

That Was A Bit Mental: Volume 2

More reviews of films that are slightly less than sane

Chris Scullion

To my gorgeous wife Louise – one more year and 100 more shite films later, our relationship is still going strong. If life was the *Nightmare On Elm Street* series, you'd be *Part 3*. Which was a good one.

I love you x

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Introduction

Welcome to That Was A Bit Mental: Volume 2, the second ebook compilation of reviews from my award-repelling film review website.

Many thanks to you for purchasing this lengthy tome, unless you managed to blag a free copy somehow: in which case, well done on dodging the measly £1.50 admission fee.

For those not in the know and blind-purchasing this because you saw a blood splatter on the cover and thought it'd be edgy, That Was A Bit Mental is a website dedicated to reviews of odd movies.

Mainly (but not exclusively) dealing with horror movies, the criteria for eligibility on That Was A Bit Mental has widened over the years. The general rule is that the film must have the ability to potentially make someone turn to their companion as the credits roll and say "well, that was a bit mental".

In short, as long as it isn't a romantic comedy, chances are it's eligible for inclusion.

Enclosed in these electronic pages, then, are 99 of the finest reviews from my site, presented in a 'director's cut' format. Typos have been fixed, shit jokes have been replaced with microscopically less shit ones, confusing paragraphs have been cleaned up and shameless Amazon links to DVDs and Blu-rays have been punted.

In short, they're basically how I should have written them in the first place. Ah well.

"Only 99 reviews?" I hear you wail. "But the last ebook had 100! Considering I paid a whole £1.50 for this, you're screwing me out of a penny and a half's worth of content! A pox on your family."

Pox thee not, dear reader, because there is indeed a hundredth article tucked away at the back of this ebook that's better than any standard review: my alternative script for *Twilight*.

Originally intended as a relatively short, shameless attempt to get site traffic from teenyboppers, it evolved as I wrote it and ended up becoming the longest article on That Was A Bit Mental. It's probably my favourite, too.

Enough of these pesky formalities, however. It's time for you to read a big load of reviews of films, most of which you probably haven't seen and are likely to never want to. For every *Alien* and *Blair Witch Project* you'll find in this book, expect to find ten *Slaughter Highs* and *Please Don't Eat My Mothers*.

Whether you're of the opinion that I watch all this shite so you don't have to, or that I watch all this shite so you're better informed as to which is good shite and which is just shite shite, I hope you find this ebook useful and entertaining.

Massive thanks again for reading.

Chris Scullion
December 2014

Alice Sweet Alice (1976)

Director: Alfred Sole

Starring: Paula Sheppard, Linda Miller, Niles McMaster, Mildred Clinton, Brooke Shields

Also known as: *Communion* (original title), *Holy Terror* (re-release title)

"Maybe you are afraid that God will send St. Michael to take another of your loved ones. When St. Michael took my little girl, I only thought of how cruel God was."

It's generally a bit of a taboo in film to combine children with murder. Usually that means filmmakers are wary of killing a kid in a movie – that's crossing the line – but it also works the other way too.

That's why it's difficult to come up with a sizeable list, off the top of your head, of films which feature a scene in which a child murders someone else.

Alice Sweet Alice isn't afraid of either taboo. Not only does it include a child being killed mere minutes into its runtime, its entire plot also revolves around the notion that another child may be killing people.

The latter child in question is the titular Alice, a badly-behaved 12-year-old girl who's constantly winding up and bullying her younger sister Karen (played by a young Brooke Shields).

With her parents divorced and her dad out of town, it's perhaps understandable that Alice isn't getting along with her sister or her mother. It's not long, however, before things go seriously out of control.

It all kicks off at the local chapel, where Karen is set to get her first holy communion along with a bunch of other girls her age (the film was originally known as *Communion* before it was rebranded a couple of years later following Brooke Shields' rapid rise to fame).

While waiting in a back room before entering the church, Karen is grabbed by a masked assailant wearing a yellow raincoat.

She's brutally strangled and then, with her body dumped into a nearby trunk, is set on fire with a candle. Killing a 9-year-old like that ten minutes into a film? That's bloody bold.

After Karen's death, the question of who killed her becomes the priority. Alice's dad returns to town to help find her sister's murderer, and her aunt – who loathes Alice – moves in to help her mum.

Before long a number of other dodgy incidents take place and it quickly becomes apparent that Alice may be the guilty party.

Not only do we actually see her kill one of her pervert neighbour's cats, her aunt is then mysteriously stabbed in the hallway by the masked, raincoated killer shortly after we see Alice putting on that very outfit.

But surely that's too obvious? Why is Alice adamant she didn't do it? Why is her aunt, in hospital, adamant she did? Why, when she's taken to a mental institution for evaluation, does Alice's lie detector test show she's telling the truth when all evidence suggests she most likely isn't? Gah, my delicate brains.

Naturally, I'm not spoiling shit. You'll have to watch it for yourself. And I recommend you do that, because *Alice Sweet Alice* has a curious atmosphere to it that sets it apart from most '70s horrors.

Indeed, it feels more like an Italian giallo film, with its whodunit plot and elaborate, almost lovingly-constructed murders.

It's also full of strong performances, particularly from Paula Sheppard and Linda Miller as Alice and her mum.

Both work fantastically together, with Sheppard excelling as a young girl growing ever colder towards her mother, who's terrified she's losing the love of the only daughter she has left.

It does have its annoying moments. After the killer's identity is revealed their less-than-stellar performance and part-mumbly, part-screamy dialogue means a number of key plot points (specifically the all-important motive) can be easily missed – I had to look it up on IMDb later because I had no fucking clue what they were saying.

It's worth sticking with despite this, however, because it's still an effective little thriller and its final little shock twist is one of the finer "Jesus Christ" moments you'll experience, which is just as well because it takes place in a church. Get it watched, then.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

Alice Sweet Alice is only available on DVD at the moment. UK readers will want to get the recently released 88 Films version, which marks the first time it's been released in uncut form on DVD in the UK (previous releases have cut out a few seconds of animal cruelty in which a cat is swung at someone). It's also got an audio commentary.

In the US, the only DVD version currently in print is by Hen's Tooth Video, which also includes the same commentary.

Bits and pieces

- Have a look online for the re-release trailer of *Alice Sweet Alice* to see sneakiness at its best. The film was re-released after Brooke Shields became famous and though she's only in the film for the first ten minutes, the trailer implies she's the star. Cheeky bastards.

- Paula Sheppard, who played Alice, was actually 19 years old during filming even though she was playing a 12-year-old. Oddly, despite putting in a decent performance, she only starred in one other movie - odd sci-fi comedy *Liquid Sky* - before quitting acting.

Alien (1979)

Director: Ridley Scott

Starring: Sigourney Weaver, John Hurt, Ian Holm, Tom Skerritt, Harry Dean Stanton, Yaphet Kotto, Veronica Cartwright

"We'll move in pairs. We'll go step by step and cut off every bulkhead and every vent until we have it cornered. And then we'll blow it the fuck out into space. Is that acceptable to you?"

It speaks volumes of *Alien's* masterful construction that 35 years after its initial release it's still one of the most effective sci-fi/horror hybrids ever made. While many sci-fi films of its era look dated beyond belief these days, *Alien's* unique style and pacing ensure it still holds its own (and usually comes out on top) among today's similar offerings.

It tells the story of the *Nostromo*, a mining ship that intercepts a strange SOS signal from a nearby planet. Waking from hypersleep, the crew of the *Nostromo* land on the planet to investigate. There they find a deadly parasite that infects a crew member and uses his body as a host to infiltrate the ship, at which point it begins systematically killing the rest of the crew.

The key to *Alien's* scare factor is Ridley Scott's clever use of the *Jaws* technique: by showing as little of the monster as possible, Scott has the viewer filling in the blanks themselves, adding what personally scares them and making something much worse than could ever possibly be shown on-screen.

When the Alien is eventually revealed however, it's to the credit of Swiss surrealist artist HR Giger that his creation is still terrifying in full view. Its long head and extending teeth are as close to a killer penis as you can get, and as the crew members are offed one by one and the film's heroine is slowly revealed to be Ripley, you can almost hear the amateur psychologists in the audience feverishly scribbling down "inherent fear of penetration" in their mental notebooks.

They're right this time, mind you. This sexual subtext is rife in *Alien*, and it's what makes it so creepy. While you've got ol' cock-headed Alien with its extending knob mouth pumping subconscious fears willy-nilly into the minds of the female half of the audience, the little Facehugger parasites are working on the male half.

The Facehuggers turn the tables on gender equality: being as delicate with my descriptions as possible, it's the female Facehugger, with its vagina-shaped underside, that impregnates the male human, dropping its seed down his throat and letting him incubate the baby Alien in his chest until it's time to give birth in an incredibly violent fashion.

Indeed, it's this 'Chestburster' scene that remains the most famous in *Alien*, partly for the reasons given above but mainly for the way it comes out of nowhere. Legend has it the rest

of the cast weren't told what was going to happen, and so their reactions to John Hurt going into a seizure and convulsing, being pinned to the table and a huge lump blasting out of his chest were genuine.

Alien is a classic because it takes a minimalist approach to horror. Everything leading up to the last 15 minutes (at which point shit goes down) takes place at a very slow pace, setting an atmosphere as it goes and using that aforementioned *Jaws* trick to make sure the viewer becomes increasingly unsettled. Indeed, it's one of the few films whose Director's Cut – released in 2003 – is shorter than the Theatrical Cut, as Scott decided to remove more shots of the Alien (mostly the unconvincing "man in a suit" ones) to make it even more elusive and mysterious.

So, *Alien*, then. A sci-fi film about men getting pregnant and women being scared by big cock-headed space monsters. On paper it sounds like it should be a load of shite (especially when it's described in such a facetious way as I just did), but in practice it's one of the greatest horror films ever made – at separate times atmospheric and energetic, subtle and shocking, unsettling and terrifying.

Oh, and its trailer is amazing too.

Five out of five

How to see it

There are umpteen ways to see *Alien*. You can either get the DVD on its own or get it as part of the excellent Alien Quadrilogy boxset. If you're more of a Blu-ray person you can get the film on its own – and this is what I recommend – as part of the Alien Anthology Blu-ray collection which can be found for stupidly cheap considering how much extra content it offers.

Bits and pieces

- If you're one of those modern hip kids who plays them there video game thingies, you should really give *Alien Isolation* a whirl. Many games have tried to religate the atmosphere of *Alien* and almost all have failed, but *Isolation* completely nails it.
- Go hunting on YouTube and you'll find test footage online of Bolaji Badejo, the chap who played the Alien wearing an early version of the costume and trying different types of movement, making it behave more like a dinosaur at times. It's an interesting look at what could have been, and frankly I'm relieved they went with something different in the end.
- Sometimes a snappy title can work wonders when trying to catch the audience's attention. *Alien* is a brilliant example of this: it's short and to-the-point. It's certainly a bloody good deal better than its original working title, *Star Beast*.

Aliens (1986)

Director: James Cameron

Starring: Sigourney Weaver, Michael Biehn, Paul Reiser, Lance Henriksen, Bill Paxton, Jenette Goldstein, Carrie Henn

"We'd better get back, cause it'll be dark soon and they mostly come at night. Mostly."

It's very rare that a sequel not only offers a complete change of pace to its predecessor but also manages to match it in terms of quality. *Aliens* is one such film, one that has a very different feel to *Alien* but is still a fantastic film regardless.

After her epic battle with the Alien at the end of the first movie, Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) takes a well-deserved rest in her ship's hypersleep chamber. Turns out she was a little too tired though, because she remains asleep in suspended animation for 57 years and by the time she's found by a salvage ship and brought back to the company she used to work for she's told her 10-year-old daughter has died of old age.

The company doesn't believe Ripley's stories about the parasites they found on the planet in the first film, explaining to her that there's a colony of people living there now and they haven't reported any problems. They suspend her from her duties for destroying their pricey mining ship in the first film, and tell her to go see a psychiatrist. That is, until a few months later, when they come crawling back and tell her that they can't get in touch with the colonists on the planet and have the feeling something's wrong. Hmmm, wonder what it could be, hope they're alright.

Obviously, they're not alright – there be Aliens all up in that bitch – but the company doesn't know that yet, so they ask Ripley to travel there with a group of marines to act as an advisor, just in case, and in return she'll get her license back. Reluctantly, she agrees, which is just as well otherwise there'd be no film.

The addition of marines, coupled with the fact that this time there isn't just one Alien but a whole army of them, makes *Aliens* a very different film to *Alien*. The moments of tension remain but rather than ending in a crew member getting stealthily picked off, they usually conclude with lots of gunfire, yelling and blink-and-you'll-miss-them shots of Aliens exploding into an acidic mess of xenoguts. These guys aren't fucking around and *Aliens* is all the better for it.

With all that testosterone in there and the knowledge that Ripley's survived this before it's hard to find a character that genuinely seems like they might be vulnerable, which is why the ingenious introduction of Newt is so important to *Aliens*. Newt is a 10-year-old girl whose family were killed by the Aliens and who's managed to survive by crawling through the air ducts and other nooks and crannies of the colony complex. Other than her expert hide-and-seek skills and the fact she's got a hell of a set of lungs on her (you've never heard a scream this high in your life), Newt is otherwise as vulnerable as a snowman in Barbados

and so Ripley not only takes on the role of the heroine once again but also that of the protector.

The supporting cast is of a high quality throughout. Cult legends like Bill Paxton, Jenette Goldstein and *Terminator* alumni Michael Biehn and Lance Henriksen are all perfect in their wildly different roles, and Paul Reiser – usually a bad comedian – is instead a great “weasel” as he plays the company sleazeball who has a hidden motive for the mission.

Aliens has been available in two different versions for quite some time now. A Special Edition was released in 1992 which proves it's not messing around by adding seventeen minutes to proceedings. Much of this extra footage takes place in the opening half of the film, but it adds more depth to each of the lead characters by showing what happened to Newt's family, Ripley's reaction to the death of her daughter and the like. If you get the choice between the two (and you have the time to watch a 154-minute film) I'd strongly recommend the Special Edition because the majority of the extra content is interesting stuff and only serves to increase your attachment to the characters.

Regardless of which version you watch however, it's the final part of *Aliens* where everything properly kicks into high gear and it all gets crazy. The introduction of the terrifying Queen Alien is one of the greatest reveals in movie history, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if an illustration of the epic final battle was found in some dictionaries next to the word 'awesome'.

Is *Aliens* undoubtedly better than its predecessor? No. Does that mean the original remains the best? No. Choosing which is best between *Alien* and *Aliens* is like choosing which is best between eating chocolate in the bath and playing football. Both are great, but they're so different that it's hard to compare them. Personally, I ever-so-slightly prefer *Aliens* because its focus on action and its greater number of memorable lines makes it more entertaining on repeat viewings, but this favouritism is negligible to say the least. My advice is simple – get them both and enjoy an epic four-and-a-half-hour double-bill. That way you can get stuck into a game of five-a-sides then go home, run the bubble bath and chew on your Curly Wurly to your heart's content.

Five out of five

How to see it

See the 'How to see it' section for *Alien*, as it's the same situation.

Bits and pieces

- Big respect to Michael Biehn, who plays Corporal Hicks in *Aliens*. There aren't many actors who can claim to have been in not just one of the most iconic movies of the '80s, but two of them (he also played the protagonist Kyle Reese in *The Terminator*). Only Lance Henriksen can match that – he too was in *Aliens* and *The Terminator*, albeit in lesser roles.
- If you're the sort of nerdlinger (like me) who likes to watch the end credits of a film right to the end, doing so with *Aliens* will let you hear the sound of a Facehugger scuttling past.

- There's one thing *Aliens* doesn't get enough credit for, and that's a countdown timer that actually fucking works. In most movies a countdown (usually for a bomb or something) lasts much longer than the 10 seconds we see on the timer, but the 15-minute countdown timer that appears near the end of the film (no spoilers) does actually last exactly 15 minutes. That's some fine editing there.

Alien 3 (1992)

Director: David Fincher

Starring: Sigourney Weaver, Charles Dutton, Charles Dance, Paul McGann, Lance Henriksen, an Alien

"You're all gonna die, the only question is how you check out. Do you want it on your feet, or on your fuckin' knees, begging? I ain't much for begging. Nobody ever gave me nothing. So I say fuck that thing, let's fight it."

ADVANCE WARNING: This article has ending spoilers, so you have been warned. It's more than two decades old, to be fair.

Imagine you had a decent job. Let's say you were the manager of something... a plumbing firm, for example. You make good money, and you're happy with the knowledge that when it comes to managing plumbing firms, you know your onions.

Now imagine you've also got two older brothers. One brother is a leading politician: be that the Prime Minister, President, whatever it is in your country. The other brother is one of the greatest footballers in the world and has two World Cup Winner's medals in his large trophy display room.

If you can't tell where I'm going with this analogy you might as well stop reading this ebook and go back to reading *Fifty Shades of Shite*. Yes, friends, what I'm saying is that *Alien 3* is the plumbing firm manager of the *Alien* series. Look, just go with it.

The film begins right after the events of *Aliens*, with Ripley, Newt, Hicks and android chum Bishop escaping the Alien-infested colony planet LV-426. All is not well, though, because a Facehugger has managed to smuggle itself onboard too.

Triggering the ship's emergency alarm, the four are dropped inside an escape pod onto a nearby planet. When she comes to, Ripley is told by the planet's inhabitants that Newt and Hicks are both dead and Bishop has been completely broken.

To make matters worse, the aforementioned inhabitants are all prisoners. You see, Ripley's landed on Fiorina 161, a prison planet where the entire population consists of males. And they haven't seen a woman in a while.

Not that this becomes much of an issue when it quickly emerges the stowaway Facehugger has managed to get inside the prison complex, planting its seed inside a dog and creating the first dog Alien.

It's time, then, for Ripley and the prisoners to stop their grinnin' and drop their linen', except this time there's no linen to drop... by which I mean weapons to fire. After all, being

a prison planet populated by murderers and rapists, it was decided it probably wasn't wise to leave firearms around.

That's all well and good for stopping a violent chap taking it to the next level, of course, but it isn't too useful when there's a xenomorph dog looking to clamp both sets of jaws around your dangly bits.

With this premise, *Alien 3* feels indecisive. It feels like it couldn't choose whether to offer an experience similar to that of *Alien* or *Aliens*, and so decided to combine both.

By returning to the simpler formula of a single creature and no weapons to fight it with, it initially seems to be leaning back towards the more tension-filled atmosphere of the first film.

However, *Alien's* atmosphere was also partly down to the small crew (each of whom who you cared about) and the fact it took place in a relatively small ship. By sticking it in a massive prison complex and chucking a load of meatheads in there, parts of it start to feel like the more action-focused sequel *Aliens* instead.

The result is the inevitable jack of all trades and master of none, with a film trying to combine the slow pace of the first film with the action of the second and ultimately failing to nail either.

Not that fans of the series will feel catered for, anyway. Before the opening credits have even finished rolling (preceded by a brilliantly creepy alternative version of the 20th Century Fox fanfare), we're told of the deaths of Hicks and Newt, characters we'd just spent nearly three hours getting to know in the last film.

Hicks was a great character in *Aliens* and his presence on a prison planet would have been interesting, but it's the killing off of twelve-year-old Newt that grates most, as it completely undermines the events of the second film and essentially says Ripley's massive effort to protect her from the *Aliens* was all in vain. "Get away from her, you bit... oh. Never mind."

Having Ripley then perform a fairly gruesome autopsy on this young girl we were once eager to see survive is the final insult, and a pretty disturbing scene to watch.

This 'up yours' to the fans aside, *Alien 3* isn't too bad. Without the talent of Ridley Scott and James Cameron, and with then-newcomer director David Fincher constantly fucked around by the studio (more on that when I review the wildly different director's cut), the result is nothing more than a sci-fi slasher film with an Alien playing the role of Freddy, Jason or Michael. And you know, that's perfectly fine.

The only time things really fall apart is during the third act, in which the remaining prisoners decide to try trapping the Alien by leading it to a giant piston then pouring hot lead onto it.

This results in a messy ten-minute segment in which the Alien is led through a complex relay system of prisoners who let it chase them one at a time (complete with overuse of a first-person Alien viewpoint) as they lock doors along the way, forcing it towards the piston.

With all these similarly bald chaps running around hollering corridor numbers at each other, you quickly lose track of what's going on and have no idea if their plan is working or not (other than the obvious rule of thumb: if it's eating one of them, then it probably isn't).

Once the Alien is disposed of, the film finally redeems itself with a brilliant ending in which Ripley, having earlier learned she's carrying a chestburster, launches herself into a furnace, incinerating both her and the Alien sprog so the evil Wayland-Yutani corporation can't use it for bio-weaponry research.

Alien 3 may not be the greatest *Alien* film ever, then (far from it), but it's still a half-decent sci-fi film in its own right, with a brave ending showing that our heroine is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to save the rest of the world. And with Ripley now dead, it brings a decent close to the series, drawing a line under it all.

Um. Right. Actually, about that...

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

See the 'How to see it' section for *Alien*, as it's the same situation.

Bits and pieces

- Try to get hold of the Alien Anthology Blu-ray box set because it contains a brilliant documentary detailing the hell David Fincher went through trying to get this film made. Not many behind-the-scenes documentaries are as brutally honest as this one, but *Alien 3*'s production problems are so well documented that I suppose it would have been ridiculous for Fox to pretend it was all rosy.
- Michael Biehn was raging when he discovered that *Alien 3* would start with Hicks dead, meaning his services were no longer needed. An early version of the script had a Chestburster coming out of Hicks, with a replica of him planned to be built, but he threatened to sue Fox for using his likeness. Eventually they ended up using his photo at the start during a computer sequence - amazingly, Biehn was paid more for the use of this photo than he did for starring in *Aliens*.

Alien: Resurrection (1997)

Director: Jean-Pierre Jeunet

Starring: Sigourney Weaver, Winona Ryder, Dominique Pinon, Ron Perlman, Brad Dourif

RIPLEY – “There’s a monster in your chest. These guys hijacked your ship, and they sold your cryo tube to this human. And he put an alien inside of you. It’s a really nasty one. And in a few hours it’s gonna burst through your ribcage, and you’re gonna die. Any questions?”

PURVIS – “Who are you?”

RIPLEY – “I’m the monster’s mother.”

There are some people who feel writer Joss Whedon can do no wrong. To those people I remove my cap, stare soberly at them and nod my head in the direction of *Alien Resurrection*, at which point blood streams freely from their eyes as they collapse in a heap, screaming indecipherable slogans of bile and malice.

To be fair, that would maybe be a bit of an overreaction on their behalf, because *Alien Resurrection* isn’t exactly the worst film ever made. It’s just the worst *Alien* film ever made.

With Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) well and truly dead at the end of the third film having launched herself into a massive pit of lava, it was always going to have to be a massively hokey twist that would bring her back for a fourth film. *Resurrection* doesn’t disappoint (or, rather, it does).

‘Ripley’ wakes up in a massive ship, 200 years after the events of *Alien 3*. But she isn’t the real Ripley, she’s a clone of the one who died on the prison planet in that third movie. How can they clone someone if they’re lying at the bottom of a lava tank, you may ask? They don’t: they clone her from drops of her blood found elsewhere on the planet.

(Of course, Ripley didn’t actually bleed at any point in *Alien 3* since, as she was pregnant with a queen Alien, the Alien on the ship never tried to attack her. Maybe it was ‘towel time’. But whatever. I’m not going to argue minor details in a film that gets far more ridiculous later on.)

This second Ripley isn’t exactly like the old one who pegged it centuries ago, mind. She’s a new and improved Ripley, made with a brand new formula (remember when Nestle added the white bit to Milky Way bars in Britain? It’s a bit like that).

Somehow her DNA has been mixed with that of an Alien, giving her some of the creature’s traits – acidic blood, super strength, ridiculous pain tolerance and the like.

Anyway, never mind that, Ripley's got bigger fish to fry (presumably by bleeding some of her chip fat blood on them). She's onboard the Auriga, a ship conducting all manner of dodgy experiments.

Just like the real Ripley, the cloned version was also pregnant with a Queen Alien, but the big scar on new Ripley's chest is telling: her Queen's been removed and is in the process of growing fairly rapidly.

This isn't the only experiment the ship is conducting, though. It's also managed to get hold of a bunch of Alien eggs, and after getting some dodgy 'cargo' (actual humans) from a group of space bandits, they get Facehugging and start spawning some proper warrior Aliens.

The aim of all this is studying the Aliens and seeing what makes them tick. Unsurprisingly, it turns out what makes them tick is busting out of their pishy little cells and going on a rampage.

It's up to Ripley, then, to help the space bandits avoid the Aliens and try to escape to safety somehow. But with her Alien blood, can she really be trusted? (Yes, as it turns out.)

It's okay to feel sorry for Joss Whedon, but not too much. He's stated in the past that he had very different actors in mind when writing the script, so for example when he was writing the character of the seemingly innocent scientist who later goes a bit mental, he didn't expect Brad Dourif (aka Mr 'If You See Me In A Film You Know My Character Will Go A Bit Mental') to be cast in the role and ruin the twist.

However, he's not entirely without blame, as regardless of casting some of the sillier ideas in the film are indeed part of the script he wrote. Ripley playing basketball with Ron Perlman? That was Whedon. Aliens taking part in an underwater chase sequence before trying to attack a paraplegic tied to another guy's back as they both climb a ladder? All Whedon.

His masterstroke, however, is the insane ending in which it emerges that the Queen Alien, now fully grown, has inherited some of Ripley's human traits and is able to give birth like a mammal instead of laying eggs. This results in a truly bizarre half-human, half-Alien hybrid that is one of the most ridiculous sights I've seen. Sorry Joss, you can't blame that one on casting.

