits and pieces
• Amazingly, lead ‘actress’ Jessica Morris managed to stay in the business and found a modicum of fame starring in daytime soap opera One Life To Live. She was also in Dangerous Worry Dolls, which is reviewed elsewhere in this book.

• Even more amazingly, Scream Bloody Murder managed to spawn a sequel. Bloody Murder 2: Closing Camp (known as Halloween Camp in the UK) was more of the same, albeit with actual gore this time.
The Self-Destruction Of The Ultimate Warrior (2005)

Director: Kevin Dunn

Starring: Warrior, Vince McMahon, Bobby Heenan, Ted DiBiase, Hulk Hogan, Jerry Lawler, Jim Ross, Bruce Pritchard, Chris Jericho

“History tells us, Hogan, that a man’s legacy is built from the premise that within his life, the moments lived, once lived, become a piece of his history. Somehow, you have conveniently, even eloquently misplaced pieces of your history. In the one time, epical battle between us, Hogan, you were the quintessential influence of what was good, great, and heroic. But different than you may remember, and albeit you may have beaten myths, legends, giants, and other great men, you never, never beat a warrior. And certainly not the ultimate one.”

Even though I’m a self-confessed wrestling fan, I haven’t stuck anything else wrestling-related on That Was A Bit Mental and I’m not sure I will again, at least not unless I come across another DVD as ridiculous as The Self-Destruction Of The Ultimate Warrior. While a lot of professional wrestling could be considered “a bit mental”, that’s more or less par for the course and talking about it on here regularly would be like talking about camels on That Was A Bit Humpy – it sort of goes without saying.

If one camel was to suddenly start talking about another camel who pissed it off 20 years ago though, and went out of its way to assassinate its character in every way imaginable, then we’d have something worth talking about, and this DVD does exactly that. Hence this review. Except it’s about a wrestler, not a camel. Look, just forget I ever mentioned camels, that was a terrible idea.

Anyone my age (30) who was into wrestling when they were younger doesn’t need an explanation of who the Ultimate Warrior was. He was easily the most intense and energetic of the WWF (now WWE) superstars, and though we never really understood what he was going on about or even enjoyed his matches much – even as a kid when everything was exciting – his crazy facepaint, sheer power and endless energy made him a fan favourite. Behind the scenes though, it turns out he was a few turnbuckles short of a squared circle.

Although WWE programming still consists of ridiculous storylines, unbelievable scenarios and expertly choreographed fights between two men who would finish each other in 20 seconds if it were real life, it’s still very rare that its staff openly and officially talk on camera about “kayfabe” – the behind-the-scenes stuff that shatters the illusion – how they come up with the storylines, how wrestlers work with others in the ring, how results are determined and the like. The Self-Destruction Of The Ultimate Warrior, then, isn’t just an interesting look at one of wrestling’s most interesting characters, it’s a wealth of information on how the WWF (as it was then) was run behind-the-scenes.

The likes of Bobby Heenan, Ted DiBiase, Jim Ross, Bruce Pritchard (one-time WWF booker), Hulk Hogan and even the boss man Vince McMahon himself give candid interviews throughout this documentary, discussing all the backstage and in-ring issues they had with Warrior with a surprising degree of detail, even if you get the feeling the story’s a little one-
sided. While events over the past decade or so make it clear that the man’s not playing with a full deck (he legally changed his name from James Hellwig to simply Warrior and currently sells mental artwork on his website), the fact that Warrior wasn’t given the opportunity to tell his own side of the story should still be considered whilst watching.

And so the gang of interviewees embark on a step-by-step verbal smackdown of a WWF icon, from the fact that he was dangerous and unsafe in the ring (“he was the least professional person I’ve ever worked with”, sulks Triple H), to the way his pumping entrance music and exciting entrance were there to make up for his terrible wrestling, to his greed backstage (Hogan, McMahon and Sergeant Slaughter tell how he tried to blackmail McMahon for more money an hour before a Summerslam main event, after which he was promptly fired for the first time), right down to his ridiculous and rambling interviews (“I hear he does talks at schools these days”, quips Jim Ross, “I’d like to go along to one of them one day and see if I can understand what he’s saying this time”). Tellingly, the only people who have good things to say about him are Chris Jericho and Christian, the only two on the doc who would have been young WWF fans when the Warrior was big.

It’s hard to tell why any real Ultimate Warrior fan would buy a DVD that rips the shite out of their hero so continuously, but those who do will be treated to a wealth of archive footage of the Warrior, from his early days in the UWF as Blade Runner Rock, to his WWF debut as the Dingo Warrior, right through to his bizarre WCW comeback. This is a particularly interesting section because it involves his rematch with Hulk Hogan, a match that WCW boss Eric Bischoff states matter-of-factly in this documentary is widely considered the worst of all time. Part of what makes this section so impressive is that, for once in his career, Hulk Hogan admits to a mistake and confesses that his inability to light some flash paper led to the match’s ending being balled up.

This whole documentary is a treat to watch, even though it’s not really clear who it’s aimed at. If you were a huge Ultimate Warrior fan back in the day you’re likely to be pissed off at all these WWE names past and present essentially lining up to stick the boot into your childhood hero without giving him the chance to stand up for himself. If you didn’t like him, chances are you wouldn’t buy a DVD whose second disc consists solely of his best matches. In a way, the package is almost as confused as the Warrior himself, as it can’t decide whether to praise the man who was a large part of the WWF’s success in the late ’80s and early ’90s or just call him a dick and leave it at that.

Personally, my thoughts are in line with those of Jericho and Christian, who thankfully get the last say in this documentary. As they put it, the guy may have had a bizarre career and he may have made many enemies in the process, but like him or not there was nobody quite like the Ultimate Warrior, and this film – one-sided though it may be – does a great job of explaining why.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

This is a DVD-only affair in both the UK and US. If you're feeling particularly mental and have a Sony PSP you can also find it second hand in UMD format.
Bits and pieces

- WWE wrestler Chris Jericho writes an odd anecdote about the Warrior in his second autobiography, Undisputed. Jericho was a wrestler in WCW at the same time the Warrior was there trying to regain popularity. Jericho was having dinner with other wrestlers when Warrior turned up, crushed some biscuits into a bowl and started deeply inhaling their aroma. When asked why he was sniffing biscuits like a maniac, Warrior replied that by smelling them he could get their flavour and taste without having to eat them. A sensible chap, Warrior.

- Warrior had his own comic book series, which is (for want of a better phrase) a bit mental. A big bit. In one episode he kidnaps Santa Claus and dresses him up in bondage gear.
Sharktopus (2010)

Director: Declan O’Brien

Starring: Eric Roberts, Kerem Bursin, Sara Lane

“There is a way we can stop this thing. Virgin sacrifices. Yes, the Mexican Fish & Game Commission assures me the only way to appease this beast is to offer it a beautiful virgin, preferably 18-25 years old. I repeat: Sharktopus wants our virgins.”

For those who don’t know, the slew of “mutated animal” creature features that have been doing the rounds for the past few years is partly thanks to the folks at SyFy (formerly known as the Sci-Fi Channel), who help fund them in return for exclusive premiere rights. That’s why many of them seem very similar.

Take Sharktopus, for example, and compare it with Dinoshark, (also reviewed in this ebook). Both films feature mutated sharks, both films have atrocious CGI scenes where the shark in question attacks and both films, for some reason, take place in Puerto Vallarta in Mexico. I’d like to think money’s probably exchanged hands between the filmmakers and the Puerto Vallarta tourism board, but considering the films are essentially saying Puerto Vallarta is packed with killer mutant sharks I’m not so sure.

Anyway then, Sharktopus. As you may be able to deduce with your keen mind, it’s about a half-shark half-octopus monster. Rather than hatching from ice like Dinoshark did, the Sharktopus is the result of a dodgy biological experiment to create the ultimate killing machine. Naturally, it breaks free and heads to Mexico—where the women are hot and the budget is cheap—meaning it’s up to the scientists who created it to stop it.

The big boss of the scientists (played by made-for-TV maestro Eric Roberts) wants Sharktopus kept alive because he’ll lose his contract with the military if it dies, so he hires Andy Flynn (Bursin), an ex-Iraq War veteran, and offers him a whole heap of money to catch it without killing it. And if you think he’s not going to change his mind later and instead blow it to smithereens when it gets out of control then I appreciate your optimism but you’re obviously delirious.

Some of the deaths in Sharktopus are actually fairly impressive, especially given the sort of off-camera rubbish we’ve been “treated” to in other movies of its ilk in the past. Expect to see some decapitations, tentacle impalement, and of course the odd chomp or twelve to keep things moving along. There are even times where the Sharktopus leaves the sea, using its tentacles to waddle along the coast in a big up yours to the snarky “well, why don’t you just stay out of the water” argument people often use during shark movies.

The most curious moment for me is the scene with the two ship painters sitting on scaffolding above the water, painting the side of a boat. The Sharktopus attacks them both, but as the second one dies he yells “Nooooo, not like this”. Are you kidding me? Being killed
by a Sharktopus is clearly one of the most awesome ways to go. Imagine your wife at your 
funeral talking to people:

“I’m sorry to hear about Jake, ma’am. You have my deepest condolences.”
“Thank you, that’s very kind of you to say.”
“If you don’t mind me asking, how exactly did Jake leave us? Was it a heart attack? In his 
sleep?”
“No, he was pulled into the sea and eaten whole by a Sharktopus.”
“Well, ma’am, that is fucking epic.”

Of the countless killer animal films currently doing the rounds, Sharktopus is one of the 
better ones... not that that’s saying much. The CGI effects and story are still hokey garbage 
but at least there are some clever death scenes in there, which is more or less what these 
otherwise mindless movies are all about.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it
If you live in the US, Sharktopus can be found on both DVD and Blu-ray. It’s DVD-only in the 
UK, but there is a UK-only box set called Creature Collection which features Sharktopus, 
Dinoshark (reviewed elsewhere in this book), Dinocroc Vs Supergator and Mega Python Vs 
Gatoroid (also reviewed in this book).

Bits and pieces
• If you’re looking for similarly ridiculous SyFy movies (and why wouldn’t you be?) then here 
are a few more of their films that use the classic ‘two things jammed into one’ title method: 
Arachnoquake, Piranhaconda, Independence Daysaster and, of course, Sharknado.

• Alternatively, you may wish to try out some of SyFy’s fairly ridiculous ‘versus’ movies. 
These include Mega Python Vs Gatoroid (reviewed in this book), Chupacabra Vs The Alamo 
and the amazingly titled Pegasus Vs Chimera. Rest assured I’ll be reviewing all of these at a 
later date.
Silent Hill (2006)

Director: Christophe Gans

Starring: Radha Mitchell, Sean Bean, Laurie Holden

“Mother is God in the eyes of a child.”

Most movies based on video games are, to put it bluntly, a pile of shite. *Super Mario Bros*, *Double Dragon*, *Dead Or Alive*... all horrible. It’s probably for this reason that I somehow managed to go five years without checking out the *Silent Hill* film, but having finally watched it I was reasonably happy.

*Silent Hill*’s plot is loosely based on that of the first game in the series. The game started with a chap called Harry Mason going on holiday with his daughter. When a girl steps in front of the car, he swerves to avoid her and crashes. When he comes to, he realises his daughter is missing, leading him to explore the nearby town of Silent Hill to see if he can find her. Cue lots of fucked-up monsters.

The movie, meanwhile, replaces Harry with a female character, Rose. Her adopted daughter has been sleepwalking and talking about a place called Silent Hill, so Rose takes her to Silent Hill to see if it triggers any memories about her past. Then, as in the game, they crash on the outskirts of the town and the daughter goes missing. It’s a small difference but an important one, as it makes it harder to sympathise with Rose when you know she deliberately chose to go to Silent Hill rather than ending up there by accident.

*Silent Hill* is a beautiful movie. Obviously when I say that I’m not referring to the horrible, mutated monsters that sometimes look like wriggling human-sized acid-spitting condoms, I mean the way it’s shot. The town of Silent Hill almost feels like a character itself, such is the detail with which everything’s been designed. The moody, empty streets look like they haven’t been updated since the 1950s and the constant fall of ash from the skies gives everything a surreal, otherworldly feeling.

Combine this with Akira Yamaoka’s stunning music (the vast majority of the movie’s score consists of music from the games) and you’ve got a movie that’s a treat for the eyes and ears when there aren’t freaky monster things shuffling about.

For a film based on such a grim series of games there are only a couple of visually shocking moments in the film, the most notable being someone having their skin ripped off and flung against the wall of a church. A normal occurrence on a Thursday night in Liverpool, sure, but something rarely seen in the world of cinema.

*Silent Hill* is enjoyable until the final 30 minutes, when everything starts to go a bit mental (well, moreso than usual). The plot starts getting needlessly complex and confusing, and it all gets rather silly. This of course is nothing new for those familiar with the *Silent Hill* games, but at least there the plot took a back seat to the whole ‘shooting things and trying
not to die’ challenge the player faced. Since most movies are very much plot-focused, there’s nothing for the convoluted story to hide behind.

As a video game movie, Silent Hill is one of the better ones out there. It perfectly captures the tone of the games, right down to the bonkers and convoluted plot. As a movie judged on its own merits though, it’s a gorgeous film that unfortunately runs out of steam when its story becomes as messy as the habits of its monsters.

Three out of five

How to see it
Silent Hill is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in the UK and US. America also has a double-bill Blu-ray that features both Silent Hill and The Grudge, while those looking for the ultimate version should get the French Blu-ray, which has English audio but also comes with a further 90 minutes of extras that aren't in the other versions.

Bits and pieces
• If you’re a gamer and want to try the Silent Hill experience, you can do one of two things. Either get the Silent Hill HD Collection on PS3 and Xbox 360 (it contains HD makeovers of the second and third games), or – and this is my preferred option – hunt down the rare Silent Hill: Shattered Memories on Wii, PS2 or PSP. It’s a gorgeous game and a real hidden gem.

• Apparently, there were 100 versions of Rose’s outfit made for the film, each with a slight change in colour. Starting off with summery colours, in each scene the outfit slowly becomes greyer and then turns blood red. It all happens so subtly though that you don’t notice it.
Sleepaway Camp (1983)

Director: Robert Hiltzik

Starring: Felissa Rose, Jonathan Tiersten, Karen Fields

Also known as: Nightmare Vacation (UK VHS)

BILL: “Eat shit and die, Ricky!”
RICKY: “Eat shit and live, Bill.”

My first encounter with Sleepaway Camp was an unassuming purchase at a second-hand DVD shop in a Glasgow market in 2001. I was a member of a horror forum at the time and I vaguely remembered it being a part of someone’s list of horror films that were worth checking out. I had slight recollections that there was a reason it was such essential viewing but for the life of me I couldn’t remember why.

I took it home and there it sat for a few weeks, until eventually I watched it with my brother late one night. We were used to watching cheesy ‘80s camp slashers and for the first 80 minutes of its 84-minute duration Sleepaway Camp was a prime example of this, with its hilariously bad acting and inventive, gruesome deaths. And then the ending came, with an image that will forever be burnt into the minds of my brother and I for the rest of our lives.

The general plot seems fairly run-of-the-mill. After a man and one of his children die in a horrible boat accident, the man’s sister takes in the other, orphaned child and raises them as one of her own. Fast-forward to ten years later and the child, Angela, heads off to summer camp with her cousin Ricky. As you’d expect, shit starts to go down at the camp and people start dropping off in gruesome ways, but who’s behind the killings?

Sleepaway Camp feels like a real labour of love. Despite the sub-standard acting which ranges from wooden (most of the counsellors are as one-dimensional as an X-axis) to ridiculously over-the-top (the actress – at least, I think it’s a woman – playing Angela’s aunt really has to be seen to be believed), it’s clear everyone’s having a ball making this film. Sure, they can’t act, but you won’t care.