Alien 3 was a slight let-down but by at least ending with Ripley killing herself and sacrificing herself to destroy the Alien species it would have been a decent enough way to bring the series to a close.

By refusing to let Ripley die and adding a number of ridiculous twists to the tale, *Resurrection* takes what was once a highly respected sci-fi series and turns it into hokey popcorn flick nonsense.

If you just want to switch your mind off for two hours and enjoy a silly creature feature, then *Alien: Resurrection* should have you covered as it isn't terrible at what it does.

The problem is that what it does is a million miles from what *Alien* and *Aliens* did, and in that respect it's a massively disappointing way to end the *Alien* saga.

Two out of five

How to see it

See the 'How to see it' section for *Alien*, as it's the same situation.

Bits and pieces

- Jeunet wasn't too fussed by the critical panning *Resurrection* got when it was released. Instead he had a break from filmmaking then, four years later, went on to direct *Amelie*, which many regard as one of the greatest films ever made. I'm still waiting for that inevitable *Alien vs Amelie* crossover though.
- There's a shot where Ripley, being some sort of weird superhuman/alien hybrid, grabs a basketball and, while walking away, tosses it back over her shoulder, dropping it perfectly into the net. Amazingly, this was real and a complete fluke (the plan was to replace it with CGI). It was almost ruined, too, thanks to Ron Perlman, who was also in shot and broke character right after the ball went in, going crazy. Thankfully, there were just enough frames in there to keep the scene in and cut right before Perlman goes nuts.

Alligator (1980)

Director: Lewis Teague

Starring: Robert Forster, Robin Riker, Michael Gazzo

"I'm gonna go out there, I'm gonna find that alligator, and I'm gonna kick its ass." (David, Alligator)

Here's a top tip: if your young daughter does something that annoys you, don't flush her pet baby alligator down the toilet to punish her. Chances are, twelve years later the alligator will still be living in the sewers and will have mutated into a huge beast by eating genetically modified dogs. Oh, and according to *Alligator*, your daughter will also mysteriously age about 20 years and become a redhead.

Alligator is a fun creature feature that doesn't take itself too seriously. It follows David Madison, a Chicago cop investigating a number of body parts that have mysteriously been turning up in the city's water filtration systems. It soon emerges that there's an alligator living in the sewers, one much bigger than any other alligator known to man.

You see, a local pharmaceutical company has been experimenting with hormones. They've been illegally acquiring dogs, injecting them with a serum that makes them grow quickly, then dumping them into the sewer when they're finished with them. The gator's then been eating them, hence its ridiculous size. After going into the sewers and seeing the gator eat one of his partners, David has to convince his fellow cops – as well as an alligator specialist (who's the little girl grown up) – what they're dealing with.

The monster effects in *Alligator* are handled in two different ways depending on the scene. Sometimes they seemingly used a real alligator and made it walk through a miniaturised set (which is blatantly obvious at some points, such as the moment it brushes past a clearly cardboard bench and it slides out of the way). At other times the film makes use of a large mechanical alligator, much like the mechanical shark featured in *Jaws*. This makes for a few great moments where victims are actually lying inside the gator's mouth, struggling to escape. You just can't do that convincingly with CGI these days.

It's actually surprising how dark *Alligator* gets at times for a film that's clearly meant to be taken less seriously than *Jaws* and others of its ilk. Various legs are bitten off, people are swallowed whole, an old man is trapped in a car while the gator smashes it and crushes him to death, and it even breaks that classic taboo by killing a young child. It's never shocking because *Alligator* is pretty tame these days, so rather than feeling offended or disturbed you'll just find yourself chuckling that they had the balls to take it that far.

While it's a good laugh, *Alligator* does miss a few tricks along the way. While it's made clear through the opening credits that the alligator in the sewer is definitely the one dropped in the toilet twelve years prior, and while it's pointed out in a throwaway line later on that the

female scientist helping out David is the same young child from that opening sequence, they never make the connection in the film that this is her alligator all grown up.

Perhaps if the gator had some distinctive markings or something so she could have said “oh shit, it’s RAMON” then that could have added a little something to proceedings, as it is it just feels like an odd coincidence with no real closure.

That’s nitpicking though. *Alligator* is one of the better examples of the slew of cheapo creature features released in the years following *Jaws*, so if you’re after cheese featuring a massive alligator (and who wouldn’t be), ignore all the SyFy pish that’s doing the rounds just now – I’m looking at you, *Mega Python vs Gatoroid* – and hunt this bastard down instead.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

Anchor Bay UK released a lovely little two-disc DVD featuring both *Alligator* and its sequel, *Alligator 2: The Mutation* (even though the first one was a mutation already). In the US it’s a solo DVD affair.

Bits and pieces

- The original script for *Alligator* was a little different and, in my opinion, could have made for an even more ridiculous (and therefore better) film. Rather than growing large by eating lab rats injected with growth hormones, in the original script the alligator grew to its enormous size because of beer from a local beer factory pouring into the sewers.
- Apparently, as was the case with the shark in *Jaws*, the giant mechanical alligator kept malfunctioning. When shooting ended, it was donated as a mascot to the Florida Gators college sports team. I’m sure they were grateful for the fucking massive broken robot.

The Amityville Asylum (2013)

Director: Andrew Jones

Starring: Sophia Del Pizzo, Lee Bane, Andy Evason, Eileen Daly

LISA – “What’s that smell?”

DELANEY – “It always hangs in the air. No matter how much we bleach the floor, there is always that smell of death.”

In December 1975, George and Kathy Lutz moved into 112 Ocean Avenue, a house in Amityville where thirteen months previously, a man had shot and killed six members of his family.

The Lutz family left the house after only a month, claiming they had been terrorised by evil paranormal forces living there. A book entitled *The Amityville Horror* was released two years later and the story went on to spawn a number of movies.

The Amityville Asylum is the eleventh movie to use the Amityville story as part of its plot, but in reality this review’s already discussed it more than the film does.

What we actually have here is a low-budget film shot in Wales, with a bunch of British actors trying to sound American while wandering around a spooky asylum and a tenuous link to the Amityville story shoehorned in to make the film a better sell.

Lisa (Sophia Del Pizzo) takes on a cleaning job at an asylum. After meeting her co-worker Delaney (Lee Bane) she’s taken on a tour of the facility.

This entails meeting each patient, getting an impressively detailed rundown of their entire backstories (from a man who’s only another cleaner, mind), and being told how to use the cleaning equipment.

In fact, the scene in which she’s shown all the different types of cleaning products and how to use them all goes on for a mystifyingly long time, to the extent that I ended up thinking “this HAS to end up becoming a plot point later on”. Nope. Just a long scene on how to use bleach.

As time goes on at the asylum, Lisa is subjected to a number of disturbing incidents. One night she sees a young girl wandering the halls. On another night, upon spotting a supposedly mute and catatonic elderly patient also roaming the hallways, said patient tells Lisa she’s going to die.

Worst of all, another patient – this one a resident in the dodgily-titled Ward X – claims to have supernatural powers, somehow knows Lisa’s mum died and mocks her for it. All very unsporting, I’m sure you’ll agree.

Each time something happens, Lisa informs Delaney and the asylum's orderlies, but they don't believe her, until eventually things get a little odd and, quite frankly, the plot becomes a complete mess.

If I can be blunt for a second, I've had shites that were scarier than *The Amityville Asylum*. The so-called 'creepy' bits pass harmlessly by and the parts that are meant to be shocking twists are about as harrowing as getting the hiccups.

Incredibly, it also has the balls to try the tired "you're telling me X? But that can't be true because Y" twist – the oldest trick in the book – twice in the space of twenty minutes.

What's that? You saw a little girl in the hallway? But the youngest patient we have here is 20. DUM DUM DUMMMM. And what? The old woman who doesn't talk just spoke to you? But she died last night! DUM DUM DUMMMM.

I'm sorry? Your film's called *The Amityville Asylum*? But it's got fuck all to do with Amityville! DUM DUM DUMMMM(B).

Eventually, the film does reveal its tenuous (and ridiculous) link to the Amityville series. It turns out the asylum was built on the grounds of the demolished Amityville house and as such the so-called ghosts that haunted it are now in the asylum.

Um, except in real life the Amityville house still exists, making this a load of bumwash that's just jammed the Amityville story in for some extra notoriety.

Shite plot and atrocious ending aside (there are something like three different attempts at a twist in there, each one randomly ditched and replaced with another like an indecisive shopper trying on dresses), it's horribly shot too.

Sometimes the camera will go out of focus halfway through a shot, and that's during dialogue scenes where there's no real excuse for it. Other shots are even more distracting, particularly when the camera is placed behind a door, or a table, or a wall in an attempt to give a sort of 'voyeur' feel that ends up more like an 'I can't see half the fucking screen' feel.

There's even a character in there who can't fucking pronounce 'Amityville' properly, choosing to go with "ah-MITTY-ville" instead of "AH-mittyville". Fuck me.

The only saving grace, and the sole element that rescues this film from an infamous 'half a Trevor' score on *That Was A Bit Mental*, is Sophia Del Pizzo in the lead role of Lisa.

Her American accent's about as accurate as my Indian one (let's just say I'm never allowed back in Tandoori Palace again), but that aside she really does try to polish a turd. She puts in a believably 'normal' performance – and I mean that in a good way – and I'd love to see her in something good in the future.

But this definitely isn't it.

One out of five

How to see it

The Amityville Asylum is currently only available on DVD in the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Being the complete pissbag I am, I once tweeted lead actress Sophia Del Pizzo to tell her I enjoyed her performance in this, while neatly omitting the fact I thought the film itself was a bucket of old wank. She replied: "Thanks for giving it a go dude. And for the compliment. Low budgets can be an arse!". So even she knew it was shite.
- Amazingly, the film was actually supposed to have a lot more in common with *The Amityville Horror*, and was even supposed to feature Ronald DeFeo, the real-life killer whose slaying of his family in the Amityville house led to the initial inspiration for the book and film. This was thwarted when the actor who was supposed to play DeFeo was turned away at immigration following a mix-up with his work visa, meaning most of his scenes and references to DeFeo were cut from the film, leaving it fairly Amityville-free despite the title.

Any Given Sunday (1999)

Director: Oliver Stone

Starring: Al Pacino, Jamie Foxx, Cameron Diaz, Dennis Quaid, LL Cool J, James Woods

"Life's a game of inches, so is football. Because in either game, life or football, the margin for error is so small. I mean, one half a step too late or too early and you don't quite make it. One half-second too slow, too fast and you don't quite catch it. The inches we need are everywhere around us. They're in every break of the game, every minute, every second. On this team we fight for that inch. On this team we tear ourselves and everyone else around us to pieces for that inch. We claw with our fingernails for that inch. Because we know when add up all those inches, that's gonna make the fuckin' difference between winning and losing."

Take one of the greatest actors in the world, team him up with one of the greatest directors in the world, throw in an amazing supporting cast and set it all on an American football field. The result is *Any Given Sunday*, one of the finest sports films ever made.

Pacino plays Tony D'Amato, an aging coach who's trying to lead his team, the Miami Sharks, to glory one last time. Standing in his way are Christina Pagniaci (Cameron Diaz), the daughter of the team's late owner (and Tony's friend) who doesn't believe in tradition and wants to move the team to another city, and the team's doctor (James Woods) who's been giving players illegal injections to keep them playing, despite the risks to their health.

Tony's players have their own issues, too. His quarterback (Dennis Quaid) is also feeling the pangs of old age and fears his career is coming to an end, his wide receiver (LL Cool J) is annoyed he's not being thrown the ball enough and believes it could affect his sponsorship contracts, and the rock in his defence (played by real-life American footballer Lawrence Taylor) has injured his neck and is one bad tackle away from permanent paralysis at best, death at worst.

And then there's Willie Beamen (Jamie Foxx), a cocky young third-string upstart who comes into the team after two shock injuries and decides he doesn't want to be a team player. He starts running different plays to the ones Tony picks and while the Sharks start to win games and the fans love Beamen, his teammates begin to resent him. As you'd imagine, the whole situation is one big time bomb waiting to go off.

It's a testament to Oliver Stone's abilities that while *Any Given Sunday* clocks in at a hefty 150 minutes none of it feels like filler. Whether it's in-fighting between players, tense arguments between Tony and Christina, the behind-closed-doors conflicts we're shown with some of the players and their families or any of Pacino's numerous lengthy and motivational speeches, every scene is captivating.

Best of all though are the game sequences. You will never see any sport filmed in such a dramatic, impressive way as Stone uses slow motion, close-ups, point-of-view shots,

montages and music to perfection during sequences that can often be long (up to 15 or 20 minutes at times) yet still never feel long enough. Sometimes he'll raise the bar even further and show something out of the ordinary, like a game taking place in torrential rain (it might sound like I'm taking the piss but it's genuinely some of the best cinematic rain ever, up there with *Road To Perdition* and *Breakfast At Tiffany's*) or a shocking injury (detached eyeball, anyone?). These game sequences are clearly the highlight of the film and are breathtaking.

It's rare that you get a film where every single actor is at the top of their game but that's what you get here. Pacino is enthralling to watch, Foxx is likeable and hateable all at once, Diaz comes across as the complete bitch she's supposed to be and the rest of the team are completely believable.

It even has you questioning certain values throughout, particularly when Foxx calls Pacino out on an 'inspirational' speech he gave to him earlier in the film, about how he had to block out the crowd and imagine he was back at home, playing with his friends in the ghettos. At the time it simply seems like Pacino is trying to connect with him and we don't give it much thought, but when Foxx brings it up and accuses Pacino of being patronising you can't help but agree with him. Even decent people have flaws, it seems.

Naturally, given the subject matter it's understandable that *Any Given Sunday* is far less popular in the UK than it is in America. Indeed, if (like me) you understand the rules of American football you're going to get the most out of the film because the game scenes will make a lot more sense and without understanding what's going on the tension will be lost on you at times. Even if that's the case however you should still give it a go because it's still an incredible character study and remains one of my favourite sports films more than a decade after I first saw it.

Five out of five

How to see it

You can get *Any Given Sunday* on DVD or on Blu-ray. Both versions claim to be the 'Director's Cut' but in reality the theatrical version (which has never been released on DVD) was five minutes longer.

Bits and pieces

- *Any Given Sunday* should also be praised as the only film I've seen to date that's managed to use a Kid Rock song well. During one of the action scenes, Kid Rock's Bawtidaba plays in the background and really helps emphasise the scene. Unlike Kid Rock himself, who only helps emphasise what being a prick is like.
- In case you're curious about the title, it helps if you know your American football and know that most games are played on a Sunday. It therefore comes from a line in the film spoken by Al Pacino: "On any given Sunday you're gonna win or you're gonna lose. The point is, can you win or lose like a man?"

Argo (2012)

Director: Ben Affleck

Starring: Ben Affleck, Bryan Cranston, Alan Arkin, John Goodman

"Okay, you got six people hiding out in a town of what, four million people, all of whom chant "death to America" all the livelong day. You want to set up a movie in a week. You want to lie to Hollywood, a town where everybody lies for a living. Then you're gonna sneak 007 over here into a country that wants CIA blood on their breakfast cereal, and you're gonna walk the Brady Bunch out of the most watched city in the world?"

Regular readers of this site will have gathered by now that I don't often go for the heavier stuff. Life's serious enough as it is without having even more terrorism, war and courtroom drama thrust in your eyeholes, so that's why I'm generally more *Motel Hell* than *Hotel Rwanda* when it comes to film taste. Still, I do appreciate a good film no matter what genre, so when *Argo* gathered a lot of attention at the Oscars I thought "Ar, go on then" (sorry).

It's based on the real-life story of the 'Canadian caper', an extraordinary event in which a man was sent into Iran and tasked with getting six American diplomats back to the US while an anti-American revolution was ensuing in the background.

You see, years prior America had been backing Mohammad Reza, an Iranian shah (king) who had made life miserable for Iranians for many years. When the Iranians revolted the shah fled and the US allowed him to travel there for medical treatment. Iran wanted him back so the entire country could kick the living pish out of him, but the US refused, so the Iranian people went apeshit, started massive street protests and stormed the US embassy, taking 52 of its workers hostage as they tried to destroy any incriminating files.

Six workers escaped unnoticed, though, and sought refuge in the Canadian embassy building (in real life they actually stayed at the British embassy too, but that was omitted from this film). While the Canadian ambassador kept them hidden in his house, he and the CIA (though mainly the CIA, according to this film: more on that later) came up with a plan to get them back to the States undetected.

The plan was *Argo*, a fake science fiction movie set up by the CIA to act as cover. After hosting a fake press event and posting fake ads for it in movie magazine *Variety* (to create a convincing alibi should anyone be questioned), CIA operative Tony Mendez (Affleck) was sent to Iran to find the Canadian embassy and tell the six what was going on. The story was that all seven would pose as *Argo's* film crew, on a location scouting exercise to see if it was worth shooting in Iran (so to speak).

Mind you, as the film shows, there are just a few problems with this plan. The first is that in order to prove they were location scouting, the group actually need to go out into Iran's busiest marketplace and walk around, taking photos, without being spotted or causing an

incident. The second is that if they manage this and get to the airport, they're likely to be heavily grilled so their story needs to be watertight.

Finally, the Iranians have set up a sweatshop to put together the shredded papers found at the US embassy, and they've started working on the documents that contain the staff's names and photos. Before long, the missing six's faces are going to be known to the Iranian police, making a return to America impossible. And you thought flying with Easyjet was a nightmare.

It could be argued that at two hours in length, *Argo* is technically an hour and a half too long. I've essentially just told you the whole story, all that remains is to see whether they get through the marketplace and the airport without incident and that's the film done and dusted, so in theory it could have been crammed into a short half-hour TV drama. In doing so though, it would have lost a lot of what makes it so outstanding, primarily its tension.

Ben Affleck's name alone has been a running joke among 'knowing' filmgoers (partly fuelled by the *Team America* song explaining in no uncertain terms why he's terrible) but I've always liked him, and *Argo* shows he knows what he's doing behind the camera as well as in front of it. Every shot is meaningful, every nervous glance tells a thousand words, and every anxious moment of suspense builds the tension ever tighter until the whole bloody thing's about ready to burst.

During the final twenty minutes I was dangerously close to breaking into a sweat, something that's never happened to me while I've watched a film (although *The Sexbendables* came close*).

All the cast are flawless, to a man (or woman). Affleck is eminently likeable as Mendez (though my obvious man-crush on him may sway my opinion somewhat), John Goodman and Alan Alda are hilarious as the Hollywood producers who help with the fake movie, Bryan Cranston is brilliant as Mendez's supervisor, and the six actors playing the would-be escapees are believable as a terrified group, uncertain if this ridiculous plan will work. They also look remarkably similar to the real-life group of six, as evidenced during the end credits where the real-life and movie characters are shown side-by-side.

The only real niggle I have with *Argo* is something I didn't even know until I read up more about the actual incident after watching the movie. While the film seems to make out that the plan is essentially the brainchild of the CIA, in reality – as then-president Jimmy Carter has since said in an interview – it was more the case that Ambassador Taylor at the Canadian embassy in Iran was responsible for 90% of the operation.

Changing history to make things seem a little more "America, fuck yeah" is a sneaky move (as does one that paints Iran in a very negative picture), even in a film that opens the country up to criticism at the start.

Its tinkering with the facts aside, *Argo* is a breathtaking film filled with enough tension that by the end of it you'll be too scared to go to the shops in case you're ID'ed for beer and end up cracking. Go see now.

*Disclaimer: *The Sexbendables* is not a real film, though with every day that passes I wish a little more that it was.

Five out of five

How to see it

Straightforward stuff here: *Argo* is available on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Former president Jimmy Carter, who was in office at the time of the real events the film were based on, has praised *Argo* and said it was a "great drama". However, he also says it's guilty of giving America too much credit, and that in reality it was the Canadian ambassador who came up with and orchestrated the idea. Poor Canada, forever being awesome but living in America's shadow.
- Alan Arkin and Bryan Cranston are both in *Argo*, and both were also in *Little Miss Sunshine*... although Arkin didn't know this. You see, the two never appeared in the same scene together in *Little Miss Sunshine* (nor in *Argo*), so during *Argo*'s promotional campaign, when someone pointed out to Arkin that this was the second time they'd appeared in a film together, he replied: "Get out of here, I had no idea".

Banshee Chapter (2013)

Director: Blair Erickson

Starring: Katia Winter, Ted Levine, Michael McMillan

“Every now and then you run up into a night that’s a stone-ass bummer from start to finish. In nights like those, if you know what’s good for you, you hunker down and you hide. This is not one of those nights.”

First, a history lesson. In the early 1950s, the US government and the CIA started a programme called MKUltra. This was a highly dodgy project in which unwitting US and Canadian citizens were made the test subjects of ‘behavioural engineering’ research.

Over the course of more than two decades, normal Americans were subjected to administration of drugs, hypnosis, sensory deprivation, isolation, verbal and sexual abuse and torture – by their own government – as a test to see how their mental states and brain functions could be altered.

Project MKUltra was officially halted in 1973, after the Watergate scandal caused the government to get a little jumpy. It wasn’t until years later that the details of the experiments were made known to the public. Naturally, some conspiratorial types believe such experiments are ongoing to this day.

Why am I telling you all this? Because it's all true, and it’s all relevant to the plot of *Banshee Chapter*.

The film begins with a lad called James carrying out an investigation into one of the unknown chemical drugs the CIA used in one of the aforementioned MKUltra tests.

James is a young documentary filmmaker, and he wants to document what happens to someone who takes the drug. With his friend filming him he drinks the chemical and soon starts to lose it. Suddenly some odd crackly radio music can be heard and weird shit starts going down. But that would be spoiling things.

James goes missing after the incident and his friend is taken into police custody, accused of killing him and hiding the body. Enter Anna, James’ old college chum, who decides to take over the investigation in an attempt to find out both what happened to her friend, and what exactly this chemical does.

As part of her investigation Anna meets Thomas Blackburn, an eccentric writer who used to investigate MKUltra back in the day. He’s by far the most interesting character in the film, though at times he does get a bit weird and do this:

As Anna and Blackburn investigate further they find tapes of the government experiments, showing the effects of the chemical on members of the public.

It's a clever way of shoehorning more 'found-footage' style into the film, and it's a good thing too because it does it relatively well. The scares are less predictable than in most other attempts at the genre, and do a spot-on job of keeping the viewer unsettled.

Eventually they find out what the chemical really does, and it has to be said the explanation, though an interesting twist, is pretty bloody hokey. Without wishing to spoil too much, it makes the brain more receptive to certain government transmissions.

It's an odd one, because the film's first few minutes feature genuine footage from news reports in the 1970s, suggesting that there's going to at least be an element of truth to what's about to happen.

Then it all just goes mental with bleeding eyes, people vomiting blood and loads of jump scares. Which, don't get me wrong, is perfectly effective. It's just not very believable.

Depending on your sensibilities, it may also leave a slightly bitter taste in your mouth to have a horror film based on real-life atrocities in which a government betrayed its country.

As long as you don't get fooled by that opening footage and don't mind a film that piggybacks off a real-life scandal for the sake of making a scary film, *Banshee Chapter* is worth a watch.

It's got scares in all the right places, it's got decent performances and it's got a brilliant soundtrack. Nicely done.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

Banshee Chapter is available on DVD in the UK and US. Don't buy it if you're expecting copious extra features – the three 'documentaries' included run to a total of about eight minutes, and still somehow manage to repeat some footage and soundbites.

Bits and pieces

- If you want to be annoyed, follow Chee Keong Cheung on Twitter (@CheeKeongCheung). He's the MD of the company that distributes *Banshee Chapter* in the UK and he must have a column on Tweetdeck constantly searching for the film's name or something, because every time someone tweets to say they've watched it and enjoyed it, he retweets it.
- The banshee is actually part of Irish mythology, and is apparently a female spirit. People say they can heard a banshee wailing when someone's about to die. Reports that Justin Bieber's career is a banshee are purely speculation.

Best Worst Movie (2009)

Director: Michael Stephenson

Starring: George Hardy, Michael Stephenson, Margo Prey, Connie Young

"You compare our movie to a Katherine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart movie and it fits in. Because our movie was all about people and the experiences those people are experiencing. Just as Casablanca and those movies are about people and the experiences they are experiencing."

Let's not beat about the bush here – I review an awful lot of shite on this site. That's what makes it fun. The worse a movie is, the more I generally enjoy watching it. As a film that many regard as the worst ever made, then, *Troll 2* is a film that holds a special place in my heart.

Most of us don't take the time, however, to consider the people who starred in these films, or those who directed or wrote them. How do these people feel when they read the countless reviews ripping their hard work to shreds? How does it affect your confidence when, 20 years down the line, people are still calling your film a bucket of dogshit or saying you shouldn't even be cast in a primary school play? These are the questions that *Best Worst Movie* attempts to answer.

Surprisingly, despite its notorious accolade as one of the worst films ever, the majority of the *Troll 2* cast are fine with being associated with it. Indeed, Michael Stephenson, who played the lead role of the young kid in the film, is the now-adult filmmaker who actually made this documentary. Together with George Hardy, the man who played the father in the movie and now works as a dentist in Alabama, they set about trying to find out more about this supposed cult following their crappy little movie is now meant to have. George in particular is surprised to see that it's been enjoying sell-out midnight screenings at various cinemas around the US and so he starts a tour of America, attending screenings and enjoying the fame he never had the first time around.

While this tour is the main focus of the documentary, it's interspersed with other little tidbits here and there. These range from sections on the more dedicated *Troll 2* fan clubs around the world (including one group who hold their own national Trolllympic Games) to a sobering wake-up call in which George, taking his newfound fame a little too far, travels to a signing at a memorabilia fair in Birmingham (UK, not Alabama) and is promptly ignored by everyone.

By far the most interesting asides however are the interviews with the various other cast members scattered throughout the film. These answer that all-important question – "what happens to you after you make such a bad movie" – and the resulting stories have varying levels of success. Connie Young, who played the sister in *Troll 2*, seems to be enjoying her life and continues to act, and while *Troll 2* was undoubtedly a blotch on her CV, she's happy to talk about it jokingly and not let it get to her, so that's a success in my books. Likewise, Don Packard, the odd troll-looking man who plays the shopkeeper in the evil town of Nilbog,

reveals that he actually walked straight onto the set from a psychiatric institution and continued to suffer from mental problems for years later, but then he turned up at one of the recent *Troll 2* screenings and the love he got from fans of the film made him feel good about himself for the first time in his life.

Not all the stories are happy ones, though, and ultimately it's the sadder ones that will stick with you. The elderly chap who played Grandpa Seth now sits in his house explaining how he did some plays and played old men in other films but never got married and never had kids, before eventually conceding "I've more or less wasted my life". Meanwhile, the woman who played the mother has completely lost the plot, living in seclusion with her elderly mother and still suffering delusions that she's still waiting on that next inevitable audition. To her, *Troll 2* is genuinely up there with a Katherine Hepburn film or *Casablanca*, with no hint of irony, and if there was still any question in the viewer's mind that she's one can short of a six-pack a return to her house later in the film leads to indisputable proof and arguably the most hilarious and yet tragic scene in the film.

To say any more about *Best Worst Movie* would spoil all the twists and turns it takes, and it makes it even easier to appreciate *Troll 2* when you realise how its cast and crew feel about it nowadays. If you haven't seen *Troll 2* you'll still get a lot out of this because it's interspersed with enough footage from the film to give you the general gist, but the ideal situation is definitely watching *Troll 2* and *Best Worst Movie* as a double-bill so you can enjoy the worst film ever made and then get the almost-as-silly inside story.

Four out of five

How to see it

Best Worst Movie is available on DVD only, in both the UK and US. I strongly recommend buying a copy of *Troll 2* alongside it, either as part of the *Troll & Troll 2* double bill DVD in the UK or the 20th anniversary 'Nilbog edition' Blu-ray in the US. The latter sadly has no special features to speak of, but is at least the best quality version of this worst quality film.

Bits and pieces

- *Troll 2* was proudly played at the third That Was A Bit Mental double-bill screening in London. It went down well, but that's partly because I'm such an awesome host. Probably.
- But what of *Troll 2* itself, I hear you ask? Where's its review? Why, you can find it in the That Was A Bit Mental Volume 1 ebook, dear reader. If you were reading in order you'd have read it already, you see. If you haven't then it looks like your rebellious, rulebreaking nature has bitten you squarely in the rump.

Beware: Children At Play (1989)

Director: Mik Cribben

Starring: Michael Robertson, Rich Hamilton, Robin Lilly, Lori Tirgrath

“Tear her to pieces! Bite through the bone! Gulp the blood! Gobble the flesh!”

The fine people at Troma specialise in making and distributing incredibly low-budget films that, while lacking in spectacle, certainly aren't lacking in ambition and sheer balls. *Beware: Children At Play* is one such movie, one with a plot so taboo there's no way it'd be distributed by a big studio.

It tells the story of John DeWolfe, an author who specialises in crime and the paranormal. He travels to the countryside with his wife and daughter to visit his friend Ross, who's a sheriff in a tiny country town. Ross's daughter has been missing for weeks, as have many of the other children in the area, and he wants to know if John has any ideas on how to find them.

What they don't realise is that all the missing kids – Ross's daughter included – have formed an odd group of feral children who, under the leadership of an older, manipulative teenager, roam the woods killing and eating anyone who steps onto their turf. Sometimes one of them will head back to the town to lure adults into following them into the woods and to their death, or at times if it's a woman who's been trapped the older teen will rape her to try and keep the evil seed going. Or something, I dunno. It's just an excuse to get some baps on the screen, though it's pretty dodgy.

What you then have is a relatively slow-paced film sprinkled with fun little set-pieces where numerous adults are killed in inventive ways by evil kids. It's odd, because the rest of the film can't decide whether it's a piece of low-budget shit (the acting quality is generally on par with that of a four-year-old with chocolate on his face trying to assure you he didn't get into the Milky Ways) or a hidden gem (the script may not be getting the best delivery, but it's clearly well-written with some great one-liners).

Anyway, all of these thoughts you're having while you watch the film quickly dissolve when the grand finale makes its appearance. Now, since we're just dealing with brainwashed children here you'd think that the best way to deal with this situation is to get the cops involved, head into the woods as a large group, use strength in numbers to apprehend the kids using tasers, handcuffs and the like, then take them to the nuthouse to try and knock the creepy cannibal side out of them. For some reason however the police and the rest of the adults (who are these children's parents, remember) decide enough is enough and it's time to kill them all.

This results in a fucking INSANE final five minutes in which numerous children aged five to fourteen are slaughtered in increasingly brutal ways. One gets a pitchfork in the throat and is pinned against a wall, another is stabbed in the back by her mum, while yet another is

shot at point blank range with a shotgun as their head explodes. I could only watch in stunned silence, awe and admiration at the sheer balls displayed by the filmmakers as I watched slaughter after slaughter. In the most memorable shot, a villager puts a pistol in an eight-year-old's mouth and blows his brains against the wall behind him. I'm not even joking. In total, eighteen children are killed in around two minutes.

Most of this is all done cheaply enough that it clearly looks fake, but the fact they'd even have the gall to try filming a whole village of children being brutally murdered in gory detail and not even try to pretend they're zombies or anything is the sort of controversial decision that stirs a feeling of respect in me for some reason. I could understand that in some people's eyes these filmmakers are morally bankrupt and the lowest of the low, but to me this is the perfect example of someone taking a genre clearly built around fantasy and pushing it to the limit to show people something they've never seen before.

Beware: Children At Play is basically *Children Of The Corn* with a budget a twentieth of the size, woodlands instead of cornfields and a far bloodier, more outrageous conclusion. And for that reason, I like it. If you want to see a film that is absolutely guaranteed to show you something you wouldn't see from a Hollywood production, this is it. Just don't watch it with a kid or they'll never trust you again.

Three out of five

How to see it

You can't. At least, not in the UK. For fairly obvious reasons, Troma seemingly didn't even try to release *Beware: Children At Play* on DVD in Britain. If you live in that neck of the woods and have a multi-region DVD player though you can import the US version.

Bits and pieces

- You can usually tell the quality of a Troma film by its title alone. Particularly brilliantly-named offerings include *Demented Death Farm Massacre*, *I Was A Teenage TV Terrorist*, *Surf Nazis Must Die*, *They Call Me Macho Woman!* and the intriguing sounding *Albino*.
- If you plan on seeing this one, don't watch the trailer since it gives away most of the dodgy special effect shots where the evil children are killed. Watch it fresh and the payoff will be greater.

The Beyond (1981)

Director: Lucio Fulci

Starring: Catriona MacColl, David Warbeck, Cinzia Monreale

Also known as: Seven Doors Of Death (USA)

“Be careful what you do, because this hotel was built over one of the seven doors of evil.”

Though Italian director Lucio Fulci may be best known in the UK for his video nasty *Zombi 2* (better known as *Zombie Flesh Eaters*), it's another video nasty that most horror fans worldwide associate with him. It's understandable, because *The Beyond* is easily one of his better films.

After starting with a flashback in which a poor sod in New Orleans is crucified in a cellar by a mob who think he's a warlock, we fast-forward to the present day (well, 1981) where we meet Liza (Catriona MacColl), who's moved from New York to New Orleans to inherit, refurbish and re-open a decrepit hotel.

It becomes clear very quickly that, as luck would have it, the hotel is built on a gateway to Hell, and as such there's a whole load of shit going down in the basement including the zombified remains of the lad from the flashback. That's Hell, not Hull, mind – though I appreciate it's hard to tell the difference. It's up to Liza along with her friend John (David Warbeck) to try to figure out how to stop this from happening.

I should probably make it clear that Italian films of this era can only really be judged among others of its ilk. If you're treating it like any other film released these days then much of it is laughable – the acting is atrocious and the dubbing is absolutely abysmal – but we're talking here about movies that were so low-budget they were shot silent and the soundtrack was cheaply dubbed in later.

Almost all of Fulci's films (as well as those of other Italian filmmakers at the time) used this technique and though snobs will say it completely ruins the films, more open-minded sorts will agree with me that it gives them a vintage charm. In fact, this clear zero-budget vibe only makes the film seem more impressive when it actually pulls off something memorable, because it's clear it had to have been achieved with next to no cash.

This being a Fulci film, and one of the films that ended up on the British video nasty list in the '80s, it should be fairly apparent what most of these 'memorable' scenes were: gory deaths. Many of the deaths in this film are the stuff of horror legend and some of them still look surprisingly realistic to this day, a true testament to the special effects work of Fulci and his effects guru Germano Natali.

Of course, much as with the fake scenes in *Faces Of Death* (reviewed elsewhere in this ebook), the added clarity of today's prints (I watched the film on Blu-ray) does expose a lot

of scenes as far less realistic than they seemed back when fourth-generation VHS copies provided a titillating blur that helped disguise the imperfections and made the viewer's mind fill in the grisly details. It's one of those rare situations where sometimes seeing isn't necessarily believing.

Because of this, the infamous scene in which a paralysed man has his face eaten apart by spiders is weakened a little when it becomes abundantly clear that some of the more active 'hero' spiders are about as fake as you can get, and when his now-clearly latex nose is peeled off it's almost comical.

With this in mind, that only makes it all the more impressive when the effects are convincing. While the spiders and the chap's fake nose won't fool anyone these days his tongue being torn off might, and when a helpless blind woman has her throat ripped out by her possessed guide dog you'll marvel at how Fulci and his crew managed to make it look so darkly realistic given their budgetary constraints.

Somewhat unconventionally for a horror film, the final twenty minutes in *The Beyond* are actually the best. Ironically, this wasn't actually anything to do with Fulci. In these twenty minutes a hospital is overrun by zombies, but Fulci had never planned to have zombies in it at all. The German distribution company who owned the rights to his films put pressure on him to add them however because his previous film *Zombi 2* had been so popular.

The resulting happy little accident is a film that starts like a haunted house movie and ends as a zombie movie, and it's considered by many as one of Fulci's best works as a result. While its excessive gore and terrible dubbing may not be to everyone's tastes, for those not bothered by such qualities it's one of the finest examples of Italian horror of that era.

Four out of five

How to see it

Although it was a banned video nasty back in the 80s, these days *The Beyond* is readily available uncut in the UK. Luckily, the lovely folks at Arrow Video have released a cracking print of it in Blu-ray and DVD flavours, complete with a couple of commentaries and some great documentaries about Fulci.

Bits and pieces

- The final 'abyss' scene in which numerous sand-covered dead bodies lie on the floor was filmed by slightly dodgy means. Fulci rounded up some local tramps, plied them with alcohol, made them strip naked and got them to lie drunk on the floor while he filmed. Fun!
- The spider attack scene may look cheap as shit but it actually found its way into a big-budget blockbuster. When Peter Parker gets bitten by a spider in Sam Raimi's 2002 *Spider-Man* movie, the nightmare sequence that follows include a brief clip from *The Beyond*.

Beyond The Mat (1999)

Director: Barry Blaustein

Starring: Mick Foley, Jake Roberts, Terry Funk, Vince McMahon

"My mother was 13 years old when I was born. Why? Because my dad raped a little girl that was in a room asleep. My dad was going out with my mother's mother. There you go. There's some bones for Jake the Snake."

I know professional wrestling isn't 'real'. I know the results are predetermined, I know the storylines are set months in advance and I know winning a championship belt is nothing more than a backstage reward for your in-ring ability and the way you connect with the crowd. So does Barry Blaustein, the documentary filmmaker who spent a few years making *Beyond The Mat*. But that doesn't mean the athletes involved (and they are athletes: they might have already picked a winner but it still hurts) don't often go through both physical and mental hell to bring an entertaining show to the public. This film aims to expose that torment.

Shot during the Attitude era of the WWF (as it was back then), *Beyond The Mat* introduces and follows a bunch of different wrestlers at various stages in their career. There's Darren Drozdov, a new signing at the WWF ready to make his big break. There's Tony Jones and Mike Modest, two wannabe superstars who train at a small wrestling school and want a shot at fighting with a big company. There's Terry Funk, a legend ready to hang up his boots, and Mick Foley, a legend-in-the-making at the top of his game as Mankind (the film was filmed before and during his famous Hell In A Cell falls). There's the people behind ECW, the upstart organisation looking to take on the big dogs of the WWF and WCW. And finally there's Jake 'The Snake' Roberts, a one-time superstar fallen on hard times.

It's Roberts' story that's perhaps the most harrowing, especially to people my age (early 30s) who grew up idolising him. At his height in the WWE, Jake The Snake was a cold, calculating master of intimidation: he was the ultimate bad guy and even though you booed him when he came to the ring, deep down you loved watching him on TV. By the time *Beyond The Mat* catches up with him he's a crack addict wrestling in two-bit hick towns, struggling to maintain relationships with his father (no wonder, considering how he was conceived) and his estranged daughter.

His tales of having sex on the road, with "two at a time, then three at a time, then two at a time with toys, then two at a time and I'll just watch" would sound like typical rock 'n' roll behaviour coming from the Rolling Stones or Russell Brand, but Roberts puts it into perspective by adding: "When you come home and try to make love to your wife, ain't no way. Ain't no way."

On a more positive note, the WWF footage is interesting to see. The story goes that Vince McMahon originally give full permission for Blaustein to film backstage and interview his stars, but when he saw what people were saying about him he tried to get the film banned.

What ultimately happened was the release of two versions of the film: a Theatrical Cut which doesn't really make too many contentious statements (except for a rant in which Jake Roberts mentions McMahon) and a Director's Cut which contains all the anti-Vince comments McMahon wanted to remove. Having seen the Theatrical Cut plenty of times in the past and the Director's Cut only recently (for the purposes of this review), the latter certainly changes the mood of the film and as such it's the Director's Cut that I recommend you hunt down if possible.

Beyond The Mat is an illuminating look at the world of professional wrestling and the people who make it happen. It'll surprise you, it'll anger you, it'll depress you and it'll make you realise that while the results are pre-determined, there's nothing fake about the struggles these guys face. And if nothing else, you'll come out of it thinking "that Mick Foley looks like a bloody lovely chap".

Four out of five

How to see it

There's only one version of *Beyond The Mat* on DVD in the UK, which is the standard Theatrical Cut. You can get it fairly cheaply. In the US the Theatrical Cut is out of print but you can find the Director's Cut easily.

Bits and pieces

- You're going to take the piss here, but if you want a modern day equivalent of *Beyond The Mat* try out *WWE Total Divas*. Yes, seriously. Half of this E! reality TV show is indeed a load of pish, but the other half is a genuinely interesting look at the behind-the-scenes going on at the WWE.
- *Beyond The Mat* may be a brilliant look at the hidden world of pro wrestlers, but let's not heap praise on Barry Blaustein just yet. He also wrote the screenplays for *The Nutty Professor* and *Nutty Professor 2: The Klumps*.

Black Christmas (1974)

Director: Bob Clark

Starring: Olivia Hussey, Margot Kidder, John Saxon, Keir Dullea, Marian Waldman

Also known as: Silent Night, Evil Night (USA title)

"Little baby bunting, daddy's went a-hunting, gonna fetch a rabbit skin to wrap his baby Agnes in."

Although *Halloween* is credited as the film that kicked off the slasher genre and *Friday The 13th* is the considered the one that inspired a slew of imitations, *Black Christmas* pre-dates them both by nearly half a decade.

This makes it all the more impressive, then, that despite being one of the earliest proper examples of the genre, it remains one of the better slasher movies 40 years after its original release.

Olivia Hussey (who first found fame in Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo & Juliet*) plays Jess, a student living at a college house with a bunch of other girls. Recently the house has been receiving a lot of dodgy phone calls from an unknown prank caller. I'm talking sexually explicit messages, c-bombs, the lot.

While the house's resident party animal Barb (*Superman*'s Margot Kidder) gets a kick out of giving the caller as good as he gets, the other girls are disturbed by the messages. Turns out they've every right to be upset, because the creepy bastard making the phone calls is actually making them from upstairs in the same house.

Things start to go tits-up when quiet girl Claire goes to her room and, unbeknownst to the rest of the housemates, is suffocated by the killer and dragged up to the attic, where she's made to sit in front of the window, plastic bag over her face and all.

When Claire's dad turns up to meet her the next day and she's nowhere to be seen, it soon becomes clear that something bad might have happened. He, Barb and Claire's boyfriend start hassling the police and trying to convince them to investigate her disappearance.

There are two main types of slasher film. The first has an established killer from the start – be that Freddy, Jason, Chucky, Michael Myers or what have you – with the plot focusing mainly which of the film's would-be victims will be able to defeat them.

Black Christmas is an example of the second type, the whodunit slasher, where the plot is as much about finding the killer's identity as how they're eventually defeated.

Whodunit slashers almost always have a red herring who seems to be the most likely killer, and *Black Christmas* is no different. It's got Peter, Jess's boyfriend, who's a first class knob-end and is controlling and aggressive.

You see, Jess is pregnant and she wants to have an abortion, but Peter's having none of it. The stress causes him to fuck up an important piano recital and he wrecks his school's piano, before heading over to the house to sort things out with Jess. Drama!

The evidence against Peter mounts when the dodgy phone calls start referencing conversations Jess has had with him regarding the abortion, making it seemingly clear that he has to be the one making them.

The whodunit plot and the unique visual style of the killings make *Black Christmas* feel more like a North American (Canadian, to be exact) version of an Italian giallo film, the sort of stylised murder movie that the likes of Dario Argento and Mario Bava were renowned for. While it doesn't have the dodgy dubbed vocals and pleasantly low-quality production quality of a typical giallo, it does still have a similar mood and tone.

One aspect in which it certainly outdoes giallos, however, is the performances. Olivia Hussey does a decent job as Jess, but the supporting cast is fantastic. Marian Waldman is hilarious as the alcoholic landlady, Margot Kidder is convincingly irritating as the constantly drunk Barb and John Saxon does his 'pissed off cop' routine masterfully, a full decade before he'd do it again in *A Nightmare On Elm Street*.

Warning: The next paragraph spoils the ending, so skip it if you don't want to know what happens.

I said earlier that the plot of whodunit slashers tends to revolve around finding out who the killer is, and then figuring out how to defeat them. In this respect, *Black Christmas* is interesting in that neither question is answered. As the final credits roll to the sound of a telephone ringing, we still don't know the killer's identity: all we do know is that he's still in the house, alone with Jess.

Black Christmas may be one of the oldest examples of the modern slasher film, but it's still one of the best. It still has the power to shock four decades later, and not even a slightly shonky remake in 2006 could damage its reputation. If you're a fan of slashers and you haven't seen it yet, correct this as soon as possible because it's a Christmas cracker (sorry).

Four and a half out of five

How to see it

Black Christmas is only available on DVD in the UK. In America, you can choose between either the DVD or a Blu-ray edition, which is naturally the best way to see the film.

Bits and pieces

- The argument over what the first slasher movie was is one that continues to rage on, mostly among neckbearded types to be fair. Some say it was 1960's *Peeping Tom*, because it

featured an antagonist that hunted and killed a series of people. Others say it was *Black Christmas* because it fit more in line with modern slasher conventions. Others still claim *Halloween* is the first 'true' one because it laid the foundation for countless imitations to follow. I couldn't give an eighth of a shite, to be honest: they're all worth a watch.

- *Black Christmas* was remade in 2006 and, surprisingly, it's one of those few remakes that isn't actually terrible. By no means is it anywhere as impressive as the original, mind.

The Blair Witch Project (1998)

Directors: Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sanchez

Starring: Heather Donahue, Josh Leonard, Mike Williams

"I just want to apologize to Mike's mom, Josh's mom, and my mom. And I'm sorry to everyone. I was very naive. I am so so sorry for everything that has happened. Because in spite of what Mike says now, it is my fault. Because it was my project."

There have been so many shaky-cam movies since the release of *The Blair Witch Project* that it can be hard to go back to the film that kicked off the frenzy and appreciate it in a more recent context. It no longer feels fresh, it no longer feels original, but what it does still offer is a well-structured, creepy film... as long as you've never seen it before.

The story goes that three student filmmakers – Heather, Josh and Mike – decide to make a documentary on Ellie Kedward, a woman who lived near Blair, Maryland in the 1700s and was dubbed the Blair Witch by those who shunned and exiled her from her village. Kedward was said to have led children away from the village and killed them as punishment for her banishment. Fast-forward to the 1940s and a madman called Rustin Parr takes seven children into the woods and kills them, claiming the Blair Witch told him to.

And so, in 1994, our trio of filmmakers set out to investigate and try to find out more about the legend. Or at least, they did. You see, *The Blair Witch Project* opens with a message that Heather, Josh and Mike went missing while filming this documentary, and the footage that makes up the movie is what was found in the woods by a search party looking for them. Of course, in reality it's all bollocks and Heather, Mike and Josh were just actors who are alive and well and still struggling to find film roles to this day, but at the time of its release *The Blair Witch Project's* rather convincing website and a 'real' documentary about the Blair Witch legend on the Sci-Fi Channel had plenty of filmgoers certain that what they were watching was real footage of three missing children.

And so we see Heather interviewing local townsfolk about the Ellie Kedward tale, and whether they thought it was real. We see her standing at various locations in Maryland, reading from a book about Maryland's history. We see lots of 'raw' footage where the trio buy supplies from a supermarket and goof around in a hotel room. And then we see them parking their car, leaving it behind and heading into the woods.

The Blair Witch Project plays on our fear of the unknown, doing this not only by keeping what's going to happen from us, but also the three actors. When it was being shot, the three were only given very vague instructions as to what their characters should do that day – go missing, drop the map, etc – and anything else they experienced was completely unexpected.

So when they wake up one morning to find odd piles of sticks next to their stuff, they had no idea that was going to happen (the film crew did it as they slept). When they hear the noises

of children laughing outside their tent at night (tape recordings being played by the crew), the terror you see and hear from them is genuine. This is what sets *The Blair Witch Project* apart from the countless imitators that followed it, in which the 'fear' was carefully scripted, rehearsed and acted out to try and look authentic: here it actually was.

This play on the fear of the unknown is unfortunately the movie's downfall too. While watching the film for the first time can be an extremely unnerving and at times terrifying experience (especially if you've got a good sound system that lets you hear the film's weird noises all around you during certain scenes), once you've seen the ending and know what happens (or, indeed, doesn't) then watching the film a second time is a greatly muted experience. Fear of the unknown becomes expectedness of the known, and what you're left with is 81 minutes of people running around with a camera.

If you've never seen *The Blair Witch Project*, see it. It took an awful lot of work to make something like this look so genuine, and if you don't know much about it you will most likely be terrified. Yes, there'll be the odd bigheaded knob who'll boast "that wasn't scary at all" (even if they don't really mean it), but this film is something of a masterpiece when it comes to fear management and the vast majority of first-time viewers will be scared stupid. This is in no way a film intended for multiple viewings though, so if you remember seeing it when it first came out and fancy another viewing you may find it's not so much a case of being scared in the woods as a walk in the park.

Four out of five

How to see it

The Blair Witch Project is currently available on DVD and, oddly, Blu-ray (even though the deliberately poor quality footage doesn't benefit from an HD picture in any way). Both have the same great extras (including a really interesting Director's Commentary and the entire fake documentary shown on the Sci-Fi Channel to promote the film), but the Blu-ray also has a few very interesting alternative endings.

Bits and pieces

- If you're in the mood for something completely different, check out *Blair Witch 2: Book Of Shadows*. It was critically mauled when it was released because its higher budget and its decision to ditch the handheld shaky-cam in favour of more traditional set-based filmmaking meant it was nothing like the original, but treat it as what it's supposed to be – a fairly meta story that treats the first *Blair Witch* as a movie, albeit one in which the events were indeed real – and it may surprise you. I liked it.

- It's very easy to mistake *The Blair Witch Project* as a handful of pricks running around in the forest, but there is actually a pretty detailed backstory in there if you feel like going to the trouble of looking into it. Try to get your hands on the book *The Blair Witch Project Dossier*, which provides a lot of the legend that leads to the events of the film, and if you can try to find the three Blair Witch PC games that were released in 2000. Each is set in a different time period – one in 1941, one in the 1860s and one in 1785 – and fills you in on more of the backstory.

Blood Glacier (2013)

Director: Marvin Kren

Starring: Gerhard Liebmann, Edita Malovcic, Brigitte Kren

Also known as: The Station

"Maybe the legends of wolfmen and mermaids are based on biological realities. Maybe the Egyptian god of the dead, Anubis, really was a human being with a jackal's head."

When the DVD cover of a film has a quote comparing it to a classic, you'd be right to feel a little suspicious. *Blood Glacier's* cover, for example, suggests it's like legendary John Carpenter sci-fi horror film *The Thing*. And this would have been accurate, had *The Thing* been deeply average.

Set in the German Alps, the film focuses on a group of researchers working in a tiny lab as they research glacial reduction and how it affects climate change. Obviously this subject matter isn't exactly likely to pump your nads, which is why *Blood Glacier* then throws a curveball in the shape of, well, a blood-coloured glacier.