Without even taking the ending into account (I’ll get to that later... no spoilers though, of course), Sleepaway Camp is littered with scenes that are surprisingly dark and grisly for a standard slasher film, especially considering most of the victims aren’t the older teen camp counsellors who usually snuff it in this sort of film, but actually the children attending the camp.

You’ll squirm as one of the girls gets hair curlers thrust into an unmentionable area, wince as a young lad is stung to death by bees, cheer as the paedophile chef (yes, really) gets what’s coming to him and gasp as you see a brief glimpse of a group of mutilated eight-year-olds. Yes, it might be cheesy and low-budget, but Sleepaway Camp isn’t fucking around.
And then there’s the ending (which I refuse to even hint at). It’s a true shock because it comes completely out of nowhere, yet still makes sense in the context of the story. The film lulls you into a false sense of superiority as you’re more or less certain to guess the killer within the film’s first 25 minutes. It’s so obvious it’s almost laughable, and you sit patiently waiting for the ‘shock’ reveal when they’re exposed as the perpetrator. But then it throws a curveball at the last minute by revealing that the killer’s identity was never supposed to be the big twist, it was always meant to be something entirely different and far more shocking.

I urge you to track down *Sleepaway Camp*. It’s 80 minutes of fun, cheesy camp slasher gold, topped off with what’s genuinely one of the most memorable endings in cinematic history. You will not get that final image out of your head, I guarantee it.

*Four and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

*Sleepaway Camp* is only available on DVD. You can either buy it on its own or get it as part of a box set along with the second and third films. There's a limited edition version of the box set with a fourth disc containing raw footage from the *unreleased Sleepaway Camp IV: The Survivor* but it's duller than a 5 watt light bulb (it’s just 40 minutes of first day footage of someone running through the woods over and over again) so don't worry about it.

**Bits and pieces**

- The DVD box set, also known as the Sleepaway Camp Survival Kit, gained some controversy in America. As the name suggests, the original box set was designed to look like a medical kit, and as such it had a large red cross on the front. The actual Red Cross complained though, and the box set was recalled. Only those who ordered from the very first batch of box sets (including me) got a red cross version, so it's considered fairly rare.

- It's well worth seeing the second and third films (which I'll review at a later date). Both are much camper (no pun intended) than the first film, and star Pamela “Bruce's sister” Springsteen as Angela.
Return To Sleepaway Camp (2008)

Director: Robert Hiltzik

Starring: Paul DeAngelo, Vincent Pastore, Isaac Hayes, Michael Gibney

RANDY: “Are you really that stupid?”
ALAN: “Not as stupid as you, you big penis!”

Although the cult classic Sleepaway Camp has had a couple of sequels, neither were really considered true successors since none of the original cast and crew were involved. With the first film’s director, writer and key cast members making a comeback for Return To Sleepaway Camp though, it could probably be considered the first ‘canon’ sequel to the original movie.

(Heads up – there are some spoilers for the original Sleepaway Camp below)

Taking place 25 years after Sleepaway Camp, Return is set in Camp Manabe, a new summer camp part-run by Ronnie, the head counselor in the original film’s Camp Arawak. Ronnie (played once again by Paul DeAngelo, who seemingly hasn’t learned any new acting tricks in the past two and a half decades) gets suspicious when kids at the camp start dying in gruesome ways, just like they did back at Camp Arawak.

Ronnie’s certain that Angela is to blame for the killings, even though her cousin Ricky (who is also played by the original actor, now in his mid-30s and more camp than Butlins) assures them that she’s still locked up in an asylum and has been since her rather awkward public display at the end of the first film.

This makes the prime suspect Alan – a big fat simple lad who’s constantly bullied by the other campers. Throughout the film this gets to Alan and he snaps on a regular basis, often screaming at his bullies and sometimes even pointing a knife at them. But is Alan upset enough to actually kill anyone? That’d be telling.

Much like the original, everything in Return To Sleepaway Camp is pleasantly bad. The acting remains as abysmal as ever, the dramatic music blares over scenes of standard dialogue for no reason at all, the script is atrocious (check the example above to see what I mean) and while the inevitable “twist” ending was clearly never going to match the original in terms of shock value, it should still please some fans of the first film.

A slasher movie generally lives and dies (ahem) by the inventiveness of its death scenes, and Return To Sleepaway Camp makes a decent attempt at it. Whether it’s the wince-inducing scene involving a length of wire attached to both the manhood of a poor chap tied to a tree and a truck set to drive off, or the will-they-won’t-they moment where two kids keep looking through a hole in the ground where they can see a sharpened a broom handle lying under their cabin, the kill scenes are fun enough to keep you watching even if they’re not amazingly well-executed (um, ahem again).
*Return To Sleepaway Camp* isn't trying to be the greatest film ever made, it's a fun and sometimes tongue-in-cheek love letter to fans of the first film who continue to keep its legend alive. For this reason I’d recommend watching the original first, and only giving this a shot if you decide you want more of the same.

**Three out of five**

**How to see it**
It's only available on DVD in North America. It was never released in the UK, so if you’re a plucky Brit and want to see it you'll need to import.

**Bits and pieces**
• Although it was filmed five years before he died, this was Isaac Hayes' last film. It's a shame that the man associated with such classic characters as *Shaft* and Chef from *South Park* would end his career this way.

• It's worth sticking around until the end of the credits to see another scene in which (mild spoilers ahead!) Sheriff Jerry meets an unfortunate end when a car falls on top of his head.
Spirited Away (2001)

Director: Hayao Miyazaki

Starring: Voice of Rumi Hiiragi (Japanese version), Daveigh Chase (English version)

CHIHIRO – “How did you know my name was Chihiro?”
HAKU – “I have known you since you were very small.”

Young Chihiro isn’t happy. Her parents have decided that it’s time to up sticks and move house, and she’s upset that she won’t get to see her friends any more. On the way to their new home, Chihiro’s dad takes a wrong turning and the family come across a mysterious tunnel. On the other side they find what appears to be an abandoned theme park.

Smelling something nice, Chihiro’s dad finds a stall filled with delicious food, which he and Chihiro’s mum start wolfing down. Chihiro wanders off and finds a boy called Haku who warns her to leave before it gets dark, but it’s too late – by the time she gets back to her parents, they’ve turned into pigs. Suddenly the once-abandoned theme park becomes a village filled with spirits and otherworldly creatures. It’s up to Chihiro to find out what’s going on and turn her parents back into humans again.

Spirited Away is the twelfth film released by Studio Ghibli, the iconic Japanese animation studio responsible for such delights as My Neighbor Totoro, Princess Mononoke and Howl’s Moving Castle. Studio Ghibli is to Japanese cinema what Disney is to western cinema and Spirited Away is a key example of this, as it’s without a doubt one of the greatest animated movies ever made. Indeed, on the year of its release in the US, it won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature, beating out the likes of Lilo & Stitch and Ice Age.

The imagination and originality on display in Spirited Away is breathtaking, with a huge variety of weird and wonderful creatures and characters throughout. From Yubaba – the bizarre witch with the massive head – to multi-limbed boiler man Kamajii, to the creepy spirit No Face and the hilarious little frog chap who keeps getting himself in the way, every character is a treat to watch.

Then there’s the animation itself, which is tremendous. It’s clear that it was beautifully animated by incredibly talented people. The occasional CGI shots aren’t too intrusive either, making for some wonderful shots – like those as the train crosses the ocean in the final act – that win you over with their beauty.

The only real negative people may draw from Spirited Away is that at 125 mins it’s maybe a little too long for a story that could essentially be told in much less time. Much of the film consists of lengthy sequences showing scenery or lingering on parts of the mysterious world Chihiro finds herself in, so if you’re after something fast-paced this might not be for you.
Otherwise, this is an incredible film that all admirers of not just animation but storytelling as a whole should check out, especially if you’re new to the world of Studio Ghibli and want to see what all the fuss is. This is all the fuss.