Researcher Janek (Gerhard Liebmann) is out walking his dog when he comes across a large glacier leaking a red liquid. Investigating a nearby cave he finds a creature that attacks his dog, so both Janek and his canine companion leg it back to the lab to tell the others what happened.

It turns out the red stuff is an odd organic substance which is transforming the local wildlife into mutated beasts. What's worse, there's a VIP group from the Ministry on the way to check up on how the team's research is going.

The introduction of the group adds a few more sub-plots to keep things interesting. For example, among the group is Tanja, Janek's ex-lover who later reveals she was pregnant with his baby but had it aborted. Ouch.

Meanwhile, once the frozen shit hits the fan and all manner of mutated creatures start knocking on the lab door, the group dynamic begins to feel reminiscent to that of *Night Of The Living Dead*, with arguments and fights threatening to harm the residents before the mutants get a chance to.

By mentioning Romero's zombie masterpiece though, I've just made the same mistake the DVD cover does. In no way does *Blood Glacier* come close to matching *Night Of The Living Dead* when it comes to studying themes of trust and co-operation within a group mechanic, partly because most of the characters are completely forgettable.

The only stand-out performance, other than those of Janek and Tanja, is that of the Minister herself, played by Brigitte Kren (the director's mother). Her character is a nasty piece of

work and so does a good job of racking up the tension in the lab. Other than that, though, it's a fairly dull group.

Sadly, the creature effects are as humdrum as the performances. Don't get me wrong, there are some great ideas here: mutated cockroaches, foxes, goats and eagles appear at various points throughout the film.

The problem is they look so unconvincing, ruining the tone of what's supposed to be a serious film. Had *The Thing* featured creatures that looked like they were designed by a high school model-building club it wouldn't have had the same chilling effect (if you'll pardon the pun).

The final straw is the absolutely ridiculous ending, which is just beyond belief and will just have the audience thinking: "Seriously? How the fuck is that going to work?"

Spoiler warning: skip the next paragraph if you don't want to find out what the ending is.

Earlier in the film, a pregnant woman succumbs to the organism and dies. At the end, after surviving the onslaught of mutant monsters and leaving us all in no doubt whatsoever that this organic thingy is a very bad thing, Janek and Tanja find her mutant baby, which looks disgusting and undoubtedly evil. Amazingly, they decide to adopt it as a replacement for the one she aborted, and leave on a helicopter with it. WHAT.

Do not be fooled by the hype, *Blood Glacier* is no more like *The Thing* than a pack of sausages is like *Babe: Pig In The City*. What it actually is, is a passable Austrian horror film that is perfectly watchable but drops the ball with disappointing regularity.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

Blood Glacier received a DVD release in the UK in early 2014 courtesy of Studiocanal, then got a US DVD release in August 2014.

Bits and pieces

- Despite how average it is, *Blood Glacier* was still considered impressive enough to win three awards at the Austrian Film Awards - best makeup, best sound editing and, amazingly, best actor for Gerhard Liebmann.
- I'm sure Liebmann would have been happy enough with that award, but he also won another that same year - a Diagonale Actor Award (awarded for excellence in Austrian film) for the dubiously named *Bad Fucking*. Bet that was an awkward ceremony.

The Burning (1981)

Director: Tony Maylam

Starring: Brian Matthews, Leah Ayres, Brian Backer, Jason Alexander

"They never found his body, but he survived. He lives on whatever he can catch. Eats them raw, alive. No longer human. Right now, he's out there. Watching, waiting. Don't look: he'll see you. Don't move: he'll hear you. Don't breathe: you're dead!"

Although there were a number of slasher films before *Friday The 13th* (most notably *Halloween* and *Black Christmas*), it was that film's success which led to the birth of a sub-genre that was by far the most oft-imitated during the '80s: the camp slasher.

(Obviously, by that I mean slasher films set in a summer camp, as opposed to films where a killer prances around going "oo-er missus" before stabbing someone.)

One of the earliest imitations – and one of the best, actually – was *The Burning*, a film written and produced by the then-indie Weinstein brothers and their small studio Miramax.

The story's straightforward enough. Ten years ago, a bunch of kids at a summer camp decide they hate one of their counsellors, Cropsy, so much that they want to play a trick on him.

One kid sneaks into Cropsy's cabin while he sleeps and places a rotting human skull next to his bedside, with a lit candle inside it. Christ knows where he got that skull from, mind.

Unfortunately the trick doesn't go quite as planned and Cropsy, understandably getting a bit of a fright when he wakes up, kicks out and knocks the skull over.

This sets his bedsheets on fire, which in turn ignites a conveniently placed bottle of gasoline on his floor, causing the entire cabin to go up in flames.

Burnt worse than a narcoleptic's dinner during one of their bad turns, Cropsy runs screaming out of his cabin, all ablaze, and dunks himself in the nearest river while the young pranksters run like fuck, escaping the crime scene pronto.

Luckily for Cropsy, he isn't dead: he just has a melted face that resembles a strawberry yoghurt with jam mixed through it. Unluckily for a different bunch of kids at a nearby summer camp ten years later, he's still a wee bit annoyed at being cooked.

Checking himself out of hospital, Cropsy heads back to the camp where he was burned alive, stopping to quickly murder a prostitute in New York along the way (just to have a kill in the first half-hour, you see).

Unlike *Friday The 13th*, which took place at a camp that was still days from opening, the camp in *The Burning* is already thriving and full of children of all ages.

The potential controversy of Cropsy causing some sort of child genocide is helpfully averted when it's decided that a bunch of the older teenage kids are to go on a canoeing trip down a river to a different part of the woods.

It's here where Cropsy is lying in wait, thereby turning *The Burning* into your typical 'serial killer stalks and kills teens' film instead of something that could have been far bleaker.

There are three things that make *The Burning* stand out from the countless other *Friday The 13th* clones that would eventually saturate drive-ins, grindhouse cinemas and video shelves. The first is its odd soundtrack.

Rather than the typical heart-pounding soundtrack you'd expect from a slasher film, *The Burning* instead opts for a score composed by Yes keyboardist Rick Wakeman. The result is an odd mix of progressive synth music and surprisingly jaunty music which, somehow, actually works.

The second is the acting. Without exception, *The Burning's* cast delivers spot-on performances, providing us with characters that we love, hate, laugh at and care about for all the right reasons.

Whether it's charismatic smart-ass Dave (played by *Seinfeld's* Jason Alexander), or Todd, the responsible counsellor with a shady past, each actor plays off their fellow characters well and there's a general feeling that they were genuine friends off the set.

Or, as my wife put it, "this is a cute movie so far". Presumably she was only referring to the group dynamic at the campsite and conveniently ignoring the fact that Cropsey had already been set on fire and subsequently plunged a knife into a hooker's stomach by that point.

Speaking of which, that's the other notable aspect of *The Burning*: its special effects. When *Friday The 13th Part 2* went into production Paramount asked effects guru Tom Savini (who had worked on the first film) to return. Savini, however, turned Paramount down and instead signed up to work on *The Burning*, and it shows.

While there are a decent amount of gory shots to be seen, by far the best example is the infamous raft scene, in which a batch of teens is quickly killed in a number of gruesome ways within a brief 20-second period.

Fingers are cut off, someone has garden shears planted in their neck... it's all grisly stuff and while it clearly looks fake these days, it must have had a hell of an impact back in '81.

Sure enough, the home video version of *The Burning* was banned in the UK, becoming one of the infamous Video Nasties (of which I eventually intend to review all 72).

Looking at it now though, there's no way it deserved to share the same notoriety as the likes of *Faces Of Death* or *Cannibal Holocaust* (which is reviewed over the page). Indeed, its gory scenes pale in comparison to today's offerings, with the likes of *Saw* and even the *Friday The 13th* remake eclipsing it in terms of gore.

Its unwarranted Video Nasty status aside, then, *The Burning* is worth a watch as one of the better examples of camp slasher cinema. Its brilliant performances are uncharacteristic for the genre, and it's got enough blood to satisfy most gorehounds without being too over-the-top.

Four out of five

How to see it

Tragically, despite now being passed fully uncut in the UK, *The Burning* has been out of print for a while, meaning the best chance Brits will have of getting a copy is buying the old out-of-print DVD from Amazon's new/used section or on eBay. Americans have by far the better deal with a stunning Blu-ray/DVD combo version, which is sadly region locked.

Bits and pieces

- The story of Cropsy was actually based on a real campfire story that, apparently, continues to be told to this day in New York and New Jersey. You'd think they'd have enough real-life crimes to talk about.
- While on-camera *The Burning* was the debut for the likes of Jason Alexander and Holly Hunter, it was also the first movie for two other famous names off-camera. Harvey Weinstein created and produced the film, while his brother Bob Weinstein helped with the screenplay.

Cannibal Holocaust (1979)

Director: Ruggero Deodato

Starring: Robert Kerman, Francesca Ciardi, Perry Pirkanen, Gabriel Yorke, Luca Barbareschi

TV EXECUTIVE – “Today people want sensationalism. The more you rape their senses the happier they are.”

PROFESSOR MONROE – “Ah, yes, that’s typical western thought. Civilised, isn’t it? That’s what Alan thought and that’s why he’s dead. The Yacumo Indian is a primitive and he has to be respected as such. You know, did you ever think of the Yacumo point of view? That we might be the savages?”

The story goes that when Sergio Leone – the legendary Italian director of *Once Upon A Time In The West* and *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly* – first saw *Cannibal Holocaust*, he felt compelled to write a letter to his friend Ruggero Deodato, the film’s director.

It read: “Dear Ruggero, what a movie! The second part is a masterpiece of cinematographic realism, but everything seems so real that I think you will get in trouble with all the world.”

He was right. *Cannibal Holocaust* was eventually banned in numerous countries (the unofficial estimate is around 50, including the UK and its native Italy), and such was the realistic nature of the on-screen deaths that Deodato was actually arrested and held on trial under suspicion of murder of the four main actors: a charge he was only able to drop after getting all four actors to appear at the courtroom.

Though the absurdly insulting title and shopping list of depravity contained within (which I’ll get to later) may suggest that *Cannibal Holocaust* is little more than a tacky little dollop of grindhouse grot, it’s actually a very accomplished and provocative film, albeit one that’s intensely difficult to watch.

The movie is split into two parts. The first sees a New York professor, aided by a guide and a captured tribesman, travelling into a South American jungle to try and find four missing filmmakers who had left two months prior to shoot a documentary on the existence of cannibal tribes in the jungle.

After getting into numerous scrapes and witnessing some truly shocking things (which, again, I’ll get to), the professor eventually finds a grisly shrine on the beach containing the remains of the filmmakers and all their camera equipment.

Deciding he needs to get their film reels home to see what they’d shot, he spends time with the tribe, partaking in their grim rituals and eventually gaining their trust and their permission to take the reels.

The second part of the film is by far the most interesting, as the professor returns to New York and watches the footage with three NYU executives. As we watch the footage with them, we see how the four filmmakers commit various atrocities on both the tribes they encounter and the forest's wildlife, all while acting up to the camera and pretending their interests in this documentary are noble. Slowly it becomes clear that they may not have been entirely innocent after all.

The 'found footage' idea is a clever one that predates *The Blair Witch Project* (the film many credit with the birth of the genre) by more than two decades. Everything is shot so convincingly, bad dubbing aside, that it's little wonder many considered it to be genuine footage. It's made even more believable – for better or worse – by the fact that some of the atrocities shown look real because, well, they are.

Every grisly animal killing in the film is completely genuine. The actors really did drag a giant turtle out of the water, behead it, pry its shell off, scoop out its intestines and eat it as its limbs twitched disturbingly. A South American native really did scalp a monkey and eat its brains. A pig really was shot in the head, a spider and a snake really were hacked in two by a hatchet and a muskrat really was tied up and had its throat slit.

The above are all shown (in the uncut version, at least) in unflinching detail, making it clear to the viewer that what they're seeing is really happening and no amount of special effect trickery could imitate it.

Incidentally, until recently the film had nearly five minutes of cuts in the UK with all animal scenes removed. This surprisingly changed in 2011, when Shameless Entertainment resubmitted the film for Blu-ray release in the UK and were told they could reinstate all the animal slaughter footage, with the exception of the muskrat scene.

While I'm happy for muskrat fans everywhere that the footage of its slaughter remains banned, the passing of all the other animal deaths seems to me a case of locking the stable door after the horse has already had a bolt in the head.

My personal view of these scenes is that they're about as tasteless as they come. That said, I'm staunchly anti-censorship (as long as the footage is within the confines of the law) and as such, if the BBFC has deemed that most of the animal slaughter footage isn't considered an illegal act then they should be in there, much as I hate them.

Another controversial sequence, known as the 'Road To Hell', shows another of the filmmakers' documentaries and features real-life footage of executions in Nigeria. While the grainy quality of this footage disguises the detail somewhat it still makes for bleak viewing and once again you're left in no doubt that it's genuine.

What this ultimately does is alter the viewer's perception of what the line of decency is in the film, and makes it clear that despite what they think is supposed to be taboo, the showing of real animal slaughter and real executions mean all bets are off. As a result, when humans are abused and mutilated later in the film (in a surprisingly realistic manner), what

you've already witnessed earlier makes it a lot harder to convince yourself that this isn't the real deal too.

Cannibal Holocaust wasn't the first film to try this – the even more reprehensible *Faces Of Death* also mixed genuine footage with staged footage to try and make the presence of the former increase the believability of the latter. The difference was that the staged scenes in *Faces Of Death* looked laughably fake, whereas here they're disturbingly convincing.

I don't want to linger too much on the numerous nasty incidents the viewer is forced to watch, so here's a list with no commentary and you can decide for yourself what your limit would be. Bear in mind all scenes are shown in graphic detail, with few cutaways and things only obscured at moments where it would be impossible to film without doing it for real.

(Obviously, the next paragraph has massive spoilers)

A tribesman is seen raping a tribeswoman with a giant stone phallus, then raping her with a spiked mudball, then beating her to death with a boulder, as punishment for adultery. Another tribeswoman is raped by the film crew. The female member of the film crew is gang-raped and beheaded. A pregnant tribeswoman has her baby forcibly removed and buried alive in mud while the woman is beaten to death. Another tribeswoman is found impaled on a large wooden pole (as the poster depicts). Another filmmaker is hit with a spear, hacked in two and has his torso ripped apart and eaten. After being bitten by a snake (off-camera), one man has his leg hacked off but dies of shock anyway. Finally, a filmmaker has his penis cut off: I have no idea how they managed to fake this last one because it looks so genuine.

As you can see, it isn't exactly *Wreck-It Ralph*. Somewhere among all this depravity is a real point, and genuine commentary on the state of journalism, in that the same reporters and filmmakers who preach about the horrors of this world are themselves using those horrors (and sometimes helping create them) for fame and ratings.

A warning shown at the start of an Australian DVD version released a few years back unwittingly proves this very point. It reads: "As distributors of this film, we wish to state with absolute sincerity that by no means do we condone the artistic decisions employed by the makers of this film. However, as firm believers in the constitutional right of free speech, we do not believe in censorship.

"What you will see will definitely shock and offend you. Nonetheless, it should be viewed as a disturbing historical document of a bygone era of extreme irresponsibility which no longer exists and, hopefully, will never exist again."

Ironically, in opening with this warning to those who have already paid for the DVD, the company in question is only demonstrating what the film is trying to say: that some are more than happy to display mock outrage at atrocities while cashing in on the sensationalism they provide.

If you can see past the onslaught of graphic and sexual violence and reach its genuine, valid message then *Cannibal Holocaust* will prove it's more than just a sleazy shock movie. Doing so requires an incredibly strong stomach though, and making it to the end will ensure that *Cannibal Holocaust* stays with you – for a number of reasons – for a long time.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

Cannibal Holocaust has been released in a myriad of versions over the years, all with varying degrees of cuts made. In the UK the most complete version is the aforementioned DVD and Blu-ray by Shameless Entertainment. The Blu-ray is the best quality version of the print you'll see anywhere and is almost fully uncut, containing the entire 'Road To Hell' sequence. Only the 15-second muskrat killing scene has been cut (replaced with random shots of monkeys in trees as we hear it squealing), plus it also includes a 'new Director's Edit' in which Deodato has gone through the film again and removed all of the animal killings. It also has some interesting interviews with the cast and crew, some of whom are less than kind when talking about the film.

If you live in America, there's no Blu-ray version available there (though the UK one is region-free so you can import it). However, the Deluxe DVD edition from Grindhouse Releasing features a second disc full of extras, the fully uncut version of the film (muskrat scene and all) and its own 'animal cruelty free version', so what you lose in picture quality you get in bonuses.

Bits and pieces

- To this day I'm torn on *Cannibal Holocaust*. I personally think it's an incredibly effective film with stunningly realistic special effects given its tiny budget, and while the animal killings are disgusting to watch they're very much a relic of their time and hard to criticise in this newly-enlightened era 35 years later. Despite this, I still find it difficult to recommend *Cannibal Holocaust* to others looking for a good horror film, because it make me feel they'll think less of me as a person if they watch it and are disgusted by it. So if you give it a go based on this review, don't hate me.

- Director Ruggero Deodato recently condemned the animal killings in his film, saying he regrets everything he did, including making the film in the first place. I'm not entirely sure how genuine he's being there, given that in the past he's claimed the killings were in the name of art and every animal killed was then eaten for food. Nonetheless, this is the reason for the 'Director's Re-Edit', which appears in the UK Shameless Blu-ray release and removes or severely cuts many of the animal killings under his apparent instruction.

The Care Bears Movie (1985)

Director: Arna Selznick

Starring: Voices of Mickey Rooney, Jackie Burroughs, Cree Summer, Sunny Thrasher

"They must be taught a lesson! A lesson for the children! A lesson for the town! A lesson for everyone!"

First, a disclaimer. I watched the shit out of *The Care Bears Movie* when I was a wee tot, and it terrified me every single time. When I saw it was available on the US Netflix library (which can be accessed using this trick), I decided it would be the perfect film for That Was A Bit Mental, for reasons that will become obvious. Well, even more obvious than anthropomorphic bears that can project magical symbols from their guts.

The film opens on an orphanage, where delightful-old-man-and-not-at-all-a-padeo Mr Cherrywood (Mickey Rooney) is tucking the children into bed. They ask him for a bedtime story to help them sleep peacefully and he obliges, ill-advisedly deciding to tell them the one about the evil as fuck book that tried to plunge the Earth into misery.

Before that, Mr Cherrywood's tale opens with Kim and Jason, two snotty little kids whose parents have "gone away" and hate everyone as a result. They're so jaded with life they seemingly can't even give an ounce of a fuck when two brightly coloured teddy bears approach them and ask to be their friends. Despite their best efforts, Friend Bear and Secret Bear (for it is they) don't manage to win over Kim and Jason, despite delightful not-at-all-sinister-or-voyeuristic lines like "we know a lot of things about you: Kim reads a lot of books and wants to be a nurse when she grows up, and Jason, you want to be a jet pilot".

That doesn't matter though, because up in the world of Care-A-Lot the Care Bears are working on a new machine that can quickly teleport bears back there from Earth. The machine goes a little wonky though and as well as Friend Bear and Secret Bear, Kim and Jason are also beamed up to Care-A-Lot. Naturally they're pissed off at the prospect of more annoying bears but in one of the quickest mood swings ever it only takes half a verse of a musical number to completely win them over. Handy.

Meanwhile, Tenderheart Bear has been sent to offer friendship to Nicholas, a wannabe magician who feels all alone because other kids make fun of him for playing with his wand all the time (ahem). It's too late though because Nicholas has found a magic book, a book possessed by an evil spirit in the form of a big green face that looks like a cross between Grace Jones and the Wicked Witch from Snow White with food poisoning. The face teaches Nicholas some evil spells and he uses them at his next magic show to remove all the love from the children there. The face then tells Nicholas to collect some items for her so that they can both create a spell so evil that it'll stop the entire world from caring about each other.

Tenderheart legs it back to Care-A-Lot to tell the Care Bears but they already know: somehow Care-A-Lot is linked to human emotion so as people on Earth stop caring it starts to wreck Care-A-Lot. If Nicholas manages to complete the spell then nobody on Earth will care about anyone and, to put it in the nicest way possible, the Care Bears are fucked.

So begins a journey consisting of numerous songs, various hijinks and a trip to the Forest Of Feelings, a mysterious new place with a bunch of cuddly new animals called the Care Bear Cousins (each sold separately). It's at this point that it becomes abundantly clear *The Care Bears Movie* is simply a 75-minute advert for these new toys.

In fact, I remember the VHS tape I had as a child actually started with an advert for the Care Bear Cousin toys before the film even started. "What's this?" many children would have thought at the time. "New characters?" They spoiled the big fucking surprise! Clearly the filmmakers realised most kids tend to turn a video off before the end credits have finished so they decided "let's stick the ad at the start so they see it and buy the toys, to hell with the plot". But I digress.

Considering its target audience *The Care Bears Movie* is one scary film. That bastard face-in-the-book gets more and more evil as the movie progresses – eventually speaking in two voices at once and changing colour – and there are plenty of other scary moments throughout such as the evil purple cloud that roams around, the giant tree monster that grabs the Care Bears and nearly eats them, and the final chase through a creepy fairground while a distressing song called 'Look Out' plays in the background. Terror, thy name is Care Bears.

That aside, the rest of the film remains good-natured fun for very young children with lots of positive messages throughout, though it does overdo it a bit at times ("parents are wonderful, aren't they?" asks Kim at one point. Easy, missus). All your favourite Bears are in there, though it's annoying that my favourite, Good Luck Bear (or Celtic Bear as I used to call him, because his symbol looks like the Celtic FC logo) gets less screen time than even the annoying Care Bear baby twins, Baby Hugs and Baby Tugs (the latter being not only the name of a Care Bear but also a self-pleasuring technique for those recovering from genital surgery). And the twist ending, which went right over my head when I was a kid, is a delightful little treat, though if we're to assume that (spoilers) Mrs Cherrywood is Kim then that means Jason is unaccounted for and in such circumstances I usually assume that means they died horribly. Poor Jason.

Um, anyway. *The Care Bears Movie*. If you have (or can borrow) some young kids watch it, because they'll love it. If you don't and you saw it when you were young, watch it again for nostalgic purposes because it holds up well. If, however, you've never seen it before and don't have a sprog to keep you company, by all means give it a go if you don't mind feeling like a creepy old person.

Three out of five

How to see it

The Care Bears Movie is available for a few quid on DVD in both the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Good job Care Bears, you made a lot of children illiterate because they were too fucking terrified to open a book. Probably.
- A sequel, you ask? But of course! *Care Bears Movie II: A New Generation* was released in 1986 and saw the Care Bears trying to stop an evil demon called Dark Heart taking over a summer camp. It was the first film I ever saw in the cinema, but I was only three years old and I haven't seen it again since so I'm not sure my review would be up to scratch.
- The Care Bears were recently given a reboot with *Care Bears: Welcome To Care-A-Lot*, a horrible-looking CGI cartoon series. Good Luck Bear even has an Irish accent in it. Is nothing sacred?

Children Of The Corn III: Urban Harvest (1995)

Director: James Hickox

Starring: Daniel Cerny, Ron Melendez, Jim Metzler

Eli – “We who are young have a vision and that is the gift to us from He Who Walks Behind The Rows. Our greatest harvest is to come!”

T-LOC – “Harvest this, motherfucker.”

Let's face it, there are only so many corn-related scenarios you can plant before the crop gets spoiled, so after *Children Of The Corn* and its iffy sequel it was decided to take the series to the streets instead. No longer are we dealing with a town full of creepy-looking Amish kids, instead we've got two of them living in the city.

Joshua and his younger brother Eli have been moved from Gatlin to live with foster parents in Chicago. Since they come from Amish backgrounds it takes them a little while to get settled into their new city lifestyles, and this is further compounded by the fact that the younger brother is a fucking maniac.

Things come to a head when the inseparable brothers go to their new city school and are promptly separated (due to their age), which doesn't go down too well with Eli. While Joshua tries to fit in, learn the city life and befriend his new classmates, Eli instead starts hatching a plot to make everyone pay.

For the most part, *Children Of The Corn III* is a passable but ultimately forgettable yarn where the usual 'weird kids getting used to a foster home and new school' tropes are dished out left, right and centre. Meanwhile, a number of dull Omen-style 'accidental' killings take place, all seemingly committed by the mysterious He Who Walks Behind The Rows, the evil deity from the first two films.

As Eli starts preaching at his school about He Who Walks Behind The Rows and giving lectures on why adults are so evil but kids are brilliant (or words to that effect), the other children at the school start to take notice and become brainwashed by his teachings, forming a cult of kids ready and willing to destroy the adults. So far, so meh. Having said that, one of the kids is actually a young and uncredited Charlize Theron so it's all swings and roundabouts.

It seems that *Children Of The Corn III* is going to trundle along to a boring ending until Eli decides he and his army of kids should go back to Gatlin and try to summon He Who Walks Behind The Rows. Then things get fucking INSANE, with a huge ridiculous monster bursting out of the ground and wrecking the place, eating kids and flailing tentacles all over the place. It's also home to some of the worst special effects you'll ever see, where the monster picks up a kid who is clearly a crude model miniature of a person.

So, *Children Of The Corn III*, then. Bullshit for the first 70 minutes, followed by 15 minutes of complete lunacy that makes no sense whatsoever but is oddly compelling for its sheer shitness. I suppose I could say it's a little... corny? No, no, I couldn't possibly.

Two out of five

How to see it

The UK standalone DVD is out of print now but you can still get it cheap for a couple of quid if you look around. A much better option is Anchor Bay's box set which features the first three *Children Of The Corn* films. There's no fancy box set in the US, only the DVD and a rather needless Blu-ray release.

Bits and pieces

- Sometimes I wonder what Stephen King thinks of all these *Children Of The Corn* films. From his single 11,000-word short story written for Penthouse magazine, Hollywood has churned out a total of ten movies and re-tellings, the vast majority of which have fuck all to do with his story except the title.
- If you're looking for another bit of before-they-were-famous type trivia other than the aforementioned Charlize Theron appearance, this film's successor *Children Of The Corn IV: The Gathering* starred a young Naomi Watts, acting her little Australian heart out.

Chronicle (2012)

Director: Josh Trank

Starring: Dane DeHaan, Alex Russell, Michael B Jordan

“There’s this thing, right, it’s called the apex predator. And basically what this is, is the strongest animal in the ecosystem, right? And as human beings, we’re considered the apex predator but only because smaller animals can’t feed on us because of weapons and stuff, right? A lion does not feel guilty when it kills a gazelle, right? You do not feel guilty when you squash a fly. And I think that means something.”

Andrew is not a cheery chappy. His mum is dying, his alcoholic dad beats him and he’s got no friends. His only solace is a video camera that he uses to film his life and document the various goings-on around him. In short, things could be going better.

One night at a party Andrew’s cousin Matt and Steve Montgomery – a popular kid running for school president – ask Andrew to come with them to film a huge hole they’ve found in the woods. While investigating the hole the trio fall in and end up in a cave, where they find a huge glowing structure. Some weird shit goes down and the camera glitches out and breaks, switching off.

We rejoin them a short while later after the three teens have somehow managed to leave the cave. Things are different though: they now have super powers. At first they’re able to simply move objects with their mind, but as they flex their telekinesis 'muscles' and are able to move progressively larger objects, things get a little more serious and Andrew starts toying with the idea of using his powers to punish the society that shunned him.

The first half of *Chronicle* is great fun. As the trio get used to their new abilities they do the sort of things you’d expect a group of teenagers would do: use them to mess around. They move leaf-blowers over to schoolgirls to blow up their skirts, they go to toy shops and freak children out with floating toys and they make YouTube-style Jackass clips where they stab each other with forks, throw baseballs at each other and move peoples’ cars around in car parks to confuse them. These guys are no Spider-Men: to them, with great power comes great irresponsibility.

The whole film’s shot as 'found' footage in the style of *The Blair Witch Project* and *Troll Hunter*: most of it is shot through Andrew’s camera but a little bit into the film we conveniently meet Casey, Matt’s ex who also happens to film everything she sees (for her blog). Talk about a coincidence.

This fairly shameless introduction is just an excuse for the filmmakers to break the whole 'found footage' restrictions and introduce multiple camera angles. The rules are broken even further when Andrew realises he no longer has to hold his camera, instead using his powers to make it float around him and essentially allowing the film to make use of any crane, tracking and steadycam shots a normal movie can use.

As things start getting out of hand and the movie gets a little darker *Chronicle* does start to lose its momentum a little, but it still remains compelling. The three leads interact well together and though a couple of major turning points could be seen a mile off (particularly those involving Andrew's parents) there's still a desire to see how it all ends.

One slightly disappointing aspect is the final act, in which the whole handheld camera gimmick is stretched to the point that it's no longer convincing. At one point Andrew stops the incredibly important thing he's doing (no spoilers, mind) to grab a bunch of iPhones and small cameras and pull them all toward him, giving him a selection of suspiciously high-quality and cinematic camera angles to choose from. It doesn't detract too much from proceedings mind you, it's just a shame because I'd have liked to see the handheld gimmick survive through to the end.

Chronicle is a pleasant surprise, turning both the superhero genre and the "found footage" film style on their respective heads. It could have done with a stronger conclusion but for the most part this is one worth seeing.

Four out of five

How to see it

Chronicle is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Since this review was first written, it has been announced that *Chronicle* director Josh Trank is to direct an upcoming Star Wars spin-off movie. I'd like to think it was my review that did it. You're welcome, Josh.
- "Hmmm, I have a problem. The film's going to be shot in a found-footage style manner, through the eyes of the protagonists' handheld cameras. But near the end there's supposed to be a big massive fight that takes place all over the city. How the fu- GOT IT. We'll make one of the kids so powerful that he has full telepathic control over every camera in the city and is able to jump between each shot with the expertise of a Hollywood editor."

The Company Of Wolves (1984)

Director: Neil Jordan

Starring: Sarah Patterson, Angela Lansbury, Micha Bergese, David Warner

“Never stray from the path, never eat a windfall apple and never trust a man whose eyebrows meet in the middle.”

Director Neil Jordan is perhaps best known for his contributions to the vampire genre (*Interview With The Vampire*) and the 'chicks with dicks' genre (*The Crying Game*) but in the '80s he also lent his directorial skills to a nifty little werewolf film called *The Company Of Wolves*, a film so rich in imagery and metaphor that its ideas and themes are still heavily discussed more than 25 years after it was originally released.

While the prologue is set in the present day, the vast majority of *The Company Of Wolves* takes place in the fairytale setting of a girl's dream. In it, a small village lives in fear of the wolves that roam the woods nearby. Rosaleen, a twelve-year-old girl, is caught up in this hysteria when her older sister is killed by the wolves and she's sent to stay with her granny for a while.

There her granny tells her a bunch of stories, which play out one by one over the course of the film: some told by granny, others recounted by Rosaleen to her mum later on. Eventually, Rosaleen herself becomes the subject of one of the tales – a werewolf version of Little Red Riding Hood – and is confronted with one of the beasts in her granny's house.

The Company Of Wolves isn't fucking around. While it doesn't have a lot of gory set-pieces, the ones it does feature are fairly extreme. One transformation scene in particular has a chap tearing his own face off until only his muscles are visible, at which point a wolf's face thrusts itself out through his mouth. It's a more fantastical take on werewolf transformation and while it's incredibly unsettling to watch, it's also difficult to take your eyes off it.

The film is rife with sexual imagery and metaphor throughout, and it's fairly clear that the entire movie is one big allegory for Rosaleen's coming-of-age. It all comes to a head during the film's final Red Hiding Hood tale in which Rosaleen confronts a man who clearly wants to have his way with her and challenges her to a race to her grandmother's house in order to try and win a kiss from her. She's twelve, you paedo.

Underlying sexual connotations aside, this is an incredible-looking film. Jordan and cinematographer Bryan Loftus properly go to town with the film's dream-like setting and create a forest world that it's impossible to take your eyes off, interspersed with the sort of artsy-fartsy shots that usually have me dismissing a film as pretentious but work perfectly here.

The Company Of Wolves has something of a cult following and it's not that hard to see why. It's an impressive film rife with sexual metaphor and masterful imagery, and there isn't

really much like it out there. While it does lose its way a little at times and get a tad too showy for its own good, it's still a film I'd happily recommend tracking down if you like your films fantastical and cerebral.

Four out of five

How to see it

UK wolf-lovers can get *The Company Of Wolves* on DVD and on Blu-ray. The Blu-ray is pretty cheap at the time of writing and both versions have an excellent commentary by Neil Jordan explaining a lot of the messages hidden in the film.

Bits and pieces

- Some of the props used in *The Company Of Wolves* recently went up for auction. They were a 'special effects wolf back' (estimated to sell for £800-£1200), a cable-controlled 'Bertie' transformation head (£4000-£6000), a cable-controlled human-to-wolf transformation head (£1500-£2500) a wolf body puppet (£2000-£4000) and a wolf bust puppet (£2000-£4000). Sadly, none of them were sold.
- If you think about it, this film isn't very realistic because wolves lack the proper communication skills and business acumen needed to effectively run a successful company. Indeed, were The Company Of Wolves a real PLC its share price would plummet almost immediately as soon as it was revealed its board consisted entirely of wolves instead of people.

Confessions (2010)

Director: Tetsuya Nakashima

Starring: Takako Matsu, Kaoru Fujiwara, Yukito Nishii, Ai Hashimoto

"Ms. Moriguchi... there is something wrong with this class."

My good chum and work colleague Tamoor gave me a Blu-ray yesterday and told me: "Watch this, it'll be perfect for your site." I got home and gave it a watch. 100 minutes later I was on Amazon ordering a copy for myself, because *Confessions* is one of the best films I've seen in years.

Yuko Moriguchi is a teacher in charge of a class of 13-year-olds, but she's decided to pack it in. She's got good reason to, mind you: her young daughter has died and she knows that the two people responsible for it are two of her pupils.

Rather than tell the police and send the two young killers through what she believes is a far too lenient youth justice system, she decides to plot her own revenge, a revenge that – once you learn the true story of what happened to her daughter – will have you questioning whether she's gone too far.

The first half-hour of *Confessions* is perhaps the most engrossing I've seen in a long time. It's essentially one long monologue delivered by Yuko to her students, explaining to them what happened, how she discovered the identities of the killers, and her method of punishment. To say too much would be to spoil a film that really has to be seen with very little knowledge about the plot.

This first half-hour is the first of three different 'confessions', essentially splitting the film's acts into separate revelations. Throughout the second act you start to question whether the two 'killers' really deserve the punishment Yuko has bestowed upon them, but by the time you reach the third act you'll have seen more twists and turns than a gymnast eating a Curly Wurly while dancing to '60s rock n roll music.

The plot isn't the only masterful thing about *Confessions*, though. The soundtrack is an incredible combination of beautiful score and achingly hip music: one minute you're watching slow-motion shots over piano music and the next you're getting Radiohead's 'Last Flowers'.

Speaking of the slow-motion, it's used often throughout the entire film and yet it never feels excessive or laboured. It's handled so magnificently and in such a wide variety of ways that almost every shot is a unique work of art.

Unfortunately I can't say too much more about *Confessions* because I really don't want to waste too much of the film, but I really want to say more because it's superb. The performances all round are fantastic, the scenes of bloody violence are always handled in a

way that seem almost poetic and never gratuitous, the ending is powerful and ingenious all at once, and I just want my copy to turn up soon so I can watch it again and again.

The pace may be a little slow for some people and those who turn their noses up at subtitles won't like that there's a lot to read, but if you pass those tests then I can't recommend this highly enough.

Five out of five

How to see it

Confessions is available on DVD and Blu-ray in the UK, but is Blu-ray only in the US.

Bits and pieces

- Don't get this confused with the *Confessions...* series of British films from the 1970s, which includes such entries as *Confessions Of A Window Cleaner* and *Confessions Of A Driving Instructor*. Let's just say you'll end up watching an entirely different type of dodgy twisting and turning, if you catch my drift. Nudge, nudge. Wink. It's softcore porn, is what I'm saying.
- Also, don't get it confused with *Confessions*, the 2010 album by Liza Minnelli. It's a bit different. Look, I'm just trying to help.

The Craft (1996)

Director: Andrew Fleming

Starring: Robin Tunney, Fairuza Balk, Neve Campbell, Rachel True, Skeet Ulrich, Christine Taylor

BONNIE – “The almanac says today will bring an arrival or something.”

NANCY – “Yeah, wonderful, I’m getting my rag.”

When you’re a teenage girl, moving to a new city and having to join a new school must be a pain in the arse at the best of times. When the head jock at the school makes matters even worse by telling everyone you were a crap shag even though you never did anything with him, there’s only one logical solution: become a witch.

At least, that’s the conclusion Sarah (Robin Tunney, starring these days in TV show *The Mentalist*) comes to. She decides to get friendly with three weird girls who have an unhealthy obsession with the occult.

Each of the girls wants to harness the power of the ‘creator’ Manon for their own reasons. Bonnie (Neve Campbell) has massive scarring on her back and wants to be able to shed it so she can feel self-confident again.

Rochelle (Rachel True) is sick of bitchy bully Laura (Christine Taylor) mocking her with racist abuse (“Why are you doing this to me?” “Because I don’t like negroids”), and wants to teach her a lesson. And Nancy (Fairuza Balk) is sick of living in a leaky trailer with an abusive stepfather and a weak mum.

It soon becomes clear that Sarah has special witchy powers, and so – with four people generally needed to summon Manon – the trio willingly become a quartet and accept Sarah into the group.

The four perform a ritual asking Manon for the power to help them with their individual problems: except Nancy, who asks for Manon to enter her body and give her all its power instead. Hmmmm, that probably won’t cause any issues later in the film.

At first everything seems all well and good, and each girl’s issues are resolved. Evil jock man falls under a love spell and becomes Sarah’s lapdog, making him a joke figure to his other jock friends. Bonnie’s scarring comes off completely. Rochelle’s bully gets what’s coming to her when her hair starts falling out in huge clumps. And Nancy’s asshole stepdad has a heart attack, dying and leaving her mum \$175,000.

That’s all good then, time for the credits eh? Well, not quite (which is just as well, because that would be a shite ending). Eventually Sarah realises that being a witch isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Bonnie’s lack of scarring isn’t just making her confident, it’s making her a

vain cow. That bully lass is almost completely bald and is frequently found crying in the school showers.

What's worse, Sarah's now-obsessed jock admirer is now getting desperate, to the point that he tries to get a bit rapey. After he fails with an attempted assault, she tells her friends what happened and Nancy, who's now invoked with the power of Manon, decides to deal with it. Let's just say the results aren't pretty.

The rest of the film sees Sarah becoming alienated from the other three, culminating in a massive witchy battle and some truly dark moments involving the apparent deaths of family members.

Considering it was aimed at a teenage audience, *The Craft* is surprisingly dark. Self-harming is discussed in unflinching detail and the final third has some scares that wouldn't feel out of place in a 'proper' horror film (assuming *The Craft* sees itself as more of a supernatural thriller).

What keeps it watchable throughout is the film's four main actresses, who have believable chemistry – well, as believable as you can get given the subject matter.

There are a few weak aspects to the film, though. Rochelle's sub-plot doesn't really have a satisfying conclusion and her character arc from friend to enemy isn't really defined.

While Bonnie's narcissism and Nancy's lust for power make it clear why both turned from good to evil, Rochelle just becomes a 'baddie' by way of default because she hangs around with the other two.

Indeed, it almost seems that she's beginning to feel sorry for her balding bully at one point, before she quickly gets in line and becomes nasty with little explanation.

Despite these niggles, *The Craft* is a decent little film with a well-written script, strong performances and some surprisingly grim moments given its target audience.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

The Craft is only available on DVD in the UK. In the US you can get either the Special Edition DVD or the Blu-ray edition. The latter is region-free so Brits craving some hi-def witchery pokery can import the Blu-ray without any hassle.

Bits and pieces

- "Where are they now," you may be asking (but probably aren't). Well, Neve Campbell obviously went on to star in the *Scream* movies (reviewed in the TWABM Vol 1 ebook), while Robin Tunney starred in the first series of *Prison Break* before becoming one of the leads in *The Mentalist*. Fairuza Balk was in the likes of *American History X* and *Almost Famous*, while Rachel True's never really been able to find a role bigger than that in *The Craft*, most recently having a small appearance in *Sharknado 2*.

- On rare occasions at school (usually the day before holidays or the like) we'd be allowed to bring in videos and watch them instead of our usual lessons. One bright spark decided to bring in *The Craft*, which we watched during our Religious Education class while our God-fearing teacher looked on in ever-growing disgust.

The Creeps (1997)

Director: Charles Band

Starring: Rhonda Griffin, Justin Lauer, Bill Moynihan, Jon Simanton

"You're history, you little pervert! No, you're archaeology, as in old garbage!"

Full Moon Pictures is one of my favourite B-movie horror studios. Established in the 1980s, it was well-known among horror fans for its cheesy low-budget efforts.

Some, like *Puppet Master* and *Subspecies*, were so popular they went on to spawn their own multi-sequel franchises. Others, like *Dollman* – in which an intergalactic bounty hunter crashlands on space only to realise he's ten inches tall – weren't.

Full Moon continues to this day, and while most of its recent output retains all of the cheese, it leaves out most of the charm. Titles like *The Gingerdead Man* and *Dangerous Worry Dolls* sound like they should be superb slices of low-budget larks (well, they do to me at least) but ultimately they end up in the TWABM Hall Of Shame.

A great example of how it used to be is *The Creeps*, a Full Moon pishfest that was given a DVD re-release this week.

Anna (Rhonda Griffin) works at the rare books section of the local library. Guests have to fill out a bunch of forms before they can even see the books on display, and even then they have to wear a mask and gloves so as not to damage the already fragile tomes stored there.

One day a nervous-looking portly chap comes in asking to see the original manuscript for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. When Anna lets him have a look, he waits until he's no longer being watched and steals it, swapping it for a fake duplicate with blank pages.

When Anna finds out the book is missing she realises her lesbian boss (trust me, it becomes relevant in the film) will fire her if she doesn't recover the book, so she hires seemingly useless detective Raleigh (who works in the back of a video shop which conveniently stocks a lot of Full Moon titles) to track the big fella down.

What they don't realise is that the man in question is actually a scientist. He's already stolen the other original manuscripts for *The Mummy* and *The Wolf Man* (um, even though those were original movies, not based on books) and now all he needs is Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to complete his fiendish plan – the resurrection of the four greatest monsters in literature, ready to do his bidding.

When he returns to the library to nick *Dracula* he's confronted by Anna, at which point he remembers he also needs one final ingredient: a naked virgin sacrifice. Story of my life, mate.

Kidnapping Anna and tying her up in his dungeon (leading to the horrendous quote you see at the top of this review), the scientist only gets halfway through the ritual before Raleigh turns up and rescues Anna. Hooray and such!

Nevertheless, the ritual is too far along to stop, and so Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, the Mummy and the Wolf Man are all indeed still brought to life... as midgets.

BOOM! That's the twist, son! They're mini monsters! And they're mini pissed off, with Dracula in particular eager to capture Anna again to complete the ritual and bring them back to full size.

If the pitch above isn't enough to get you interested in *The Creeps*, then maybe I just don't want to be your friend anymore. This is Full Moon silliness at its finest, a delicious slice of mental midget mayhem.

A word of warning, though: the acting is atrocious. I know bad acting is par for the course with this sort of film but I'm talking truly horrendous at times. If you'd grabbed a random woman off the street and made her act in this film, chances are she'd deliver some of the lines better than Rhonda Griffin does.

Personally, the fact I run this website should make it clear that I'm very much of the 'the worse it is, the better it is' persuasion, so it doesn't bother me. But if a cringeworthy script and even worse delivery aren't your idea of a fun time then you might want to give this a miss.

Fans of Grade A cheese will definitely want to give *The Creeps* a go. Everything about it suggests it should be rubbish – the acting, the budget, the soundtrack, the ending – but in this case multiple wrongs somehow do end up making a right.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

The Creeps was recently released on DVD in the UK as part of 88 Films' Grindhouse collection. It even comes with the classic Full Moon Videozone magazine programme that was included at the end of the original VHS version, and also includes a ridiculous bonus 'film' called *The Best Of Sex And Violence*. The US DVD version comes with the Videozone programme too but doesn't include the bonus film.

Bits and pieces

- If the little midget Dracula lad with beard and the husky voice looks familiar, that's because he should. He's Phil Fondacaro, the dwarf actor who also played Roland in *Sabrina*, *The Teenage Witch* as well as Vohnkar in *Willow*.
- Usually when these classic monsters have appeared in a movie together it's been the doing of Universal Studios. The first major example was 1943's *Frankenstein Meets The Wolf Man*, which was followed by the likes of *House Of Frankenstein* and *The House Of Dracula*, both of which featured Dracula, Frankenstein's Monster and the Wolf Man.

Creepshow (1982)

Director: George A Romero

Starring: Ed Harris, Leslie Nielsen, Ted Danson, Tom Atkins, Hal Holbrook, Stephen King, EG Marshall

"You see that crap? All that horror crap? Things coming out of crates and eating people? Dead people coming back to life? People turning into weeds, for christ sake? Well, you want him reading that stuff? All right then! I took care of it. That's why God made fathers, babe. That's why God made fathers."

If you've read my previous review of *Creepshow 3*, you'll have noticed that it has the dubious honour of one measly Trevor mask as its rating. This wasn't just because *Creepshow 3* is bad (though it most certainly is), but also because its predecessors were so good that the third film let the entire series down. To cheer myself up, then, I decided to re-watch the original *Creepshow* again.

If you're not familiar with it, *Creepshow* is a collection of five short stories written by Stephen King and directed by George A Romero (back when he was still good and not slapping his name on any old shite for a fiver). It's an homage to the old EC comics of the 1950s like *Tales From The Crypt* and *Vault Of Horror*, and as such each story starts and ends as if it were in a comic book, with garish colours and speech bubbles. It's an interesting style that not everyone will love but it's fun and keeps things light-hearted. Make no mistake, this may be a collection of horror stories but (much like the EC comics themselves) its tongue is planted firmly in its rotting cheek and its five tales of morality are much funnier than they are scary.

The first story, *Father's Day*, features Ed Harris and tells the tale of a family get-together that's spoiled when the corpse of a murdered father comes back to life looking for his Father's Day cake. It's a fun start to proceedings and the final scene is just ridiculous, making it clear – as if there were any doubt – that *Creepshow* is a film that doesn't take itself too seriously.

Following that is *The Lonesome Death Of Jordy Verrill*, starring Stephen King himself in the lead role as a curious farmer who finds a meteorite that's landed in his field and, sensing an opportunity to get rich from it, tries to collect it. It doesn't quite go as planned as he's infected by the meteorite and begins a slow transformation process into... well, that would be telling. This is another fun, short tale with another silly ending but the real joy is in seeing Stephen King trying to ham it up and over-act as much as possible as the goofy, dim-witted farmer. King doesn't usually star in many films and this makes it clear why, but in a film like this a bad performance only makes the cocktail sweeter.

The third tale, *Something To Tide You Over*, slows things down slightly and is more dialogue-heavy. In it Ted Danson plays Harry, a desperate man being held to ransom by his girlfriend's ex-lover Richard (Leslie Nielsen). Richard has kidnapped Harry's girlfriend and wants him to

come with him to the beach so he can see her again, but it's only when they get there that Harry realises what Richard means by this and the grisly demise he has planned for both he and his lady friend. It's fun seeing Nielsen in a serious role again (while *Creepshow* definitely isn't a serious movie for the most part he plays his part completely straight and sinister with no hint of humour) and the inevitable twist ending is like something straight out of one of Romero's better movies, even though the final scenes leading up to it in Richard's house are laboured a little.

If the third yarn was a little laboured then *The Crate* feels like an eternity. The story itself isn't a bad one – a college janitor finds a hundred year old crate under some basement stairs and realises there's an ancient beast living inside it. The problem is its running time, as while in any other circumstances it would be considered positively brief, when it follows three tales that are significantly shorter yet tell similarly detailed stories this one starts to feel like you're watching a four-hour epic by comparison. It's a shame because the story itself isn't bad and the creature effects are decent, but had it been a bit shorter (and perhaps the previous three stories lengthened a bit) then maybe it wouldn't have felt so never-ending.

Thankfully, *Creepshow* goes out on a high with the best story of the bunch, *They're Creeping Up On You*. It's a wonderfully-written, well-acted story about a mean old fuddy-duddy called Upson Pratt. A clean freak with a phobia of germs and a ruthless businessman to boot, Pratt is a nasty piece of work. At one point one of his employees' wives calls and tells him her husband committed suicide because of the way he'd been treating him, and he responds by taunting her. He then insults the exterminator, who comes to the door after he complains about seeing a cockroach. In short, he's a prick. He gets what's coming to him though as his seemingly germ-proof, sterile home is invaded by a group of creepy-crawlies, one that spell a grisly end for a grisly man.

There are umpteen horror anthology films out there and *Creepshow* is one of the best. While *The Crate* is a bit too long, the other four are good fun to watch and the fact it never takes itself seriously only works in its favour. Even the prologue and epilogue, in which a young boy's comic book is binned by his dad (the awesome Tom Atkins), are entertaining. If you get a chance, watch it to see how this sort of thing should be done.

Four out of five

How to see it

Creepshow is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in the UK and US. For once the UK version is the one worth getting, as it's packed with special features whereas the American disc is fairly bare-bones.

Bits and pieces

- *Creepshow*'s sequel was almost as entertaining, but the recently released *Creepshow 3* is a scandal of a so-called film that has no place bearing the *Creepshow* name. If you want to see just how angry it made me, the full review is in the That Was A Bit Mental Volume 1 ebook.

- If you can, try to track down the *Creepshow* graphic novel. It tells the full story of the movie in the style of the EC horror comic books the film itself pays tribute to. It's a sort of Printception, I suppose. Either way, it's a brilliant wee read.

Curse Of Chucky (2013)

Director: Don Mancini

Starring: Fiona Dourif, Brad Dourif, Danielle Bisutti, Maitland McConnell

ALICE – “Chucky, I’m scared.”

CHUCKY – “You fucking should be.”

The success of *Bride Of Chucky* and its follow-up *Seed Of Chucky* mean these days Chucky is commonly considered a horror comedy star. Despite this, there still remains a core following of long-time horror fans who have been hoping for years that everyone’s favourite killer doll would return to his roots and appear in another ‘proper’ horror film in the style of the original *Child’s Play* trilogy.

Curse Of Chucky is that horror film, with nary a dick joke, sex scene or zany sidekick in sight. Although it’s the first Chucky film to go straight-to-video, don’t let that put you off, because this is old-school Chucky doing what he does best: pretending to be a doll whilst trying to steal a small child’s soul.

Set four years after *Seed Of Chucky*, *Curse* begins with a mysterious package turning up at the house of Nica (Fiona Dourif), a wheelchair-bound paraplegic who lives with her mother. Predictably, the package contains Chucky, but Nica’s at a loss as to who would have sent this odd-looking doll. It’s a wonder she’s never heard of Chucky: she should probably get out more. Oh, right, the wheelchair.