Five out of five

How to see it
Criminally, Spirited Away is only available on DVD in the UK and US, with no Blu-ray version released at the time of writing.

Bits and pieces
• I can understand how some will swear by the original language track for live action films (I'm the same – I always insist on watching Japanese or Italian films in their original language, for example). After all, it looks odd seeing an actor's lips and body language look different to the words they're saying. What I don't get, though, is people insisting on watching anime and Japanese movies in their original Japanese language because “they don't want to watch a dubbed version”. Guess what – all voice acting in animation is dubbed. With that in mind, though the Japanese dub of Spirited Away is excellent, the English language dub (with Daveigh Chase as Chihiro) is no less superb.

• There's a five-book manga version of Spirited Away which has been translated into English and is available on Amazon. I'm wary of calling it a 'manga' though because all the panels in the comic are just stills from the film.
Swamp Shark (2011)

Director: Griff Furst

Starring: Kristy Swanson, DB Sweeney, Jeff Chase, Jason Rogel, Sophie Sinise

“This isn’t a normal shark. It swims, it kills, and it’s out there.”

Swamp Shark is actually one of the better examples of the recent slew of low-budget creature features out there, but that’s like saying an elbow is one of the least painful ways to receive a blow to the testicles.

As you’d expect from the title, it’s about a shark. In a swamp. The weekend before the annual Gator Fest at the Atchafalaya Basin (a shindig that, judging by the Gator Fest scenes in the film, attracts around seven people), a dodgy animal smuggling deal goes wrong and a giant shark ends up in the swamp.

A local drunk falls into the water and is eaten alive by the shark but the police blame the McDaniels family, who run their own restaurant complete with a pack of alligators that sit outside. According to the police, one of their gators must have done it, but head of the family Rachel (Kristy “Buffy” Swanson) sees a shark outside and decides to head off to find it and prove it was the real culprit.

As it was a made-for-TV effort, Swamp Shark is very tame for a shark film. There’s one graphic scene in which the shark leaps out of the air and bites a man’s head clean off, but other than that most of the deaths involve the old classic trick of someone being pulled underwater and the water turning red.

Meanwhile, the sex scenes are so desperate not to show any nudity that it actually gets silly – at one point one chap takes a photo of his topless girlfriend (we see her from behind) but when you then see the photo he’s taken, it turns out he only managed to get her head and shoulders in the photo. It makes no sense, but otherwise we’d have gotten to see her tits and the TV peeps would have been unhappy, you see.

The shark effects themselves are a bit of a mixed bag. The first half of the film wisely goes down the Jaws route by barely showing the thing and only giving little glimpses here and there. It’s only when it starts appearing more often and decides to start leaping out of the water – as is the law with any killer animal in a movie these days – that the old dodgy CGI kicks in again.

Swamp Shark is harmless and it isn’t terrible. All the actors seem to be having fun, none of them put in a truly terrible performance, the characters you want to die end up dying, and the ending is silly, over-the-top fun. It’s no Jaws by any stretch of the imagination but if it’s on the telly and there’s nothing else to watch it’ll pass the time.

Two and a half out of five
How to see it
America may well have a larger global profile than Britain, but there's one thing the UK has that the US doesn't, and that's a Blu-ray version of Swamp Shark. Suck it, Uncle Sam! Yes, it may be DVD-only in the US, but the UK has it in both DVD and Blu-ray flavours. Brits can also get it in a triple-bill creature feature DVD box set which also includes Snow Beast and Monsterwolf. And, of course, if you think either of those are going to be Oscar material, you're a maniac.

Bits and pieces
• Brits may not be too familiar with lead actor Wade Boggs but he's kind of a big deal in America... just not as an actor. Boggs was a legendary baseball player, who mainly played with the Boston Red Sox. He appeared in twelve All-Star games in a row and was one of the players in the softball episode of The Simpsons. And now he's the star of Swamp Shark, which naturally eclipses anything else he's managed in his life.

• Director Griff Furst obviously wasn't put off sharks for life after finishing Swamp Shark. He recently also directed Ghost Shark, a SyFy movie. There can't be many directors who've helmed two shark films – not even Spielberg managed that.
Teen Wolf (1985)

Director: Rod Daniel

Starring: Michael J Fox, Susan Ursitti, Jerry Levine

Harold – “Listen son, you’re going to be able to do a lot of things the other guys aren’t.”
Scott – “Oh yeah, like chase cars and bite the mailman?”

Fresh from his success in Back To The Future, Michael J Fox was the talk of Tinseltown. He was quickly snapped up to play the lead role in Teen Wolf, a teen comedy with “bite”. Ho ho ho, I’m quite the wordsmith.

Scott Howard (Fox) is your typical high school loser. He’s shit at basketball, can’t attract the ladies and can’t buy alcohol because the guy at the liquor store is too smart for him and his pals. In short, he’s a dweeb.

Things start to take a turn for the better when Scott all of a sudden realises he can actually play basketball like a young Michael Jordan. His friends are amazed at his newfound abilities and he is too, but he soon gets concerned when he starts growing hair at a ridiculous rate (no, not like that) and finds himself snapping into violent rages all of a sudden.

Eventually Scott’s hair gets out of control and starts to completely cover his face. He locks himself in his bathroom at home, scared at what he’s becoming. His dad comes into the bathroom too and, to Scott’s surprise, his face is similarly fluffy. It turns out Scott – like his dad and the rest of his bloodline – is a werewolf.

Oddly, despite his new appearance his schoolmates don’t really question it like they would if it happened in real life. Instead, everyone thinks this new hirsute Scott is awesome. They love his basketball skills, they think he’s cool as hell and all the ladies want to be with him (even though it’s essentially bestiality). The director of the school play wants him to be the lead (as long as he’s still a werewolf) and he gets invited to all the parties.

Even though it has a bizarre premise, the same old teen movie conventions apply and it soon emerges that Teen Wolf is yet another movie about high school acceptance. When he becomes cool, Scott finally gains the attention of the selfish bimbo all the guys love, at the same time ignoring the wholesome, loveable girl who’s actually in love with him. Meanwhile, all his basketball teammates start to resent him because he hogs the ball and isn’t a team player.

As you’d expect, Scott loves the popularity for a while, but then realises it’s a shallow existence. And, as you’d expect, by the end of the film Scott realises being a cool werewolf isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, tries to play basketball without his werewolf powers and realises who’s really important in his life. It’s all predictable stuff.
Eventually the whole werewolf gimmick becomes pointless because the only benefit it really seems to grant Scott is the ability to play basketball better. He doesn’t attack people, he doesn’t roam the woods, he doesn’t communicate in growls and roars. Essentially he’s just a normal man with a hairy body and impressive dunking skills. Since I’m fairly sure werewolves aren’t known for their ability to play basketball the movie could have just as easily been called Teen Frog or Teen Coat Rack and it would have been the same film with different make-up and special effects.

*Teen Wolf* is a perfectly acceptable high school movie, but if you’re expecting a film showing how a teen struggles to survive high school with a hideous medical affliction you’re going to be disappointed because all it essentially teaches is that if you want everyone to love you, you have to be a werewolf first.

*Three out of five*

**How to see it**
In both the UK and US, *Teen Wolf* is available either as a standalone Blu-ray or in a DVD double-bill along with *Teen Wolf 2*, the sequel starring Jason Bateman.

**Bits and pieces**
- There’s nothing more depressing to me, a massive fan of 80s movies, then looking up *Teen Wolf* on IMDb, Wikipedia or Amazon and getting the 2011 MTV television series as the top result. I have nothing against the new series, but it’s sad to see history taking a back seat to fresh new shit.