Shortly after Chucky’s arrival, Nica’s mother dies gruesomely in the middle of the night. With the death passed off as a horrible accident, Nica’s sister turns up to comfort her. Unfortunately, her version of ‘comforting’ is offering to send Nica to a care home for disabled people so she can sell the house and get rich.

What’s the point of all this pish? Nica’s sister has a young daughter, Alice, who also comes to visit. Nica gives Chucky to Alice as a present and that’s when the story really kicks into motion.

What follows is something that, while not strictly a remake, feels like a retelling of the original *Child’s Play*. Chucky befriends Alice and tells her who he really is, while the rest of the family refuse to believe her and start dropping off one by one.

It’s a treat to see Chucky in a serious horror role again, and despite the all-out comedy of the previous two films it’s clear no damage has been done to the character’s reputation. There are some properly chilling moments throughout and Chucky does feel scary once again, for the first time since *Child’s Play 3* was released 22 years earlier.

Placing all the action in a single house gives the same sense of claustrophobia the original film did. Since all of Nica's family (Alice aside) are utter cocksticks their inevitable deaths are simultaneously scary and triumphant, keeping the viewer hooked throughout.

It's also a clever touch making the protagonist wheelchair-bound. Intelligent and independent yet paralysed from the waist down, Nica is the ultimate definition of a vulnerable heroine, one whose spirit is more than willing but whose flesh is woefully weak. To her, merely getting up the stairs when her house's built-in elevator breaks down is a horrible ordeal, so the typical 'why doesn't she just leave the house' argument is neatly punted against a wall.

It also helps that Fiona Dourif, the actress playing Nica, plays the role perfectly. She's a strong actress and while some accused the filmmakers of nepotism when she was originally confirmed for the role (she's the daughter of Brad Dourif, the actor who voices Chucky), her performance dismisses those claims as moot.

There's plenty of fan service in there for long-time Chucky devotees too. As well as the references to the Andy Barclay story arc in the first three films, there's a lot of backstory showing what happened to Charles Lee Ray (the serial killer who transferred his soul into the Chucky doll) and the events that led to the police tracking him down at the start of the first film.

The ending is also a huge fanboy moment for fans of *Bride Of Chucky*, and keep an eye out after the credits for a secret scene that concludes the entire six-film series brilliantly.

In all, *Curse Of Chucky* is a great comeback for a classic horror character who had seemingly reached a dead end. It flicks a plastic middle finger to those who didn't think Chucky could be scary anymore and is a brilliant way to tie up loose ends. Obviously I'd love to see more Chucky films in the future but given how long it took to get this one greenlit, if this is how the series will ultimately conclude, I'm satisfied with that.

Four out of five

How to see it

Curse Of Chucky is available on DVD and Blu-ray. If you fancy catching up on the series as a whole, there's a brilliant box set called Chucky: The Complete Collection which was recently released in America. It's region-free, so Brits can import it from Amazon US.

Bits and pieces

- The other five *Child's Play* films are reviewed in the first That Was A Bit Mental ebook if you want to get yourself up to speed on Chucky's previous adventures. If you're lazy and just want to know the order I liked them from most to least: *Child's Play*, *Child's Play 2*, *Bride Of Chucky*, *Child's Play 3*, *Seed Of Chucky*. *Curse Of Chucky* fits somewhere near the top, maybe after *Child's Play 2*.
- This isn't the first time Brad Dourif and his daughter Fiona have appeared in the same production, although the first time was perhaps slightly more awkward. Brad Dourif played

physician Doc Cochran in gritty wild west TV series *Deadwood*, and Fiona appeared in a few episodes too... as a whore at the local brothel. Fun!

Dawn Of The Dead (1978)

Director: George A Romero

Starring: David Emge, Ken Foree, Scott Reiniger, Gaylen Ross, Tom Savini

"You know Macumba? Voodoo. My granddad was a priest in Trinidad. He used to tell us: "When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth."

While once-legendary horror director George A Romero has let his talents go a little wayward recently, the man will always be best known for his Dead trilogy. No film series has inspired more amateur horror filmmakers than *Night Of The Living Dead*, *Dawn Of The Dead* and *Day Of The Dead*. They were the first contemporary zombie movies, the films that wrote the rulebook and laid the foundations on which countless zombie movies, comics and video games in the decades since have built upon. While *Night Of The Living Dead* was the film that started it all off and created the modern zombie as we know it, its sequel *Dawn Of The Dead* is the film that many argue is the best of the trilogy. I'm inclined to agree.

Taking place a short while after the events of *Night Of The Living Dead*, the original spate of reports of the dead coming to life has now escalated into a full-blown epidemic in which zombies roam the streets and buildings of Philadelphia. Two workers at a TV station realise things are starting to get out of hand and, as they try to escape a building being overrun by zombies and SWAT team members, they meet two soldiers who also think it's time to bail. They head to the roof, 'borrow' the TV station's helicopter and go in search of a place where the locals are decidedly less bitey.

Spotting a large mall (malls were a fairly new concept at the time *Dawn* was filmed) our fearful four decide to land on its roof and hold up in there for a while, agreeing that if things get worse before they get better they could at least live off the mall's supplies for a fairly long time. Things do get worse though and a massive horde of zombies manages to break into the mall, forcing the group to fight for survival.

While much of the film's social commentary is nothing new these days (commercialism turns us into zombies does it, George? Tell us something we haven't heard before!), it's somewhat telling that even 34 years after its original release *Dawn Of The Dead* still presents more questions of morality and asks more of the viewer than almost all of today's zombie films, of which the limit of ethical quandary on offer is usually the basic 'oh no, my friend's been bitten by a zombie, I wonder if I should kill him if he changes into one'.

Instead, Romero's film chucks countless predicaments of principle at the viewer and has them constantly questioning whether the 'heroes' and other human characters are doing the right thing. Is it still alright to kill zombies if they're young children? Is it right to effectively raid the mall and steal any goods from its shops as you see fit just because of the circumstances? Is it right to taunt the zombies and use them for shooting practice, considering they're essentially the corpses of once-living people and they didn't ask for this?

Should the pregnant female of the group be allowed to get in on the action, or is it right that they keep her in the upstairs storage room to keep her safe? And, when a motley crew of no-good bikers turns up later in the film to break into the mall, raid its shops and further humiliate the zombies by sticking custard pies in their faces, is it wrong to feel happy when the zombies get their own back and tear them limb from limb?

Even if you decide not to take all these questions into account, *Dawn Of The Dead* is still a great zombie movie in its own right. The gore effects (courtesy of master of the macabre Tom Savini, who also plays as the leader of the bikers) are incredible, and even all these years later you'll still marvel as the zombies are offed in many weird and wonderful ways – expect to see a scalping courtesy of a helicopter's blades, a screwdriver being stuck into a brain through the ear, and more exploding heads than... well, than some sort of horrible mass head-exploding incident that thankfully hasn't happened yet.

Meanwhile, the fantastically quirky soundtrack mixes a dramatic Euro-synth score from Italian horror musicians Goblin with cheesy stock muzak for the mall scenes, including the hilarious tune The Gonk which was later used in *Shaun Of The Dead* and *Robot Chicken*.

Any time someone asks me to recommend them a classic horror film, *Dawn Of The Dead* is always one of the first I (and many others) mention. It's a perfect example of how horror has the power to scare, to build tension, to disgust, to excite, to entertain and to make the viewer ask questions that a more conventional plot may not make them consider. It's the ultimate zombie movie, and one that everyone with at least a passing interest in horror has to see at least once in their lifetime.

Five out of five

How to see it

Christ, where can't you see it? As one of the greatest horror films ever made it's no surprise that *Dawn Of The Dead* is available in more or less every format known to man. By far the best version currently available is the incredible three-disc Blu-ray edition from Arrow Video (they've also released an almost-as-brilliant DVD). In the US, you can get Anchor Bay's half-decent Blu-ray or their great four-disc DVD Ultimate Edition here. That UK Blu-ray's really the best of the bunch, though.

Bits and pieces

- It's hard to believe given his suave, slim appearance in *Dawn Of The Dead*, but Ken Foree – who plays Peter in the film – would decades later end up playing Roger Rockmore, otherwise known as Kenan's dad in Nickelodeon children's show *Kenan & Kel*. Not many actors can boast two legendary roles in one career but Ken Foree can.
- Speaking of Ken, he also gets a cameo in the 2004 remake of *Dawn Of The Dead*. He plays a televangelist who appears on a TV interview and gets to once again say his classic line “when there's no more room in Hell, the dead will walk the Earth”.

The Day After (1983)

Director: Nicholas Meyer

Starring: Jason Robards, JoBeth Williams, Steve Guttenberg

DR OAKES – “Do you have any idea what’s going on in this world?”

DR LANDOWSKA – “Yeah. Stupidity. It has a habit of getting its way.”

The threat of nuclear attack is something that has remained ever-present for the past 70 years. The technology may keep improving, and the potential enemy may keep changing, but whether it’s the Japanese, the North Koreans, the Americans, the Cubans, the Iraqis (ha!) or – in the case of *The Day After* – the Russians who are the would-be obliterated, much of the world lives its day-to-day life with the constant underlying knowledge that at any point another pissed-off country could press a button and that’d be that.

The Day After was an ambitious and brave TV movie that attempted to convince all who watched it that nuclear war shouldn’t be the ultimate answer (which sort of goes without saying, but some people are a bit daft). It shows the build-up, the result and the aftermath of a fictional nuclear attack on Kansas City.

Curious to know how shit goes down? Here’s the basics: Russia doesn’t like the fact that America has troops in West Berlin (this is when the Berlin Wall was still up, remember), so it starts sending troops to East Germany to try and pressure America into leaving. America tells Russia to keep its snout out of it, and East German troops start getting arsey so Russia blockades West Berlin. America tells Russia that if it doesn’t back down it’ll consider it an act of war, but when NATO sends troops in to sort things out Russia starts killing them, so America starts threatening nuclear action.

As this fictional story is set up (usually through TV and radio broadcasts in the background) we’re introduced to a selection of Kansas residents, each going about their lives unaware of what’s about to happen. There’s the farmer’s daughter who’s ready to get married the next day, there’s the doctor preparing to give a lecture to a group of students at the University of Kansas hospital, and there’s Steve Guttenberg, playing Steven (must have been a huge leap, that), a medical student trying to get home.

When the bomb eventually goes off (it happens around 40 minutes into this two-hour film), the special effects are unsurprisingly modest for a TV movie made in the ’80s. Stock footage of nuclear explosions is mixed with wholly unconvincing shots of fake mushroom clouds (they were apparently created by injecting colored oil plumes into a tank of water) and shots of people with cheesy X-ray effects overlaid to make it look as if the radiation is showing their skeletons. I haven’t been hit by many nuclear bombs in my time but I’d imagine I’d be turned to dust before anyone got a sneaky peek at my ribcage.

The aftermath is significantly more convincing. The filmmakers co-operated with the city of Lawrence in Kansas who willingly allowed its streets to be 'decorated' with smashed windows and upturned, burnt-out cars for a few weeks, and the result is an effective post-apocalyptic environment that may be a little understated (a message at the end of the film explains that the real devastation would probably be far greater), but still manages to depress.

Apparently, when it was originally shown on TV in the US, no sponsors bought commercial time for any scenes after the bomb goes off, meaning the final hour of the film was free of commercial breaks – just as well, because it would have really ruined the mood.

The make-up effects are disturbing at times, with hair loss and charred flesh on display. The odd dead cow or burnt-out body are grotesque cherries atop a cake cooked at gas mark 70,000.

At times *The Day After* dabbles with social commentary. The campus hospital at the nearby university starts running out of staff and supplies and considers taking the morally dubious stance of locking the doors to any more patients who turn up. When aid arrives only some is given to the hordes of starving people, and when the aid workers explain it's because they have to move on to the next town and help them too, the people revolt. Another scene shows members of the public being executed without trial.

This is undeniably bleak, but it isn't really necessary and only serves to keep things interesting. The real story is the devastation caused by the bombs and how it affects both the environment and the normal people we were introduced to beforehand.

The Day After deliberately goes out of its way to make it unclear who fired first. The only thing we're told for sure is that both decide to do so, and through radio reports it's heard that Moscow has suffered similar devastation. *The Day After* is not a film in which America are the goodies and Russia are the bomb-dropping baddies. It's a film in which the only enemy is the nuclear bomb and the only victim is the human race, regardless of nationality. Because of this it remains relevant, effective viewing and is well worth a watch.

Besides, Steve Guttenberg's in it.

Four out of five

How to see it

The Day After is only available on DVD, in both the UK and US. There's no Blu-ray version yet, which is a shame because it's clear a lot of attention to detail went into making the Kansas streets look thoroughly devastated and it would be nice to see it more clearly. Not that 'nice' is the best word to use, of course.

Bits and pieces

- I have the feeling *The Day After* is the reason Steve Guttenberg never became an '80s teenage heartthrob like Patrick Swayze or who have you. Once you see him all radiation-

riddled with half his hair melted off it's hard to imagine the ladies swooning unless they're fainting from sheer disgust.

- To this day, *The Day After* holds the record as the most viewed TV movie in American history. 38.55 million households watched it, with an approximate audience of 100 million, which I would imagine was only slightly more than the first episode of *Joey* (and significantly more than the second).

Dead Heat (1988)

Director: Mark Goldblatt

Starring: Treat Williams, Joe Piscopo, Lindsay Frost, Darren McGavin, Vincent Price

ROGER – So what’s the story on these John Does? What’s so unbelievable?

CORONER – I’ll show you. The teeth and fingerprints are practically worthless but I noticed one thing – stitches. You can see where the cut was made, traversing the sternum and incised with an electric saw.

ROGER – They had surgery?

CORONER – Nope. They had autopsies. They’ve been here before, fellas. I certified them myself.

Dead Heat is an 80s cop movie in which one of the cops is a zombie. There you go, that should be all you need, enjoy.

Fine, I suppose I’ll elaborate for the sake of making this review worth your while, but that description really does sum up what I believe is one of the most criminally overlooked cult gems of the 1980s.

Detective Roger Mortis (get it?) and his partner Doug Bigelow are called to a robbery at a jewellery store. As the crooks leave the store they pull out shotguns and start shooting at the countless officers who have surrounded the area. Although the officers score a number of direct shots on the criminals, it doesn’t appear to harm them and they continue to shoot cops dead until one is blown up and the other is run over.

Roger and Doug reckon there’s something funny about this so they ask the coroner (and Roger’s ex) to look into it. It turns out the criminals had been dead before, and had somehow come to life. Dum dum dummm.

Without giving too much away, Roger and Doug soon uncover an evil plot to resurrect the dead using a special machine that can reanimate corpses with some sort of electrical shenanigans. In a scrap with the ne’er-do-wells involved in the scheme, Roger is killed and brought back to life by the machine, essentially becoming a zombie himself.

The problem is, he can only stay undead for so long before he eventually rots away, so together with Doug and Lindsay, a morally outraged worker at the company behind the machine, they race against time to put an end to things before it’s too late and Roger becomes all mushy and shit.

In case you can’t tell, *Dead Heat* is ridiculous. Even though it knows this, it doesn’t go over the top and knowingly wink at the audience all the time as if to say “this is bloody mental,

isn't it?" Instead it continues to play it straight like a normal 80s cop movie, saving most of the laughs for the normal jokey dialogue between the two detectives. This just makes things even funnier, as nobody seems too bothered that Roger is essentially a walking, talking corpse.

That's not to say it doesn't go a little nuts at times, mind you. One particular kitchen scene – in which Roger and Doug fight with a bunch of reanimated meats – is bloody insane, as a liver flings itself at Doug's face while a large, skinned, headless cow wrestles to the ground and a decapitated chicken's head lying on a table starts squawking. It's awesome.

Even better is that the effects are fantastic for a film this old. Despite the clear madness involved in the aforementioned scene all the reanimated animals are surprisingly believable, and you'll wonder how they made that hideous skinned cow run along the floor so realistically. Another surprising scene later on involving a plot twist and a rapidly rotting corpse looks a little hokey but is still a great effort by the effects team and looks suitably grimy.

You might never have heard of *Dead Heat* before, but don't worry – not a lot of people (in the UK at least) have. Do yourself a favour and change that by tracking it down and enjoying a refreshingly funny and enjoyable film. Sure, it's a little cheap and there are more plot holes than an amnesiac's autobiography, but it'll keep you laughing from start to finish and the surprise introduction of Vincent Price near the end is the icing on the rotting cake. They simply don't make movies like this anymore, and after watching it you'll better understand what a shame this is.

Four out of five

How to see it

You can get *Dead Heat* on DVD in the UK but it's out of print so expect to have fun tracking it down. Americans have an easier time of it, with DVD and Blu-ray versions widely available.

Bits and pieces

- The fact that hardly anyone's heard of *Dead Heat* is all the proof I need that this world is on a downward spiral. If there was any justice in this world, *Dead Heat* would be up there with the likes of *Return Of The Living Dead*, *Reanimator* and *The Evil Dead* as a classic cult '80s horror film. Instead it's more or less completely forgotten these days.
- Joe Piscopo was one of the members of the notorious *Saturday Night Live* cast of 1980 – the season that was about as funny as mass manslaughter. The majority of the cast was axed and replaced, except for Piscopo and Eddie Murphy. The two went on to be the stars of the show for the first half of the '80s.

Dead Space: Downfall (2008)

Director: Chuck Patton

Starring: Voices of Nika Futterman, Keith Szarabajka, Jim Cummings

DOBBS – “There’s a lot of blood in this room, but no bodies.”

SHEN – “Sounds like one of your parties.”

DOBBS – “Or your sex life.”

If you haven’t played the *Dead Space* series of video games you’re missing out on a bunch of petrifying, immersive survival horrors that combine the isolation of outer space with the terror of big bastard mutant alien things. Since the games start with you onboard a ship that’s already been infected with said mutants and had its crew sliced to bits however, it seems there’s a lot of story to be told about how the situation got so messy. Enter *Dead Space: Downfall*.

A prequel to the original game, *Dead Space: Downfall* is an animated movie explaining how the SS Ishimura, a mining ship, ends up being infested by the monstrous Necromorphs. After a colony on the planet Aegis VII asks for advice on an alien artifact they’ve found, the Ishimura nips down to the planet and takes it on board. Not before a ship infected with a Necromorph manages to get inside the Ishimura though, infecting the Ishimura with the mutant menace.

The Necromorph virus spreads throughout the Ishimura, turning the ship’s workers into mutants. Predictably, shit goes down and various poor sods end up coming face-to-face with their own spleens. It’s left to a small group of surviving workers to destroy the mutants, save the Ishimura and figure out what the alien artifact is supposed to be.

Of course, this being a prequel to the *Dead Space* video game, which sees you arriving at the Ishimura and finding everyone dead with Necromorphs still running riot, it should be fairly obvious to most people watching *Downfall* that nobody’s going to make it out alive by the end of this one. It’s harder then to care much about the well-being of the film’s main characters when you know they’re going to end up pegging it before long.

It also doesn’t help that each of these characters are entirely without any redeeming qualities. The dialogue is woeful, there’s not an ounce of personality in there and the writers, realising this, decided to have them say “fuck” every two seconds to make up for it, as if that makes it cool.

Visually, the film’s a mixed bag. The screens in this review may make it seem exceptional and, certainly, the art style is very clean and similar to what you may expect from some anime studios. When you see it in motion though it’s hard not to be underwhelmed at times because the animation ranges from fantastic to basic almost randomly. It’s functional

enough, but there are plenty of times throughout where everything suddenly feels chunky and rigid. It's also interspersed with rubbish CGI shots of the ship, which stick out like a sore thumb and are jarring deviations from the film's artistic direction. That's right, I can sound posh when I want to.

Still, there's a lot of gory bits in the latter half of the movie and bloodhounds will smile at the various grisly demises of the crew members of the Ishimura, keeping you watching out of interest even as the rest of the film descends into a bunch of meatheads emptying endless rounds of ammo into hordes of mutants while saying "fuck" a lot.

Ultimately though *Dead Space: Downfall* is a bit of a waste of time. As a horror film it's ineffective, as an animation it's too basic and as a film designed to show the events leading up to the first *Dead Space* game, it's disappointingly generic and does the *Dead Space* story a disservice. When the best part of a film is that at 74 minutes it's mercifully short, that's probably not a good sign. As the crew of the Ishimura would say, it can fuck the fuck off.

One and a half out of five

How to see it

Dead Space: Downfall is available on DVD and Blu-ray. You can also get it in a two-pack with the other *Dead Space* animation, *Dead Space: Aftermath*.

Bits and pieces

- In an odd case of foreshadowing, the title *Downfall* is a very appropriate description of the *Dead Space* video game series following the release of this film. *Dead Space 2* was considered a worthy sequel to EA's original but *Dead Space 3* was roundly panned for its focus on all-out action rather than the moodily atmospheric eeriness that made its predecessors so terrifying to play. If *Dead Space 1* and *2* were *Alien*, then *Dead Space 3* was *Aliens*, except it wasn't any good. In a way, then, that was a bad analogy, but I can't be arsed changing it now.
- There's also a second *Dead Space* animated movie, 2011's *Dead Space: Aftermath*. It's more of the same but this time based on the events of *Dead Space 2*. Give *Downfall* a go first though, and only track down *Aftermath* if it floats your boat.

Demons Never Die (2011)

Director: Arjun Rose

Starring: Robert Sheehan, Jennie Jacques, Jason Maza, Ashley Walters, Reggie Yates, Tulisa Contostavlos

"The truth is we've all thought about it at some point – death that is. Life can be painful, we'd like to know that we can end it all if we had to. The warning signs are there if you look hard enough. Those pretty girls who seem to have everything – smiles on the outside, but inside they're broken."

Slasher films have been ten-a-penny since the early '80s but *Demons Never Die* is to be commended for trying something different – it's a slasher film where the victims actually want to die.

Set in London, *Demons Never Die* tells the story of a group of college students, depressed for various reasons, who have all agreed to carry out a suicide pact. They decide that they'll all meet up somewhere in the near future and overdose on pills together. While they're in the process of arguing the whens, wheres and hows of this grim little arrangement however, someone in a mask is offing them one-by-one anyway, annoying the other members of the group who think their chums are killing themselves on their own instead of sticking to the pact.

It's an interesting idea (at least initially), but one that throws up its own problems. Many slashers suffer in their inability to make the audience feel empathy for its characters: in between all the killings and screaming it's often hard to develop a character enough that the person watching grows to like them and doesn't want them to die. Since the characters here all start off wanting to die anyway, it's very hard to build up some sort of sympathy for them and think "oh, I hope they don't get killed", since you know they're going to run off and have a hundred Nurofen later anyway.

It does create some unexpected sympathy for one of the characters in the group as her reason for wanting to commit suicide is revealed. She's been doing modelling on the side and she's been suffering from bulimia for a couple of years, and she's unable to deal with it. The revelation of this truly tragic motive does shock you into actually caring for her, but it turns out to be a little too late by that point (without going into too much detail).

The film seemingly realises it's hard to be concerned about the well-being of suicidal people as the final act begins and the majority of the group all suddenly decide "actually, let's not go through with this". I'm not going to go too much into whether that possibly trivialises the idea of suicide, as I'm currently not suicidal myself and can't comment on whether it would possibly feel a little insulting to watch a film in which a group of characters with similar thoughts decide they can just turn those thoughts off and decide just to live instead. In the context of the film it helps because while it does then become a standard slasher from that point, it does at least introduce some tension as the characters now have something to lose.

The cast are all believable and carry off their roles perfectly well, in particular the male and female leads who fall in love and question whether life's really worth losing when you find someone special. Don't fall for the film poster and DVD/Blu-ray cover trumpeting N-Dubz and X-Factor star Tulisa Contostavlos as the main billed actress though, because while she does a good job she literally appears for the first two minutes of the film and is then gone, very much replicating the Drew Barrymore role in *Scream* (but even having much shorter screen time than her).

In fact, it's clear that *Scream* is the template for a few of *Demons Never Die*'s set-pieces. One scene in particular, where the lead female is chased by the killer for a while and manages to escape before her boyfriend suspiciously turns up immediately after the killer disappears, is straight out of the first *Scream*.

I couldn't decide what I thought I about *Demons Never Die*. A lot of the time I respected it for bringing the typical American slasher bollocks to a setting that would be far more realistic and identifiable to British teens, and the fact that all the characters were suicidal anyway – though handled sloppily – at least threw up some interesting questions. The night-vision stuff near the end is also effective.

At the same time though I was frustrated by a few things, mainly the lack of tension in the scenes with the killer, the extremely underwhelming ending and the fact that the film is constantly broken up with *Hollyoaks*-style music montage sequences (leading to the suspicion that the film's trying almost as much to sell you the achingly hip soundtrack, replete with tracks from Jessie J, Dionne Bromfield and Rizzle Kicks, as much as it's trying to tell you a story). It's certainly not a brilliant film then, but it's at least worth a watch because it does try to take an overused genre and present it in an underused setting.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

Demons Never Die is out now on DVD and Blu-ray.

Bits and pieces

- Tulisa starred in another well-known video a couple of years ago, one that gained notoriety when it was leaked online. As in *Demons Never Die* she only lasts a few minutes, and as before her performance is pretty suspect. I think I'll leave it there and keep it subtle, so it's not blatantly clear I'm talking about her blow job video... shit.
- Curious about the title, I decided to do some research to see if demons can indeed die. Naturally, I headed to the world's greatest and most reliable source of information, Yahoo! Answers. Apparently (and this is with all the spelling intact), "You can not kill them. You Can rebuke them in the name of Jesus and send them back where the belong, to the pits of hell and bind them there. Demons are the angels that choose to follow satin when God threw him out of heaven." So there you have it. Demons can't be killed, and they like satin. At least they dress classy.

The Diary Of Anne Frank (2009)

Director: George Stevens

Starring: Ellie Kendrick, Iain Glen, Tamsin Greig, Geoff Breton

"I have often been downcast, but never in despair; I regard our hiding as a dangerous adventure, romantic and interesting at the same time."

Last month I suddenly had the urge to become more cultured, and so I finally did something I'd always wanted to do: I read Anne Frank's diary. Far be it for me to criticise such a monumental tome, but I wasn't completely enamoured with it. Although Frank was an incredible writer for her age, being a young teenager who was naturally unaware of the horrible fate awaiting her the majority of the book consisted of spiteful comments about the people sharing the small annex with her as she, her family and four others hid from the Nazis.

In fact, and I'm really truly sorry for anyone offended by this, but had it not been for the historical importance of the book and the fact that we all knew the atrocious details of what happened to Anne Frank after she wrote her diary, you might be forgiven for not really warming to her, or maybe even thinking she was a bit of a knob.

This TV mini-series made by the BBC, then, can be forgiven for making use of a little poetic license so that Anne is less like the cold, sometimes spiteful teenager she was in her diary and is instead more amiable and downright charming at times. While there are still moments where she's a bit of a tit, like when she writes her father a cruel letter or when she dismisses her mother's offer of comfort, for the most part she's significantly more likeable than she is in her actual diary.

This is partly thanks to the casting of Ellie Kendrick, who does an incredible job as Anne Frank. At first it does seem odd to see a 13-year-old German girl being played by a 19-year-old Brit (in fact, it's odd that the entire cast has English accents), but you quickly forget this and begin to enjoy her performance. Well, maybe "enjoy" is the wrong word, but you know what I mean.

Also impressive is the accuracy of the annex set, which judging by photos and videos shot since is incredibly faithful to the actual one. This makes it a lot easier to transport yourself to their situation.

There are two versions of this mini-series, a 150-minute version and a 100-minute version. Unfortunately the 100-minute version is the only one I had access to, but so much of the book is accounted for that I'd be interested to see how they managed to stretch it out for another 50 minutes.

That said, the inclusion of some scenes is a little questionable, especially given that this version is a cut-down one. Was it really necessary to keep in her chat about menstruation,

or show her crying as she comes to terms with the development of her breasts? Perhaps these scenes have been kept in there to show that she was a normal girl with normal thoughts, but they were still a little uncomfortable to watch since they were the private thoughts of a real 13-year-old.

Naturally, sad as it is to say it, anyone watching a portrayal of Anne Frank's death is ultimately awaiting the scene where they're eventually found by the Nazis. This version once again uses a little poetic licence: it suggests that Anne was writing in her diary as the Nazis arrived, whereas in reality her last entry was three days before it happened. This aside, it's still handled fairly tastefully, and it's nice that there aren't any prison camp scenes (which would have essentially been pure speculation, as nobody knows for sure when or how she died). Instead we get simple title cards explaining what happened to each of the annex members.

Whether you've read Anne Frank's diary or not, this 2009 interpretation is an effective, (mostly) tasteful, (mostly) accurate attempt at telling the story. The lead actress's performance masterfully carries the film, and it's for this reason that I'd recommend it.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

You can get the full 150-minute mini-series on DVD for only a few quid on Amazon.

Bits and pieces

- You may be well aware of the story a couple of years ago in which human fad Justin Bieber visited the Anne Frank museum in Amsterdam and wrote a message in its guestbook saying: "Anne was a great girl. Hopefully she would have been a belieber". Many criticised Bieber's comment as egotistical but I just think it's stupid: there's no way Anne would have been allowed to play music in the annex without the Nazis finding her right away.
- The film takes one fairly major liberty with Anne's story in that it has her writing in the diary as the Nazis arrive. In reality, they turned up three days after her last entry. The film would have you believe the book ends mid-sentence or something. That would just be a loa-

Doctor Mordrid (1992)

Directors: Albert Band, Charles Band

Starring: Jeffrey Combs, Yvette Nipar, Brian Thompson, Jay Acovone

"Before this is over, I will drink your blood and feed on your flesh, and it will taste sweet."

The story goes that indie studio Full Moon had originally done a deal with Marvel Comics to make a film adaptation of its Dr Strange comics. However, negotiations fell apart at the last minute and so an extensive rewrite was needed.

The result was *Doctor Mordrid*, a film that doesn't share an awful lot with Marvel's hero other than his titular medical qualifications. That's not to say it doesn't still have a degree of charm, though.

Doctor Anton Mordrid has been living in New York for 150 years, waiting for the promised return of the evil Kabal (Brian Thompson, best known for playing an alien bounty hunter in *The X-Files*), who a prophecy dictates will eventually break out of his dimensional space castle prison cell and come to Earth. Seriously.

When Kabal comes back to Earth he plans to wreck the joint, summoning his minions from the fourth dimension (which I think is actually time, but that's probably not important).

Mordrid's clearly not having any of that, so he rents a fancy flat and turns it into a makeshift research centre where he can study world events and try to predict when Kabal will return.

As luck would have it, Kabal returns to New York, of all places, saving the Doc a potential fortune on travel fares. After he's resurrected by two amateur Satanists, he kills one of them and tasks the other with helping him recover the three elemental artefacts he needs to take over the world.

It's up to Doctor Mordrid, then, to stop Kabal from royally fucking up the planet, but there's a bit of a problem. You see, he's recently befriended Samantha Hunt, a specialist in rituals who regularly helps the police with odd crimes.

When Kabal's victim is discovered, Samantha recommends the police ask Mordrid for advice, but rather than consider him a valuable source of info they instead decide he's the one who did the killings, taking him in for questioning. D'oh.

Can Mordrid get out of jail back and find Kabal in time to stop him finding the three artefacts he needs to destroy the world? Well, you're still here, aren't you?

Although its plot is fairly straightforward, *Doctor Mordrid* does like to occasionally chuck in the odd curveball to keep you on your toes with an occasional "um, what the fuck is this all about".

A good example is the scene in which the Doc teleports himself to the other dimension, which seems to consist solely of a tiny planetoid on which a castle sits. Inside he meets an old friend whose eyes have been melted off. He cures his mate's eyes then fucks off back to Earth again for seemingly no reason.

The final battle is also suitably mad. Taking place in a museum, it's all well and good until Kabal decides to resurrect a giant dinosaur skeleton. Mordrid does the same and suddenly things go all stop-motion with a big dino bone fight. It's gloriously silly and it doesn't give a shit.

The cast is by and large decent, and certainly miles away from the gash Full Moon ended up hiring a few years down the line (I'm looking at you, *Hideous!* and *The Creeps*). By far the best example of this is Jeffrey Combs, the star of cult favourite *Re-Animator*, who's brilliantly loveable as the quirky Mordrid.

If you're looking for something short (it's a brisk 72 minutes), cheap and delightfully buttly then you could do a lot worse than *Doctor Mordrid*. It's by no means Full Moon's best offering but it's got that early '90s charm that should have you chuckling throughout its unabashed low-budget presentation.

Three out of five

How to see it

Doctor Mordrid was recently released on DVD by 88 Films, a UK publisher who focuses mainly on the Charles Band era of Full Moon films. As with its other releases the disc contains the Full Moon Videozone making-of feature that was also included on the original VHS version of the film. In the US, you can either buy it as a standalone DVD or get it as part of the Charles Band DVD Collection, which also contains *Meridian*, *Crash And Burn* and *Head Of The Family*.

Bits and pieces

- Jeffrey Combs is better known as Herbert West, the main character in the brilliant 1985 cult horror *Re-Animator*. He was also the voice of the Rat King in the recent *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoon series.
- If you watch *Doctor Mordrid* and are surprised by the chemistry between Combs and his co-star Barbara Crampton, there's a good reason for it. She too was in *Re-Animator*, starring alongside Combs.

Dollman (1991)

Director: Albert Pyun

Starring: Tim Thomerson, Jackie Earle Haley, Kamala Lopez

OVERWEIGHT KID – “That’s a Kruger blaster! The most powerful handgun in the universe!”

DOLLMAN – “That’s right, fat boy.”

While Full Moon Features is still going these days, it’s probably fair to say that most of the stuff it puts money into is utter shite. The likes of *Dangerous Worry Dolls*, *Gingerdead Man* and *Killjoy*, while entertaining to those who get a kick out of watching bad movies, just can’t cut it overall. This wasn’t always the case though: back in the late 80s and early 90s Full Moon Productions (as it was known then) was a powerhouse in the world of low-budget, straight-to-video sci-fi and horror. Film series like *Puppet Master*, *Subspecies* and *Trancers* were much-loved by genre fans at the time, and the Videozone making-of features at the end of each tape (long before DVD, mind) helped gain Full Moon a cult following of fans. *Dollman* was one of the more popular films Full Moon released during that time period, and it’s easily one of the silliest.

Dollman opens on a planet many light years away with its hero Brick Bardo coming face-to-face with his nemesis, the criminal Sprug. On this planet if you commit a misdemeanour and are caught you have a body part removed as punishment, so when you consider Sprug is just a head on a floating platform, it’s obvious he’s a nasty bugger. Still, that doesn’t stop him jumping (well, rolling) into his spaceship and trying to leave the planet, with Brick following in hot pursuit. The two ships crash-land on Earth (the Bronx, to be precise), so Brick has to find a way to repair his ship and get back to his own planet before Sprug finds him. There’s just one thing: on Earth, Brick is only thirteen inches tall.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its ridiculous premise, *Dollman* is brilliant fun. Tim Thomerson is the cheesiest 80s action hero you can think of (despite it being released in 1991), peppering the film with horrendous one-liners and moody acting. Combine that with rubbish sunglasses and a constant sneer and you’ve got the closest you’ll ever get to a movie version of Duke Nukem.

Brick is found by a Bronx woman called Debi. She hates the gang warfare that’s taken over the Bronx and she wants Brick to help her fix it. The leader of the gang causing Debi the most hassle is Braxton, played by a young Jackie Earle Haley, who clearly enjoys playing the role. Eventually Sprug ends up out of the picture and the real battle between Brick and the gang begins.

The major disappointing aspect of *Dollman* is the hero’s gun. In his planet it’s the most powerful weapon ever created: at the start of the movie we see him shooting two criminals with it and they explode in a shower of gore with just one shot each. This bodes well for the rest of the film but when he gets to Earth and his gun is reduced in size, it’s also reduced in

power. This means that while it does damage to the countless gang members he guns down in later scenes, it's not powerful enough to do more than create a wound on them. It seems clear this was a budgetary decision, so scenes where enemies are shot would just have them falling over rather than pricey gore effect shots.

Dollman is dumb. *Dollman* is funny. *Dollman* is crude and doesn't care, sometimes taking the piss out of itself with ridiculous dialogue ("What the fuck are we fuckin' waitin' for? I mean, fuck this shit! Fuck man, the fuckin' set-up is fucked up! The little fucker knows what kind of fuckin' shit is waiting here to fuck him up. So let's get the fuck out of this fuckin' deal and go looking for the tiny little mother fucker").

Most importantly though, *Dollman* is fun to watch, and at only 75 minutes (which might as well be just under 70 minutes given that it has the longest bloody credits sequence ever created) it's a quick laugh that lends itself to much hilarity when watched in a group. This is the sort of film where the trailer sums it up perfectly, so give it a watch below and you'll see why this is so fun, if a little cheap and cheesy.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

The DVD of *Dollman* is relatively rare in the UK because it's been out of print for a while now. Thankfully, it was recently released on Blu-ray by 88 Films. Both DVD and Blu-ray are easy enough to find in the US, as is a triple-bill DVD featuring *Dollman*, *Demonic Toys* and (naturally) *Dollman vs Demonic Toys*.

Bits and pieces

- Yes, that's right, *Dollman vs Demonic Toys*. In it, Dollman squares off against another group of Full Moon characters, the evil Demonic Toys, which then went on to fight against the dolls from Puppet Master. Basically, Full Moon loves its 'tiny person' crossovers.
- I still can't think of Jackie Earl Haley without getting pissed off. As a massive *Nightmare On Elm Street* fan, let's just say the remake - in which he played Freddy Krueger - wasn't exactly my cup of green tea.

Dolls (1987)

Director: Stuart Gordon

Starring: Carrie Lorraine, Ian Patrick Williams, Carolyn Purdy-Gordon, Guy Rolfe, Hilary Mason, Stephen Lee, Buntly Bailey, Cassie Stewart

RALPH – “You know, I can remember every toy I had as a kid.”

GABRIEL – “And they remember you, Ralph. Toys are very loyal, and that is a fact.”

This may appear to be your fairly bog-standard review of a cheesy '80s horror film, but for me this review is a confrontation of my childhood fears and a firm “up yours” to many a sleepless night.

You see, when I was a young sprog of around five or six, I used to go with my dad to the local library to rent videos. Usually I'd end up with something suitably child-friendly but for at least a year there was a cardboard standee in the corner that used to scare the living piss out of me.

The offending display simply showed the poster image you see to the side of this text. The word '*Dolls*', along with an image of a doll holding its eyeballs in the air. It was also accompanied by the UK VHS tagline: “They want to play with you”.

We never rented *Dolls*, but that image alone was enough to terrify me. I couldn't sleep for months thinking about that doll. It was one of the reasons that, ironically, I despised horror films when I was young.

Years later my dad tried to make me watch Clint Eastwood's critically acclaimed war film *Hamburger Hill*, but when we started watching it there was a trailer for *Dolls* at the start of the video and I broke down, refusing (in my young and innocent way) to watch the film in case it had anything more to do with *Dolls* in it.

So now, as a man of 30 years of age, I've finally won my 25-year battle with *Dolls* and watched the film that made me a nervous wreck for so much of my childhood. And, as is usually the case in stories like these, it turns out it's tame as fuck.

It tells the tale of Judy, a young girl going on holiday with her dad and stepmother, neither of whom are particularly fond of her and would much rather she wasn't there.

When their car breaks down in a dark country road during a massive rainstorm, the trio run to a nearby mansion in the hope that someone there will be able to give them shelter.

Luckily for them, the mansion is owned by a kind old couple, who used to make dolls back in the day. Judy's parents are as disrespectful and thankless as you can get, but Judy is

delighted by the couple's generosity and is happy to have someone want to look after her for once.

Before long the group are joined by three more people seeking refuge from the rain: friendly portly chap Ralph and two British girls, who are secretly robbers planning to steal Ralph's wallet and leg it when the rain goes off.

As you'd expect, it isn't long before things start getting a little unnatural. The audience is informed of this long before the mansion's visitors are, with shots of the dolls turning their heads to keep an eye on their new guests.

That night, one of the English girls can't resist exploring the house to see what she can steal. Not too chuffed with their owners' hospitality being betrayed like this, the dolls spring to life and dish out some pint-sized punishment, taking her up to the attic and turning her into a life-sized doll.

It's therefore up to Judy and Ralph to not only stop the dolls before everyone pegs it, but to convince Judy's parents and the remaining English girl that the dolls are indeed alive.

Dolls is a silly film, with impressive special effects for its budget that make up for the generally low standard of acting. It's also got a charming little musical score by the fantastically named Fuzzbee Morse.

Without wishing to spoil too much more, the final twist in which it's revealed what's actually making the dolls alive is just batshit crazy.

Crucially, it's also the moment I realised how silly my fear of this film had been, that the dolls I'd been scared of all these years were in fact something that was, quite frankly, pretty fucking dumb.

This revelation aside, I'd recommend you give *Dolls* a watch. At a brisk 77 minutes it'll whizz by pleasantly quickly, and it's got some decent set pieces that, daft ending aside, should make you smile.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

Dolls is only available on Blu-ray in the UK, having recently been released by 101 Films. It's a decent quality transfer, offering a commentary by director Stuart Gordon. In the US, you can only get it on DVD.

Bits and pieces

- *Dolls* was the first ever film shown at a That Was A Bit Mental double-bill film screening. It was the first part of a double-bill that also included *For Y'ur Height Only*, the Filipino midget spy movie. Because, you know, little people.

- There aren't many horror films that had gore removed by the filmmakers themselves, but that's what happened with *Dolls*. Since Stuart Gordon had recently had success with the gore-heavy *Re-Animator*, he was encouraged by the studio to make *Dolls* similarly gory. A death scene was filmed in which one character had their intestines removed by a doll with a pitchfork. After filming was completed it was decided the gore didn't suit the film's tone and it was dropped.

Drive (2011)

Director: Nicolas Winding Refn

Starring: Ryan Gosling, Carey Mulligan, Bryan Cranston, Albert Brooks, Ron Perlman

"There's a hundred-thousand streets in this city. You don't need to know the route. You give me a time and a place, I give you a five minute window. Anything happens in that five minutes and I'm yours. No matter what. Anything happens a minute either side of that and you're on your own. Do you understand?"

I didn't really know what to expect when I put *Drive* into my Blu-ray player. To be perfectly honest, though it had received rave reviews from people I knew, people whose opinions I trusted, I just couldn't get excited about it. Ultimately I ended up renting it and giving it a go purely because my fiancée wanted to see it. I'm glad I finally did, because it's a sensational film.

Drive tells the story of an unnamed driver (Gosling) who works as a movie stuntman during the day and is a freelance getaway driver for criminals at night. After falling for his next-door neighbour (Mulligan) and deciding to help out her jailbird husband, things end up going pear-shaped and the driver has to struggle to ensure not only his own survival, but that of his neighbour's family.

Ryan Gosling puts in a curious but ultimately appealing performance as a man who says very little throughout the film. There are moments of dialogue when it's really essential to get the point across but a lot of *Drive* consists of Gosling and Mulligan staring at each other without saying anything. And yet, that's partly what makes the film so interesting, because their chemistry is such that they both do such a great job of saying an awful lot without actually saying anything.

One thing that may shock you about *Drive* is the gore. It's not exactly a splatter flick in the style of *Blood Feast* but there's no denying that *Drive* has a lot more of the red stuff than your standard crime drama. One scene in an elevator in particular brings back some horrible memories of the fire extinguisher scene in *Irreversible* (rumour has it the director asked *Irreversible*'s director Gaspar Noé for advice on how to imitate the scene's grisly effect). Put simply, if you're squeamish, there's enough here to make you uncomfortable: though, crucially, not enough that you should avoid the film altogether.

The other thing I fell in love with was the soundtrack. It very much has an 80s feel to it (even though all the music was created within the past five years), and the opening and closing titles make it clear that this was the intention. If *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* – my favourite game in the *GTA* series – was a movie, *Drive* would be it.

If you're the way I was and you just can't motivate yourself to watch *Drive* for whatever reason – maybe it's the generic title, maybe you just can't get excited about Ryan Gosling – I

urge you to check it out. It's slow paced at times and it could have been a bit shorter, but it's an audio and visual masterpiece and one you should really make time for.

Four and a half out of five

How to see it

Drive is available on DVD and Blu-ray.

Bits and pieces

- My wife has become fairly obsessed with the *Drive* soundtrack, ripping the arse out of it on Spotify on a regular basis. As a result I have almost the entire thing permanently implanted in my mind, from the slow one ("there's something inside you, it's hard to explain") to the catchy one ("a real human being and a real hero") to the shite one ("you keep me under your spell"). It's worth a listen.
- A lot of people compare *Drive* to the indie PC game *Hotline Miami*. In reality, the only similarities are its '80s-style soundtrack and the fact that both feature violence. That's not to say *Hotline Miami* isn't worth playing – it definitely is – but if you're expecting *Drive: The Game* you're going to be disappointed because it's less subtle. A lot less.

Evil Never Dies (2013)

Director: Martyn Pick

Starring: Tony Scannell, Graham Cole, PH Moriarty, Anouska Mond, Fliss Watson, Katy Manning

Also known as: The Haunting Of Harry Payne (original title)

"The only thing I need to know from you... is how the hell you kill a dead man."

Here's an interesting one, a British gangster film with a paranormal twist. I haven't seen anything like that since *Cockney Spook*, a movie I just made up in my head.

Evil Never Dies (which until recently was going to be called *The Haunting Of Harry Payne*, but was changed to a far more generic title in December 2013) tells the story of Harry Payne, an aging mobster who's just left prison after serving ten years for the murder of his gang boss and best friend.

Keen to leave a life of crime behind him, Harry has moved to a small village in Norfolk to become the new landlord of a quiet pub. Naturally, in order to ensure there's a film worth watching, things don't stay quiet for too long.

As (bad) luck would have it, Harry's quiet village is soon the setting of a host of grisly murders, in which the victims are butchered with a big sickle. They don't do things by half measures in Norfolk, you see.

The villagers think the killings are the work of the White Lady of Rayleton, the ghostly local legend. The police aren't too convinced, especially Detective Inspector Bracken, who dealt with Harry back in the day and is convinced he's getting straight back into the killing habit again.

There's a twist, though. Harry's got psychic powers, which he's been trying to suppress over the years by drinking them away. These powers might be able to help Harry figure out what's going on and not only clear his name, but also patch things up with his estranged wife (who's now in a nearby madhouse).

Evil Never Dies has some decent performances, but British audiences will be forgiven for thinking they've stumbled on an odd paranormal episode of *The Bill*.

Tony Scannell, who plays Harry, starred in the long-running ITV series for nine years as D.S. Ted Roach. Meanwhile, Graham Cole, who here plays the role of Harry's rival Detective Inspector Bracken, was PC Stamp on the same show for 22 years.

Meanwhile, the role of Harry's wife is filled by Katy Manning – who appeared in *Doctor Who* back in the 1970s as the third Doctor's assistant Jo Grant – and Harry's old gang boss is

played by the wonderfully-named PH Moriarty, who was Hatchet Harry in *Lock, Stock And Two Smoking Barrels*. So there's some experience here.

It's a shame, then, that *Evil Never Dies* doesn't really manage to elevate itself above normality despite its relatively unique concept.

The story is fairly basic, with about as many layers as a t-shirt, while all the apparently gruesome killings were seemingly deemed too brutal (or, more likely, too expensive) to show on-screen.

In fact, it's telling that despite the film being mainly about Harry's psychic battle with the village's ghosts, the majority of the most engaging scenes are the flashback sequences in which there's nothing paranormal to be seen and everything just feels like a straight-up gangster flick.

The only major success is the film's twist ending, which is fairly clever to a point, until the film decides it can't be happy enough with a nifty sucker punch and goes one step further with a silly battle involving people's souls.

If you see *Evil Never Dies* fairly cheaply then it's probably worth a watch, because there's some solid acting on display here and it's an interesting premise. But don't expect to be running around and telling your friends about this hidden gem you've just found, because there's really nothing remarkable about it.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

Evil Never Dies is available on DVD in the UK courtesy of 4Digital Media. It isn't available in the US yet.

Bits and pieces

- Much like *Demons Never Die*, reviewed elsewhere in this ebook, the title *Evil Never Dies* is a load of old pish. Evil has died countless times throughout history, from the execution of Saddam Hussein to the cancellation of horrendous British TV soap *Eldorado*. So the next time someone claims that 'evil never dies', tell them to wipe the shite from their lips.
- Here's an odd coincidence for you. Writer John Mangan is also an actor, who's due to star in *Payne & Redemption*, an independent film 'inspired' by the *Max Payne* video games. So one minute he's writing a film about a man called Payne, the next he's starring in a film about a different one.

Exorcist II: The Heretic (1977)

Director: John Borman

Starring: Linda Blair, Richard Burton, Louise Fletcher, James Earl Jones

FATHER LAMONT – “I’ve flown this route before.”

HELICOPTER PILOT – “Oh yes?”

FATHER LAMONT – “Yes. It was on the wings of a demon.”

I’ve said plenty of times before that *The Exorcist* (and its subsequent Director’s Cut) is one of the greatest movies ever made. It’s terrifying, it’s spectacular, it’s faith-challenging and it’s supremely acted. In a way then *Exorcist II: The Heretic* is even more impressive, because it takes one of the finest films ever and follows it up with a sequel so brain-achingly bad it’s without doubt the biggest drop in quality in film sequel history.

Set four years after the events in Georgetown, 18-year-old Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair again) is now living in New York with her mum’s friend Sharon (Kitty Winn, also returning from the first film) while her mum is off making another movie. Regan claims she doesn’t remember any of the events of the first film, but she’s being monitored by a psychiatrist anyway. The psychiatrist, Dr Tuskin (Louise Fletcher) reckons Regan’s suppressing those memories and she wants to try hypnosis to free them.

Meanwhile, a priest called Father Lamont has been assigned by the Church to investigate the death of Father Merrin at the end of the first film, so he visits Regan to try to get answers. So far, so normal. But this is still only the first ten minutes or so. Then it gets bad.

It’s said that when *Exorcist II* had its premiere, the audience were fine with it until the 'synchroniser' was introduced. At this point the audience burst into hysterical laughter and the film could never win back their respect. It’s little wonder why: it’s the exact moment all the accolades and reputation earned by *The Exorcist* are flushed down the toilet and the series turns into hokey sci-fi mumbo jumbo.

You see, the 'synchroniser' is a device Dr Tuskin owns for hypnosis. It’s a set of two headbands with diodes attached to them, each connected to a flashing light that emits a tone. When Regan and Father Lamont both wear these headbands and use their minds to make the tones sound the same, Father Lamont can read Regan’s mind and be a part of her dreams. Seriously.