- Here’s a brilliant story of sneakiness. By the time *Teen Wolf* arrived in Brazil, *Back To The Future* had already been released and had been a success. To cash in on it, the film was renamed *Garoto du Futuro*, which translates as *Boy From The Future*, even though there’s fuck all time travel in *Teen Wolf*. That’s like taking Adam Sandler shitefest *Jack And Jill* and calling it *The Man Who Sings At Weddings*.
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)

Director: Tobe Hooper

Starring: Marilyn Burns, Gunnar Hansen, Edwin Neal, Jim Siedow, Paul Partain

“I just can’t take no pleasure in killing. There’s just some things you gotta do. Don’t mean you have to like it.”

Though it was never technically a video nasty, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre was refused a certificate for a theatrical release by the BBFC and as such remained banned for an astonishing 25 years in the UK. It actually wasn’t until 1999 that the film was finally given an 18 certificate and got a British cinema run. Quite a result for a film whose director was initially aiming for a PG rating.

This lengthy ban is particularly interesting when you consider that The Texas Chainsaw Massacre is actually fairly tame by today’s standards, at least in terms of graphic content. Indeed, there’s actually very little on-screen violence at all – instead the film relies on the power of suggestion to terrify audiences. In a way its real downfall was that it worked too well.

The film tells the story of Sally, her brother and their three friends who are taking a trip to Texas to stay at Sally’s grandfather’s house out in the countryside. There have been reports that some ne’er-do-wells have been robbing graves, so after a brief stop at the graveyard to check her granddad’s grave is still intact, Sally and chums head on down the road. They pick up a hitch-hiker who turns out to be a bit mental, but it soon turns out that’s just the start of their problems when they happen upon the Sawyer house.

You see, it soon emerges that all the graverobblings have been committed by a weird, possibly in-bred family who live together in a huge country house decorated with their own macabre creations. There are lamps made with human skin, chandeliers made out of bones and armchairs that quite literally have arms on them. That’s what happens when you live too far from an Ikea.

One by one Sally’s friends discover the Sawyer house while out wandering, and one by one they encounter Leatherface, the huge mentally troubled son of the household who’s taken on the “mother” role. Being the “mother” Leatherface is in charge of preparing the meals, and being that the family are a bunch of cannibals, that means capturing his new guests and turning them into that night’s dinner.

This leads to some of the most infamous scenes in ’70s horror, including one in which a young chap is smacked in the head with a mallet, his legs convulsing as the skull fragments enter his brain. Then there’s the notorious ‘meathook scene’ in which a girl is dragged into the kitchen and literally hoisted up and onto a meathook through her bare back, then writhes around screaming while Leatherface cuts her boyfriend’s head off with a chainsaw.
Incredibly, despite the gruesome descriptions there is very little blood spilled in these scenes. You never see the hammer hit the head, you never see the meathook going in the back, you never see the chainsaw actually touching anyone. Using the same principle that *The Human Centipede* would copy 35 years later, the film relies on the audience’s ability to fill in the gaps themselves. Whereas actually seeing a meathook pierce the victim may not have worked out so well because the effect could have been hokey and unrealistic (especially given the film’s shoestring budget), by cutting away just before impact the viewer imagines the worst possible outcome in their head and it becomes far more powerful than it ever could have had it been shown.

Despite its exceptionally low budget (the whole film cost around $83,500 to make) *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is an impressive looking movie at times. It’s clear that director Tobe Hooper (who would go on to direct *Poltergeist*) had a good eye for effective shots at this early stage in his career, and some – such as the van picking up the hitch-hiker and Leatherface’s frustrated tantrum at the end of the movie – are breathtaking.

The cast are believable too. The five teens each have their own distinct personalities and although it’s clear that Sally and her brother are the main characters and given more opportunity for character development, you can ultimately relate to all five. Meanwhile, the Sawyer family are all as mental as a washing machine filled with bacon and this really comes across well in their performances, particularly Gunnar Hansen as the neglected, scared and yet terrifying Leatherface.

*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is a classic in the horror genre. It may not be to everyone’s tastes, and while it’s tame by today’s standards some may still not like the unrelenting nature of the horror (the final 30 minutes in particular are essentially non-stop screaming, mental torture and noise). If you can stomach the insanity though you’ll find yourself stunned at how such a low budget could produce such an effective film. Essential.

*Five out of five*

**How to see it**

If you live in the UK, I strongly recommend getting the ‘Seriously Ultimate Edition’ of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* from Second Sight on either Blu-ray or three-disc DVD. It’s appropriately named. Americans, your best bet is the ‘Ultimate Edition’ (in Blu-ray and two-disc DVD flavours) from Dark Sky Films. Because of messy licensing issues, there’s no box set with every movie in it.

**Bits and pieces**

- Gunnar Hansen, who played Leatherface, returned in 1988 to play ‘the stranger’ in the 1988 sleazefest *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers*. Look out for a review on TWABM in the future. Sadly its sequel, *Student Chainsaw Nurses*, was never completed.

- When you think about it there actually isn’t really a “chainsaw massacre” as such, since only one character is killed with a chainsaw in the entire movie. It really should have just been called *The Weird Texas Family Who Used A Chainsaw Among Other Tools To Hurt People.*
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre had a messy history in the UK and was subject to bans long before the video nasty hysteria began in the 1980s. The theatrical version was banned by the BBFC in 1975, then banned again when a cut version was offered. When it emerged on VHS in 1984 (videos originally didn’t have classifications), it was banned once again. Contrary to popular belief, it actually wasn’t one of the 72 films on the notorious ‘video nasty’ list. It wasn’t until 24 years later, in 1999, that the film was finally released uncut in the UK. Amazing for a film that doesn’t actually show anything.
The Thing (2011)

Director: Matthijs van Heijningen Jr

Starring: Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Joel Edgerton, Ulrich Thomsen, Eric Christian Olsen

“So I’m going to die because I floss?”

Legend has it the 2011 version of The Thing was originally going to be a remake of a remake. John Carpenter’s fantastic 1982 movie was already a newer take on 1951’s The Thing From Another World, and Universal’s original intention was to remake the Carpenter version and give it a CGI update.

It’s said, however, that the film’s producers managed to convince Universal to make a prequel instead, because in their eyes Carpenter’s version was already perfect and remaking it would be like “painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa”. This refreshing moral stance (if the story’s true, mind) led to what we have here, a film that instead focuses on the unknown events that led up to the Carpenter film, one based on the Norwegian research camp that discovers the Thing before it gets to Kurt Russell’s team in the ’82 film.

Kate Lloyd (Winstead) is a graduate palaeontologist who specialises in ice-based excavations. When an Antarctica research site uncovers a huge alien spaceship hidden under the ice, Kate is asked to join the team to help them study it. Oh, and the big alien monster they find trapped in the ice. Guess what happens next.

As in the ’82 film the Thing has the ability to change its shape and imitate any living organism it makes contact with, so once it inevitably escapes from its icy prison the film, like its predecessor, becomes as much about the crew’s lack of trust of each other as it does the monster itself.

There are further nods dotted to the original film throughout, some of which are fairly obvious (the origins of the odd two-headed corpse found by Kurt Russell in the 1982 version are finally explained, and the end credits sequence fits nicely in with the start of Carpenter’s film) while others are more subtle additions that only die-hard devotees of the original would notice.

For example, in one scene during a battle with the Thing, one character swings an axe and it gets stuck in the wall. They’re told to leave it in case it’s infected, so they do. While this scene is fairly throwaway, fans of the 1982 film may remember a scene where some characters find and explore the Norwegian camp, during which an axe can be seen stuck in the wall in the background.

While The Thing does a good job of trying to live up to the Carpenter classic, it does eventually run out of steam and the whole ‘who can you trust’ theme takes a back seat. The film then becomes a standard slasher movie where the monster stalks around trying to kill
people, who every now and then look at each other as if to say “wait a minute, are you a monster? No, probably not”.

And when Mary Elizabeth Winstead’s character eventually does her own metaphorical transformation and essentially becomes Ripley from the Alien films, right down to actually entering the Thing’s spaceship and hiding in its air ducts, the film loses its identity a little. Even its variation on the famous blood test scene – where it’s instead decided that anyone with a filling in their teeth can’t be the Thing because it’s not organic, hence the quote at the top of this review – is, while tense, a little disappointing.

That said, while The Thing 2011 doesn’t quite have the same magic, immaculate timing and atmosphere as the near-perfect The Thing 1982, it’s still much better than the majority of other recent films ‘inspired’ by classics. Fans of the Carpenter classic should give this a go, if only to see its take on what happened before Kurt Russell and chums encountered one of cinema’s greatest monsters.

*Four out of five*

**How to see it**
You can get The Thing on DVD and Blu-ray in the US, so it’s a pretty standard set-up there. It’s the same deal in the UK, but you can also get a two-disc set (on either Blu-ray or DVD) that also includes the 1982 John Carpenter version.

**Bits and pieces**
• Since it’s a prequel, the ultimate way to watch The Thing is in a double-bill (ideally with one of the UK boxsets listed above). Watch the 2011 version first, then watch the 1982 John Carpenter version immediately after it. It works perfectly too, since there’s a sequence during the end credits of the 2011 version that leads directly into the opening sequence of the 1982 version.

• If you watch both films and crave more Thing goodness, there’s also The Thing From Another World, the 1951 movie that served as the original inspiration for the Carpenter film. Want more? Hunt down the 2002 video game, released on PS2, Xbox and PC. Set after the Carpenter film ends, it eventually reveals what happens to Kurt Russell’s character.
Troll 2 (1990)

Director: Claudio Fragasso

Starring: Michael Stephenson, George Hardy, Margo Prey, Robert Ormsby

“Do you see this writing? Do you know what it means? Hospitality! And you can’t piss on hospitality! I won’t allow it!”

A lot of films are considered awful, but Troll 2 is so bad that calling it awful feels like going easy on it. Not content with simply being a bad film, Troll 2 was actually at one point the #1 worst-rated film on the entire IMDb site.

That’s one hell of an achievement, and one that most people who’ve seen the film wouldn’t argue with, but that dubious honour only tells half the story. It doesn’t add, for example, that despite (or indeed because of) its flaws it’s one of the most entertaining films you’ll see.

The plot is up there with Citizen Kane. Young Joshua and his family head to the tiny country town of Nilbog to do a house swap with a family there. All is not as it seems though, as Joshua’s dead grandfather appears in a vision to tell him that the town is actually inhabited by goblins pretending to be humans. What’s more, these goblins want to turn Joshua and his family (as well as a group of teenage lads who’ve also driven to Nilbog) into plants so they can eat them. Because they’re vegetarian goblins, you see.

The truly impressive thing about Troll 2 is the consistency with which it delivers comically bad moments. From the opening scene in which Joshua’s grandpa tells him the story of the goblins, to the moment where Joshua literally pissed on a dinner table to stop his parents from eating tainted goblin food (leading to the classic line at the top of this review), to the sister’s amazingly bad dance routine, to the hilarious goblin costumes, to the blatantly obvious ‘revelation’ when Joshua looks in a car mirror and realises why the town’s called Nilbog, every single scene features at least one thing that’s laughably terrible.

To give Troll 2 a little credit (and only a little, mind) there are some moments that are clearly supposed to be ridiculous. The part where a young lad in a camper van is seduced by a woman wielding an ear of sweetcorn, in which their passionate encounter ends up getting so steamy that the entire van somehow fills up with popcorn, couldn’t possibly have meant to be serious.

Indeed, the more you watch Troll 2 and the more hilariously bad moments you encounter, the more suspicious you get and you start to fear you’ve been the victim of an elaborate practical joke, that the movie that was designed to be deliberately bad and you’ve fallen for it. Thankfully, as proven by the recent (fantastic) documentary Best Worst Movie, it’s clear this wasn’t the case and the cast and crew were actually trying their hardest.
Troll 2 is the perfect film to watch with a group of friends. While most cheesy films suffer from bad acting or a daft plot, Troll 2 is rare in that every single element – the direction, music, acting, special effects, script, plot and editing – is fantastically terrible. It’s the movie equivalent of all the planets lining up as they revolve around the sun – it’s so rare that every single element that could be shit is present and accounted for. As a result, it’s a joy to watch from start to finish, albeit clearly not in the manner originally intended.

Four out of five

How to see it
In the UK, the only way to get Troll 2 is in a double-bill DVD along with the first, unrelated Troll. This double-bill is also available in the US, as well as the recently released 20th Anniversary Nilbog Edition (on Blu-ray and DVD). Sadly there are no extras in this new version, meaning the only reason to bother with it is to have one of the worst films ever in startlingly good quality. Seriously, the Blu-ray picture is surprisingly fantastic.

Bits and pieces
- If you get a chance, watch the brilliant documentary Best Worst Movie. Directed by Michael Stephenson (the now-grown chap who played young Joshua in Troll 2), it’s a fascinating, hilarious and at times depressing look at what the ‘stars’ of the film are up to now and how they react to the cult following it’s developed since.

- There is actually a Troll 3, but don’t get too excited. It’s got nothing to do with either of the first two Troll films, It has none of the previous cast or crew... oh, and there are no trolls in it either (not that there were any in Troll 2, mind you). In fact, it seems it was only given that name to cash in on Troll 2, which is about as clever as bringing out an album and calling it Nickelback. It’s also known as Creepers, The Crawlers and Contamination.
Turkey Shoot (1982)

Director: Brian Trenchard-Smith

Starring: Steve Railsback, Olivia Hussey, Michael Craig

Also known as: Death Camp Thatcher (UK video), Escape 2000

“Freedom is obedience, obedience is work, work is life.”

It is the future: the year 1995, to be precise (though everyone still has early 1980s hairdos). After a nondescript country falls under the control of an evil totalitarian regime, correctional camps start springing up across the country to teach deviants how to live ‘properly’ and do what they’re told. This is the harsh reality facing our protagonists in Turkey Shoot. Oh, and there’s a werewolf in there somewhere too for no reason.

Turkey Shoot is an Australian exploitation film that bombed in both its native country and in the US (where it was known as Escape 2000). It was only when it was released in the UK – as Death Camp Thatcher – that it found success, mainly because its new name combined with its story of oppressed people rising up against their leaders struck a chord with the UK public at the time for obvious reasons.

The film follows a small group of camp prisoners, most notably Paul (Steve Railsback) – a pirate radio presenter who was caught broadcasting anti-dictatorship messages – and Chris (Olivia Hussey), a shy shop owner who was captured when a protestor randomly stumbled into her store and the police thought he was conspiring with her. The head of the camp, Charles Thatcher (see what they did there?), fancies a bit of sport and so he picks five prisoners, including our two new chums, and offers them a deal.

The five are allowed to leave the camp and roam the surrounding forestry, but after three hours Thatcher and four of his associates will start hunting them. If they can survive without being caught until sundown, they will be free forever. If the hunters catch them however, they’ll be killed. It’s basically a cross between First Blood and Battle Royale with a hint of Hunger Games.

To keep things interesting, the five hunters each have their own weaponry and wildly different personalities. One is an upper-class lesbian with a crossbow and a collection of explosive arrows, another roams the forest in a bulldozer alongside his pet werewolf wrestler. Shut up, it’s the future. They can do what they want.

The first half of Turkey Shoot is spent explaining the camp scenario and generally showing how nasty the camp staff are. It goes on a little too long and the film makes it point long before it decides it has. Thankfully, once the group leave the camp and the hunt begins, the pace starts to get a lot faster and the action a lot more ridiculous, especially when the gore starts flowing.
It may take a while but once the blood starts to spill in *Turkey Shoot* it does so in numerous inventive ways. Hands are cut off, bodies are split in two at the waist and in one memorable scene a machine gun somehow manages to make a head and body explode into thousands of pieces.

The cast are generally entertaining for their own reasons. Steve Railsback is an intense lead, the chap playing Thatcher chews so much scenery it’s a wonder he hasn’t gained weight by the end of the film and while legend has it that Olivia Hussey was a tricky actress to work with (she refused to do any nude scenes, which explains why she showers with her jumpsuit on), she plays the innocent shy victim role perfectly.

Meanwhile, the film’s soundtrack is a wonder in itself. The score served up by Brian May (no, not that one) is brilliantly ludicrous, with synths and various bizarre sounds adding an extra layer of weird to the already mental goings-on.

*Turkey Shoot* is schlock but it’s fun schlock. While the hunting scenes in the film’s second half are much more entertaining than the first half’s over-long camp scenes, it’s still compelling viewing throughout and you really do want Paul and Chris to give Thatcher a much-deserved kicking. It’s not a must-have but if you get the opportunity to see it you should.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**

*Turkey Shoot* is only available on DVD. In the UK it’s currently being published by Optimum Releasing (a previous release by Hardgore is now out of print), while in the US you should search for it by its alternative title, *Escape 2000*.

**Bits and pieces**

- This could have been a fairly different film had it not been for some last-minute changes. A major investor backed out only two weeks before production, chopping $700,000 off the $3.2 million budget and leaving the filmmakers with only $2.5 million. The result was the removal of the first fifteen pages of the script, as well as the axing of a spectacular helicopter chase scene.

- *Turkey Shoot* is a good example of ‘Ozploitation’, a wave of low-budget schlocky films that started in Australia in the early 1970s and ended in the late 1980s. Other notable examples include *The Cars That Ate Paris*, *Patrick* and the *Mad Max* films.

Director: Bill Condon

Starring: Kristen Stewart, Robert Pattinson, Taylor Lautner

“No measure of time with you will be long enough. But we’ll start with forever.”

There’s a scene in Breaking Dawn where Jacob, the miserable hormonal werewolf, tells Edward, the miserable hormonal vampire: “I know how this ends, and I’m not stickin’ around to watch”. I wish I had that luxury.

You see, I love my wife, and part of what makes our relationship so strong is our ability to compromise. She puts up with it as I make her watch a slew of shite horror films and I put up with her love of Sailor Moon, SpongeBob Squarepants, The X Factor and Twilight (don’t worry, she likes other stuff too, fortunately). The latter thankfully doesn’t affect me too much – the only time I have to put up with it is when each Twilight film hits the cinema. It’s for this reason I was made to watch Breaking Dawn Part 1.

Much like Jacob, then, I too know how this is going to end – I’ve already had the plot of the book explained to me in unnecessary detail and already I know how Part 2 goes – but unlike Jacob, my relationship means I won’t be able to avoid it. And if it’s going to be anything like Part 1, I’d better bring the sleeping pills.

Before I continue, a disclaimer: I am in no way a Twilight fan. I never saw the first film, then met my future wife and was subsequently dragged to (and struggled through) the next two. I have no doubt fans of the series will adore this forth entry and weep openly throughout, after which they’ll run home and weep hysterically a little more as they cut their hair off and stick it on their homemade Jacob and Edward voodoo dolls. But I’m trying to judge it on its own merits.

While it would have been perfectly possible to fit Breaking Dawn into one film, it seems the studio behind it wanted to do a Harry Potter and spilt the film into two for the simple reason it’ll make them double the money. What we have, then, is the first two acts of the story stretched over an excruciating two hours, with more padding than that in the bras of its target audience.

Yawn! As a wedding scene lasts half an hour, complete with the longest “you may kiss the bride” moment in cinematic history. Struggle! As you endure a needlessly lengthy honeymoon scene complete with a white-hot montage featuring at least three scenes where Bella and Edward play chess for a bit. Sigh! As Bella gurns, looks gormless and bites her lip so often you wonder if she isn’t already practising to be a vampire.

Incidentally, speaking of Bella and Edward, it’s understandable that Twilight is aimed at a teenage audience, because watching the on-screen relationship between actors Kristen
Stewart and Robert Pattinson reminds me a lot of my own teenage school days — it’s awkward, it’s painful and (because of the subjects I chose to take) there’s no chemistry.

After what has to be a whole fucking hour of wedding and honeymoon nothingness, the story finally progresses when Bella finds herself up the duff with some sort of mutant baby. Cue another 40 minutes of her looking deathly ill while the vampires look at her, then look at each other, then look back at her again, interspersed with bits where moany Jacob grudgingly chats with moany Edward then argues with the other werewolves who keep threatening to fuck up the vampires but take ages to actually go through with it.

I could go on and on, but I’m actually getting angry as I type this, and I just keep remembering ridiculous things. The scene where the werewolves all meet on a beachfront and argue with each other in shoddy CGI without even opening their mouths. The numerous scenes where Edward zips around really quickly — while swimming, while walking through the woods, while packing his fucking suitcase — just to remind the audience he’s a vampire because otherwise he gets to do the best part of fuck all vampire-related in this film.

The ‘fight’ between the vampires and the werewolves, which takes place in the dark, lasts about two minutes and is so filled with jump cuts it’s impossible to tell what’s going on. Or the fact that the film is literally fifteen seconds old before Jacob once again peels his shirt off to appease the swooning teen audience.

The film’s one saving grace is the final scene, which admittedly is excellent and a fantastic way to end the film, and the story as a whole in fact. I’d much rather a line was drawn under it at this point, but of course we still have to deal with another whole film showing Bella coming to terms with her new situation, no doubt moping about for another two hours doing very little.

Breaking Dawn Part 1 is 110 minutes of piffle followed by ten minutes of relatively interesting goings-on. Perhaps the best compliment I could give it is that it helped me understand how it must feel to be a vampire, because as I watched this mindless, over-long drivel I too felt dead inside.

One and a half out of five

How to see it
Breaking Dawn Part 1 is available in all the formats you’d expect. As well as the standalone DVD and Blu-ray editions, you can also get the Complete Twilight Saga on DVD and Blu-ray, containing all five movies in the series.

Bits and pieces
• Since writing this review I’ve had the displeasure of sitting through every film in the Twilight series. I can therefore report that this is one of the worst entries in the series, but in fairness that’s like saying the penis is the worst place to be non-fatally stabbed.

• To be fair to Kristen Stewart, she’s not a terrible actress in some other films. Probably. I can’t think of any examples off the top of the head, which makes me think I was maybe just
saying that to be nice. Maybe she's good in *On The Road*. I haven't seen it though, so I dunno. Either way, she isn't going anywhere any time soon, so get used to it.
The Vault Of Horror (1973)

Director: Roy Ward Baker

Starring: Daniel Massey, Terry-Thomas, Curd Jurgens, Michael Craig, Tom Baker

“That’s how it is, and how it always will be. Night after night we have to retell the evil things we did when we were alive. Night after night, for all eternity.”

For those unfamiliar with Amicus Productions, it was a British film production company based at Shepperton Studios in Surrey where it was active during the ‘60s and ‘70s. Amicus specialised in horror films, in particular anthology ones that offered a handful of 20-minute stories instead of one long 90-minute one. The Vault Of Horror is one such anthology, featuring five tales based on stories from the popular EC Comics horror series of the ‘40s and ‘50s (which included such publications as Tales From The Crypt, Vault Of Horror and Shock SuspenStories). And it’s brilliant.

The film opens with five businessmen going into an elevator which takes them down to a room none of them pressed for. When they enter the room, which looks like a gentlemen’s club, the lift closes behind them, at which point they realise there are no buttons to open it again. They decide to sit at the table in the room and have a chat while they wait for the lift doors to open.

The men start to share the dreams they’ve been having recently. Coincidentally, each dream tells a story in which each man does something immoral then dies as a result of their actions.

Tale one involves a chap called Harold (Daniel Massey), who plans on confronting his sister about their father’s inheritance. He takes things a little too far but gets his come-uppance when he heads to a nearby restaurant after his altercation.

Then there’s the story of Gritchit (Terry-Thomas). He’s recently been married to a lovely young lady but he constantly badmouths her for putting his things in the wrong place. We’re talking proper neat freak stuff here, with individual types of screw going in different labelled containers (not counting the ones loose in his head). Eventually wifey is driven to the edge and decides to give Gritchit a taste of his own medicine.

Next up is Sebastian (Curd Jurgens), a magician travelling the world with his wife in search of the next big trick to confound people with back home. Leaving his wife at a hotel, Sebastian wanders the streets of Egypt where he finds a women in an alleyway. As she plays her flute a long rope raises out of a vase. She then grabs the rigid rope and climbs up it, right to the top. A stunned Sebastian offers to pay her a fortune for the secret but she refuses, so he makes a plan to take it from her in a less than sociable manner. There’s more to the trick than Sebastian realises though, as his wife eventually finds out.
The fourth tale is the weak link in the anthology, with some hokey bullshit about a man (Michael Craig) faking his death to gain insurance money and things not going quite as planned, but thankfully the final tale rounds things off nicely with the clever story of an artist (Tom Baker) who visits a voodoo priest to get revenge on three men who wronged him. After receiving a blessing from the priest the artist realises that everything he paints happens in real life, so he sets about painting portraits of his three enemies then messing them up to kill them. Foolishly though, he fails to properly protect his own self-portrait...

Of the five tales (none of which, incidentally, are actually from the Vault Of Horror comic series – four are from Tales From The Crypt and the other is from Shock SuspenStories), the first and fifth are the most entertaining. The ending – explaining where the five men actually are – can be spotted a mile off, but the main story was always just a basic shell to contain the five shorter stories, which are clearly where the real entertainment value lasts.

If you can find it, it’s worth getting hold of the full uncut version of The Vault Of Horror. The American DVD releases of the film cut the endings of the first two stories, which is a shame because the final shot in the first story in particular is an incredibly effective, chilling moment and probably the best shot in the whole film. UK channel Film4 often shows a restored version of the film – this is the full uncut version and the one I recommend checking out.

The Vault Of Horror is a hidden gem, a great little British horror anthology where the five stories (while varied in quality) are all entertaining enough. Although the uncut version is really the best way to watch it you should still really see it in any form you can.

Four out of five

How to see it
There are two ways to see The Vault Of Horror on DVD, and sadly neither is perfect. The UK version, by Vipco, offers the uncut version of the film, but the picture quality is atrocious and it’s been out of print for years now. Meanwhile, in the US it’s available as part of MGM’s Midnite Movies line and can be found on a DVD double-bill with Tales From The Crypt – sadly though, it’s the cut version. I recommend instead looking out for it appearing on TV. UK channel FilmFour occasionally shows the uncut version in the best quality transfer I’ve seen to date, as this was a BFI National Archive restored print.

Bits and pieces
• It’s rumoured there was originally a different ending to The Vault Of Horror (spoilers ahead!). In the finished version, the five men realise they’re dead and the swanky room they’re in is simply a waiting room in which they can sit and consider their lives and subsequent deaths. The door then opens and they walk mournfully to their respective graves. In the other ending, they turn into rotting corpses as they do so. Only one photo remains of this scene, showing the five men with zombie-like skeletal faces, but it’s unknown if it was actually shot on film or if it was just a publicity photo.
• Any Americans not quite familiar with Tom Baker will indeed be familiar with one of his previous roles, as he was the fourth incarnation of The Doctor in Doctor Who between 1974 and 1981.
The Witch Who Came From The Sea (1976)

Director: Matt Cimber

Starring: Millie Perkins, Lonny Chapman, Vanessa Brown

“If only there was a way of making a fortune babysitting, you sister Molly could be a babysitting millionaire. Don’t tell me the kids don’t like you better than they like me, their own hardworking mother. Don’t say that or I’d say seaweed if you said that.”

Let’s face it, most of the 72 films in the 1983 video nasty list are light on plot. With gore, nudity and shock value very much the key components of your standard nasty, anyone out metaphor-hunting will come back with an empty net. Except for that one I just did. That’s my gift to you.

The Witch Who Came From The Sea, however, actually has some depth to it and bravely explores a taboo that films rarely touch – the mental trauma suffered by adults who suffered child abuse when they were younger. Given the subject matter and its entry in the notorious video nasty list it’s easy to believe this is likely to be a pretty repulsive film, but in actuality it’s handled with a surprising degree of tact.

Molly (Millie Perkins, fresh from her critically acclaimed role as Anne Frank) is a single woman who dotes on her two nephews. She’s their best friend and spends most of her time hanging out with them, telling them stories about the ocean and their granddad, who she claims was lost at sea. In reality, he actually sexually abused Molly when she was a little girl, and she’s struggling to come to terms with it.

Molly has an interesting way to vent her frustrations surrounding her past. She’s developed a habit of seducing men considered heroes – sports stars, TV personalities – then having sex with them before cutting off their manhood and killing them. As you do.

These scenes (along with the child abuse plot) are clearly the reason The Witch Who Came From The Sea gained its video nasty status, but in reality they’re unlikely to offend anyone in this day and age. All the dodgy stuff happens off-camera and the resulting blood is so fake it looks more like red wine.

It’s not a visually shocking film, then, but it still has a bit of punch during Molly’s disturbing flashbacks of her and her father. While these are thankfully handled fairly tactfully, they still make for uncomfortable viewing. In fact, the entire film has you feeling awkward throughout thanks to its odd presentation. Some of the killings are presented as dreams (even though they happened), complete with fuzzy picture and deliberately slowed-down speech. The best way of describing it would be that it feels like a normal film on some sort of hallucinogenic drug.
By far the star of the show is Millie Perkins as Molly. A first her performance seems a little off and wooden but as the plot develops you begin to understand why that is and as her mind deteriorates during the last 20 minutes it makes for compelling stuff.

*The Witch Who Came From The Sea* is a surprisingly accomplished little film, albeit one that’s a bit experimental and will have you scratching your head at times. While it’s not exactly a classic you should all be rushing out to see, it’s certainly one of the more watchable (and tamest) video nasties and one you should still check out if you get the opportunity.

*Three and a half out of five*

**How to see it**
In the US you can find *The Witch Who Came From The Sea* on DVD courtesy of Subversive Cinema. It isn’t available as a standalone disc in the UK: the only way to get it is to buy Anchor Bay’s DVD boxset *Box Of The Banned 2*, which also includes four other previously banned video nasties.

**Bits and pieces**
- Though *The Witch Who Came From The Sea* is actually a surprisingly adept, powerful film about child abuse, that obviously doesn’t sell to grindhouse audiences. That’s why the tagline on the film poster was the slightly less poignant “Molly really knows how to cut men down to size”.

- Although it was one of the Director Of Public Prosecution’s 72 video nasty films, *The Witch Who Came From The Sea* was unsuccessfully prosecuted and was quickly dropped from the list when it became clear it actually wasn’t that bad. Despite this, nobody bothered re-releasing and as such it didn’t see a UK release again until Anchor Bay submitted it in 2006 for the above mentioned box set.
About the Author

Chris Scullion is a video game journalist and reviewer born and raised in Coatbridge, Scotland. After getting a degree in journalism in Edinburgh, Chris moved to London at the age of 23 and spent six years working at the UK version of the Official Nintendo Magazine. Following this, Chris was put in charge of Nintendo Gamer, an unofficial website dedicated to the quirkier side of Nintendo gaming.

After Nintendo Gamer was closed down (not his fault, honest), Chris was made Games Editor of Computer And Video Games (cvg.co.uk), where he continues to work to this day. Established as a magazine in 1982, CVG is the world’s longest-running video game publication and well worth a look. Not that I’m biased or anything, I’m just a nameless narrator at the back of a book.

Although his job involves writing about video games, Chris is also a massive fan of movies (well, you’d hope so given what this book’s about), particularly cheesy horror films from the 1970s and 1980s. He’s also a dedicated fan of Glasgow Celtic football club and lives with his wife Louise in Wimbledon.

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