Not weird enough yet? Then how about this: while using the synchroniser with Regan, Father Lamont’s mind is transported to 1930s Africa, where he learns of a boy called Kokumo who has the power to fight an evil demon called Pazuzu. Lamont realises that Regan was possessed by Pazuzu in the first film (not the Devil, then), and that he has to go to Africa to try to find the now adult Kokumo (James Earl Jones, dressed up in a giant locust

costume: yes, really) to get advice on how to defeat it. Remember, this is the sequel to *The Exorcist*, one of the most revered and respected horror films ever.

The whole thing is just an insult to the original film. The first *Exorcist* was a chilling battle between the devil and a priest questioning his faith, with an innocent little girl used as the arena. It took place in a quiet unassuming street, adding a sense of realism that made the otherworldly goings-on that more powerful and disturbing. Then the sequel comes along with mind-reading headbands, African demons and James Earl Jones dressed up like a giant locust, and everything is pissed against a wall.

In the past ten years I've tried maybe ten or so times to watch *Exorcist II*, and have fallen asleep every time. This is no word of a lie. Only recently was I able to watch the whole film in one go, and now I can clearly say being unconscious was a far more entertaining experience. The first *Exorcist* was a challenging film that made its audience question their faith in religion. The sequel made them question their faith in Hollywood.

A half out of five

How to see it

Looking for a laugh? Fair enough. You can get *Exorcist II* on DVD but I'd recommend you get the *Exorcist: The Complete Anthology* DVD boxset instead (or the US Blu-ray equivalent) because at least then you'll get some brilliant films along with it.

Bits and pieces

- While *Exorcist II* could have so easily been the start of a downward spiral for the series, it was instead saved by the fantastic *The Exorcist III*. In it, the police lieutenant from the first film tries to solve a series of murders taking place in Georgetown by a seemingly satanic serial killer.
- If you get a chance, check out the trailer for *Exorcist II*. It perfectly highlights why its soundtrack is one of the worst I've ever heard in a film.

Faces Of Death (1978)

Director: John Alan Schwartz

Starring: Michael Carr

"During the past 20 years I know that my compulsion to understand death was much greater than just an obsession. My dreams have dictated my mission. But now it is time to witness the final moment, to discover the circle that forever repeats itself. The end of the beginning or the beginning of the end? I'll leave that decision to you."

I've been putting off watching *Faces Of Death* for years but I knew that my pledge to eventually watch all 72 video nasties meant that one day I'd have to grin and bear it. When my fiancée took a trip to visit her friend in France, I figured there was no time like the present. As I expected, *Faces Of Death* is fucking horrible.

This gruesome '70s film is part documentary, part mockumentary, a film that claims it wants us to consider death and make us question the ways in which we kill and be killed, but in reality it's just an excuse to show scene after scene of grotesque footage. It's since been admitted that around 40% of the footage was faked, but that of course means around 60% was real and that's just macabre.

Of course, even if it hadn't been admitted that much of *Faces Of Death* was fake, these days it'd be much easier to tell anyway. The film originally gained notoriety and popularity in the early days of VHS, where people would rent and copy the taboo tape, passing it around their friends and constantly degrading the already fuzzy picture quality in the process. This made it easier to believe all the footage was real, because the detail lost in the tape quality would be filled in by the viewer's subconscious and made 'realistic' in their heads.

Nowadays, with the film available on DVD (in some countries at least), it's much clearer to tell which of the footage is genuine and which is scripted, hokey bullshit. Many of the film's more famous scenes – the murderer on Death Row getting the electric chair, the orgiastic cult who eats each other's organs, the game warden who's eaten alive by an alligator, the rescuers recovering the mangled corpse of a man who's fallen down a cliff, the bear attack, the man setting himself on fire, the restaurant where a live monkey has its head caved in and its brains scooped out – are exposed as quite obviously fake with the benefit of added clarity.

However, it also makes the real stuff much easier to see, and it's this stuff that's truly hard to stomach and makes *Faces Of Death* one to skip. The first half an hour is easily the worst, opening with footage of actual open heart surgery and continuing on to plenty of graphic footage of animals being killed. We see an illegal dog fight taking place, followed by a dying lion bleeding to death. We see an African tribe cutting open a cow and draining its blood into a pot. We see a chicken being beheaded, then we see slaughterhouse workers cutting cows' throats open in kosher killings. We also see seals and alligators being clubbed and skinned.

Other real (stock) footage is harrowing to watch: a section on the Nazis shows lots of Holocaust footage, with emaciated bodies being carted around and dumped in graves, while newsreel footage of cholera victims in India, suicides, dogs with cancer and police gathering the brains and various other remains of road accident victims and San Diego plane crash corpses produce a continuous stream of shocking imagery.

Faces Of Death can try to chuck its moral messages around all it wants, but it's clear they've simply been shoehorned in there to justify showing the footage. The simple fact is that regardless of how much of it is fake, the fact that much of it is real footage of humans and animals being killed means this is a film that truly lives up to the video nasty name, and one of the very few nasties that I believe should be banned in its uncut form in the UK. We may live in a time now where graphic death footage can be found online by those who really want to see it, but the act of putting some of it in a film, adding fake scenes to boost its running time and making money off it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Avoid.

A half out of five

How to see it

Despite its shocking real-life content, *Faces Of Death* is available to buy in a near-uncut state in the UK. The only shots missing are the dog fight scene and the start of the restaurant scene where the customers bash a monkey's head in (since the brains are fake the actual bits where the brains are eaten are still in there). If you're really morbidly curious and you have to see it in full, you can import the uncut German DVD (which was the version I watched) from Amazon. If I were you though, I'd just watch the excellent *Video Nasties: The Definitive Guide* DVD documentary instead, which covers it in enough detail.

Bits and pieces

- If your stomach is some sort of vacuum and you still crave grotesque sights after watching *Faces Of Death*, you're in luck! There are a total of five sequels, each offering a similar combination of real and faked footage, as well as a compilation of the first three called *The Worst Of Faces Of Death*. Really though, there are so many better things you could be doing. Learn to juggle, for example.
- Of all the reviews on the That Was A Bit Mental site, the *Faces Of Death* one continues to be the most popular (in terms of hits) every single day. There are some sick buggers out there and no mistake.
- With all the beheadings going on in the news and the likes of 4chan and Liveleak making graphic images and videos of real gory deaths readily available to young and old alike these days, I fear for the day that something like *Faces Of Death* is laughed off as harmless, tame fun much like once-shocking slashers like *Friday The 13th* are now. Speaking of which...

Friday The 13th Part 2 (1981)

Director: Steve Miner

Starring: Amy Steel, John Furey, Warrington Gillette

"I told the others, they didn't believe me. You're all doomed! You're all doomed!"

It's common knowledge among horror fans that Jason isn't actually the killer in *Friday The 13th*, and it's in fact his mum who wanders around coating the forests of Camp Crystal Lake with teenage blood. Eager to cash in with a sequel but realising they couldn't pull off the same trick twice (not to mention the fact that Mrs Voorhees was decapitated at the end of the first film), Paramount decided it was time to finally introduce Jason himself.

Before opening with a short prologue to ensure the first film's heroine is quickly done away with, *Friday The 13th Part 2* jumps forward five years to introduce us to a new group of potential teenage victims. These cheery (and horny) scamps are headed to the countryside to take part in a training session so they can learn how to be camp counsellors.

Thanks to the events of the first film, Camp Crystal Lake is still condemned and nobody's allowed to go there. As luck would have it though, the training centre is located just a machete's throw away from the Crystal Lake site. Hmmm, I hope nothing happens to anyone as a result of this.

After a fan-pleasing return from Crazy Ralph – who once again turns up to deliver an eerily prophetic warning and once again is dismissed – the would-be counsellors meet at the training centre and proceed to tell the obligatory campfire backstory of Jason and his mum.

What happens after this is essentially a re-do of the first film as one by one a total of eight victims are offed in various gruesome ways. One couple makes the slasher film mistake of having sex and the two are promptly impaled together mid-coitus as a result. A skinny dipping incident results in a machete-aided throat slice. Even poor old Crazy Ralph finally gets what's coming to him.

By far the most memorable kill in *Part 2* however is that of Mark, the unfortunate wheelchair-ridden lad who's just about to get some female action for the first time. Heading out to the cabin's porch to get some fresh air before the deed, Mark gets a machete plonked unceremoniously through his head before having his wheelchair kicked down the stairs, rolling him downhill and into the lake. Say what you will about Jason, but at least he's an equal opportunities destroyer.

Speaking of Jason, *Part 2* does indeed mark his first main appearance as the killer. He's not quite the hockey mask wearing icon most know him as by this point, though (the mask doesn't make its debut until *Part 3*).

Instead, in order to hide his disfigured face, Jason wears a slightly less menacing pillowcase over his head for the majority of the film. He's still an intimidating figure thanks to the sheer bulk of the stuntman playing him (the fantastically named Warrington Gillette), but it's certainly still the least terrifying portrayal of one of horror's most famous (hidden) faces.

The main problem with *Part 2* is its final third. After killing off eight people in quick succession the film leaves us with Jason, two survivors, and another 25 minutes or so left to go. The result is a lengthy chase scene that goes on a little too long for my liking, even though it's interspersed with interesting moments (such as the heroine Ginny dressing up as Jason's mother to try and confuse him).

The token twist ending is also nonsensical, in that it doesn't actually tell us what the ending was (spoilers for the rest of this paragraph). Whereas the first film's twist (the surviving girl, sitting in a canoe in the middle of Crystal Lake, is pulled under by a young Jason) is easily dismissed as a dream, this time it's not so easy to do so.

After seemingly killing Jason, Ginny and her fellow survivor Paul head to another cabin. There, a maskless Jason bursts through a window and attacks Ginny, at which point we fade to white. The next thing we see is Ginny being helped into a stretcher, as she explains she has no recollection of what happened to Jason or Paul.

Call me entitled, but after watching a chase scene for 25 fucking minutes I expect to see what happens at the end of it, not just be told "we don't know how it finished, sorry."

In a way, *Part 2* is a victim of the original's success. Without knowing if they had a hit on their hands, the makers of the first film were able to make a movie that didn't have to cater for the possibility of a sequel. They had a killer (Mrs Voorhees) who was killed fairly convincingly, and the twist ending with the little kiddy Jason coming out of the lake was little more than a *Carrie*-style dream ending to get the audience chatting as they left the cinema. It was a nice way to end a one-off film and had it not been so popular then it would have been a perfectly fine standalone story.

When the first *Friday The 13th* became an unexpected success and a sequel became necessary though, not only did the 'proper' Jason have to be created but his death had to be left ambiguous to prevent future complexities when making a third film, or a fourth, or (as eventually happened) a tenth. Hence the *Part 2* ending in which Jason appears to create a final scare then just fucks off without any explanation as to where he went.

As the series progressed the filmmakers got used to the balance of giving us a satisfying Jason 'death' while still leaving the possibility of a follow-up in place. This effort lacks the former, making the latter feel jarring.

Friday The 13th Part 2 has a strong first half as far as '80s slasher films go. The characters are relatively well-rounded and their personalities are distinct enough that they don't just feel like generic bags of meat ready to be butchered in a variety of ways. The kills are also inventive enough given the genre was still in its infancy at this point, and the screen debut of Jason marks a classic milestone in horror cinema. The final 20 minutes are a bit of a slog

though and the ending is just a piss-take, meaning while it may be iconic it's by no means the finest of the *Fridays*.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

Friday The 13th Part 2 is available on both DVD and Blu-ray. If you're craving a more overall *Friday The 13th* experience you have three options. In the UK your only main option is the *Friday The 13th: From Crystal Lake To Manhattan* DVD box set, which contains DVD versions of *Friday The 13th Parts 1-8*.

This same DVD box set is also available in the US, though by far the best option is the recently released *Friday The 13th: The Complete Collection* Blu-ray set. This is only available in the US but I can confirm it's region-free (I own it myself), so if you're feeling particularly flash with the cash you can import it. This set contains all twelve movies in one box for the first time, including *Freddy Vs Jason* and the 2009 reboot.

Bits and pieces

- Jason is played in this movie by Warrington Gillette. I have no intention of legally changing my name by deed poll but if I did you can bet your balls it'd be to Warrington Gillette.
- Adrienne King, the 'final girl' from the first *Friday The 13th*, returned to *Part 2* to film a small prologue in which Jason kills her for offing his mum in the first film. Apparently King was supposed to star in the entire movie but she turned it down because she was getting hassled by a stalker. After filming the prologue, she wouldn't star in another film again for another 19 years.

Friday The 13th Part 3 (1983)

Director: Steve Miner

Starring: Dana Kimmell, Paul Kratka, Larry Zerner, Richard Brooker

"Is that all you're gonna do this weekend? Smoke dope?"

After the second *Friday The 13th* movie ended with the doors left wide open for a sequel, that inevitable follow-up sauntered through said doors just one year later in the shape of the imaginatively titled *Friday The 13th Part 3*.

The second film concluded with the survivor conveniently blacking out and having no idea where Jason had gone, so the third begins just one day later as a still very-much alive Jason heads to a lakefront property called Higgins Haven, where he takes solace in a nearby farmhouse to rest his wounds.

As Jason's luck would have it, yet another group of sexually active teens are on their way to spend the week at Higgins Haven, blissfully unaware one of the horror genre's most notorious slashers is camping out in the building next door.

You really don't need me to tell you what happens next, but suffice to say the result leads to what's probably a nifty overtime bonus for the county coroner. In all, *Part 3* ends with a total of eleven deaths, the most in the series at that point.

What sets *Part 3* apart from its two predecessors and umpteen successors is that it was originally shown in cinemas in 3D. Not your typical red and blue affair either, but the proper clear, polarised glasses effort.

I had the good fortune to see a rare screening of the 3D version in Edinburgh many years ago (there aren't many prints left, not to mention cinemas with old-school screens suitable for projecting that type of image onto) and it was sensational.

As a 3D film from the '80s *Part 3* naturally spends much of its time thrusting things into the camera to make the audience lose their shit. Throughout its 95 minutes viewers are constantly ducking as a baseball bat, a mouse, a snake, a yo-yo, a joint, a harpoon and two different eyeballs are among the items shoved towards them.

The 3D effect – as it was originally intended, at least – is unexpectedly effective given the film's low budget and the technical complexities still involved in shooting in 3D in the 1980s.

Some of the aforementioned close-ups are slightly misaligned, so when Jason squeezes a poor chap's head so hard his eyeball pops out there's a minor 'double vision' effect when it comes towards you.

Surprisingly, then, the most impressive instances are during the less exciting scenes, where you're allowed to just soak in the detail. A scene near the start where we see sheets hanging out to dry in a garden is a highlight, as is the film's final shot of a serene lake.

Watching in 2D, as the vast majority of today's viewers do, the removal of *Part 3's* gimmick relegates it to the status of just another slasher film continuing the tried and tested *Friday The 13th* formula.

In terms of quality it's on a par with its predecessors, though its teens are slightly more appealing: in particular Shelly, a hopeless nerd who just can't get the ladies to love him.

In fact, it's Shelly who's responsible for the introduction of *Friday The 13th's* most iconic item – Jason's hockey mask – when it emerges he's brought it along to try and scare people as a prank. When Shelly pegs it later, Jason nicks his mask and keeps hold of it for the next eight films.

If you can, watch *Friday The 13th Part 3* in 3D as it was originally intended (see below to find out how). In 2D it's little more than yet another entry in the series, albeit one with some memorable death scenes and the debut of Jason's famous mask.

In 3D though, even with coloured glasses as opposed to the proper polarised method, it's cheesy fun.

Three out of five

How to see it

See the 'how to see it' section for *Friday The 13th Part 2* - the same applies for this film.

Bits and pieces

- One of these days I want to screen *Friday The 13th Part 3* in 3D. It's going to happen, mark my words. Sadly, it'll probably have to be in the rubbish red-and-blue glasses format, but even so. If you live in London, follow @TWABM on Twitter and keep an eye out for announcements.

- I don't want to get all wanky but technically this shouldn't really be called *Friday The 13th* since it starts the day after the events of *Part 2* and then moves on to the day after that. So technically it should be called *Sunday The 15th And A Bit Of Saturday The 14th*.

Friday The 13th: The Final Chapter (1984)

Director: Joseph Zito

Starring: Kimberly Beck, Corey Feldman, Crispin Glover, Peter Barton, Ted White

“Jesus Christmas! Holy Jesus! Goddamn! Holy Jesus jumping Christmas shit!”

Oh, you poor, deluded fools. To think there was once a time when the fourth film in the *Friday The 13th* series was supposed to be the last one ever.

Of course, hindsight tells us this couldn't have been further from the truth – Jason would go on to star in a further eight movies – but for now let's treat *The Final Chapter* as the concluding part it was seemingly intended to be.

Following on from the end of the third movie, an apparently dead Jason is carted off to the local morgue where he rests with his victims. Predictably, it's not long before he's up and at them again, killing a couple of doctors on his way out of the building.

Jason sets off for Crystal Lake but he isn't the only one headed there: and if you think I'm referring to anyone other than a group of sexually active teenagers then you really haven't gotten the hang of how this franchise works yet.

Yes, another bunch of dick-swinging dudes and dudettes (including a young Crispin Glover) have rented a house at Crystal Lake, with the aim of partaking in all manner of alcohol consumption and numerous games of Hide The Sausage.

Watching on enviously is Trish Jarvis (Kimberly Beck), who lives in the house next door with her mum and brother Tommy (a pre-*Goonies* Corey Feldman). Trish wants to join the party but her mum's having none of it, predicting with soothsayer-like accuracy that it'll only lead to trouble.

Let's not piss around any further: even if you haven't seen the film before there are no prizes for guessing what the next 50 minute-chunk consists of (except for maybe a badge saying Captain Obvious). A grand total of twelve deaths are doled out by Jason in *The Final Chapter*, each clearly attempting to outdo each other in originality.

One poor sod has his neck sliced and broken with a surgical hacksaw. Another is thrown out a window, landing on the roof of a car three storeys down (and blowing out its windows in a spectacular and slightly unrealistic fashion). And, as ever, the token 'impaled from below' scene returns, this time with an unfortunate lass getting speared from underneath a raft.

As for poor Crispin Glover, he gets a corkscrew slammed into his hand then a meat cleaver lodged in his face. Thankfully, before this happens he manages to make his mark on cinematic history with one of the worst dances ever committed to celluloid.

The Final Chapter once again tinkers with the genre's now-staple 'final girl' act by having two survivors. Both Trish and her little brother Tommy are the last ones standing by the end of the film, and while having two survivors ultimately didn't work well in *Part 2* this time it's a lot more effective given that Tommy is so young and more vulnerable than his sister.

If you want to get all arsey and academic about it, *The Final Chapter* offers an interesting change in the perception of the female 'heroine' character. The films before it presented the idea of the final survivor being a teenage girl – a traditionally weak character (according to the movies, not me) – who realises she has to fight and finds inner strength to defeat what seems like an unstoppable foe.

This time another level in the hierarchy is added in young Tommy, and the film says: "You thought teenage girls were weak? Try a nine-year-old boy on for size". Despite being the stereotypical 'final girl', then, Trish is no longer the most vulnerable character and as such her role in the final battle is merely to act as a decoy, having a half-arsed struggle with Jason while the real 'final' character, Tommy, prepares to confront the odds and delivers the final blow.

Either that or I'm reading too much into it and someone just really wanted to see Corey Feldman shave his hair off and swing a machete around (which does actually happen).

Which brings us neatly to the inevitable twist ending (spoilers for the rest of this paragraph!). Yes, despite the title claiming this was indeed the final chapter, the filmmakers still couldn't resist ending on an "or is it?" note by suggesting that while Jason was indeed dead, young Corey Feldman had gone a little mad after killing him and could potentially go on to continue killing.

Thankfully, this odd ending wasn't followed up on and the idea was scrapped by the time the inevitable *Friday The 13th Part V: A New Beginning* went into production. That's not to say *Part V* didn't introduce another new idea that would prove to be even more controversial... but that's for another time.

Friday The 13th: The Final Chapter is a good entry in a series that had more or less nailed the slasher formula by the fourth film. The ending is the only truly unsatisfying aspect, the rest is standard slasher fare that should pass the time well enough with a group of mates.

Three out of five

How to see it

See the 'how to see it' section for *Friday The 13th Part 2* - the same applies for this film.

Bits and pieces

- There are other series with movies that claim to be the 'final' instalment but can't help going ahead with another sequel anyway: see *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (followed by three more films) and *The Final Conflict* (the third *Omen* movie, followed a decade later

by *Omen IV*). But *Friday The 13th* is extra special because it makes this false claim twice in the same series: once with *The Final Chapter*, then again with the ninth entry, *Jason Goes To Hell: The Final Friday*. The latter was subsequently followed by *Jason X*, *Freddy vs Jason* and the *Friday The 13th* remake.

- Of all the actors to portray Jason over the years, *The Final Chapter*'s Ted White is probably the least well-known. That's because he demanded to have his name removed from the film's credits in protest at director Joseph Zito treating the other teenage actors like shite. The final straw came during a scene in which teenage actor Judie Aronson was filming a scene in a freezing lake and Zito refused to let her come out of the lake in between takes. What a prick.

Friday The 13th Part V: A New Beginning (1985)

Director: Danny Steinmann

Starring: John Shepherd, Shavar Ross, Melanie Kinnaman, Dick Wieand

"Jason Voorhees? You're outta your fucking mind. You've been out in the sun too long. Jason Voorhees is dead! His body was cremated. He's nothing but a handful of ash."

Picture the dilemma faced by the studio execs at Paramount. They'd just released the fourth *Friday The 13th* film, one which quite clearly drew a line under the whole series with the title *Friday The 13th: The Final Chapter*. And yet, people wanted more.

So, deciding to neatly brush the whole 'final chapter' business neatly under the blood-soaked carpet, Paramount greenlit a fifth film and decided to call it *A New Beginning*, the title implying that the first four films were still their own little series and now we were dealing with a brand new story arc.

Except we weren't, because *A New Beginning* follows on from the events of the fourth film, albeit a number of years later. Now a teenager, Tommy Jarvis – played by a guy who looks nothing like Corey Feldman – has been sent to a psychiatric asylum for similarly troubled teens, having continued to suffer nightmares and visions of Jason ever since he killed him as a kid.

The problem is, the asylum isn't helping much. Tommy's visions of Jason are still continuing, and now they're even worse because his fellow nutcase teens have started turning up dead. How can visions kill people? That's fucking insa... oh, right, there must be someone actually killing them. Never mind.

Part V does its best to walk the line between being a completely new story and a traditional *Friday The 13th* film. Though the asylum setting takes the action away from Crystal Lake for the first time the typical *Friday* formula remains, with teens lining up to get their own five minutes of fame/nudity before being offed in an appropriately grim fashion by a chap in a hockey mask.

The acting is of a generally poor standard this time around, even by slasher film standards. While each *Friday* before it at least had a character the audience could side with, here it's difficult to do so. The lad playing Tommy has all the personality of a pencil case, and his supporting cast ranges from dull to irritating.

Most hated are the 'comedy' hillbilly family. This grotesque mother and son live near the asylum and keep turning up to have a go at the staff for letting the teens wander near their house. The mum is foul-mouthed to an unnecessary extent, the result being that rather than thinking "wow, she's angry" you'll instead think "hmm, the writers are trying too hard to make her offensive".

Her son, meanwhile, is probably the single worst character in the entire twelve-film *Friday The 13th* series. An infuriatingly annoying caricature of dumb hillbillies, he stinks up every scene he's in with his stupidly over-the-top performance and constantly threatens to turn the film into a terrible comedy rather than an adequate slasher.

Which is, thankfully, what *Part V* still manages to be against the odds. The kills are varied: one poor chap has an ice pick rammed into his neck, another has a road flare jammed into his mouth, while one unfortunate lass gets a pair of garden shears thrust into her eyes.

There's also another classic example of atrocious 1980s dancing, in which one teenage nutcase pegs it after a lengthy spot of robot dancing.

There's one controversial aspect of the film that had fans up in arms, and I've deliberately avoided it until now in case it spoiled things. Those who don't mind, feel free to read on. If you plan on watching *Part V* at some point though, be a dear and skip ahead to the final paragraph.

Right, now those pricks are out of the way let's talk about them behind their backs. Actually, never mind, let's discuss this ending. The big controversy surrounding *Part V* is that the killer wearing the hockey mask isn't actually Jason. Instead, it turns out to be one of the ambulance drivers from the start of the film, who recognises the first victim as his long-lost son and decides to take revenge.

Although the *New Beginning* subtitle sort of suggested that might be the case, fans were still livid that the promise *Part IV* made of being '*The Final Chapter*' had actually turned out to be accurate after all. They went expecting another Jason movie, instead all they got was some big dick in a mask.

Paramount noted the fan outrage and took great pains to reverse the damage with the inevitable sequel, which was tellingly titled *Friday The 13th Part VI: Jason Lives*. Was it any cop? We'll find out soon, won't we?

So, I suppose you want to know if you should watch *Friday The 13th Part V: A New Beginning*. My response is a hearty, confident 'maybe'. In terms of the overall quality of the series this lies somewhere in the middle: not quite as effective as the original quadrilogy but still offering some decent, gory shocks before MPAA censorship started to ruin the later movies (more on that in a later review).

Given its divisive ending, there's a case for saying this film's end doesn't justify its means. Since the means take the form of a half-decent slasher movie though, you won't mind too much.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

See the 'how to see it' section for *Friday The 13th Part 2* - the same applies for this film.

Bits and pieces

- Although Tommy Jarvis is now an adult in *Part V*, Corey Feldman's still in it: he appears in the odd flashback as young Tommy. This makes it all the more jarring when we're brought back to the teenage Tommy, however, who looks nothing like him.
- As the review mentions, fans were truly pissed when it turned out Jason wasn't the killer in *Part V*, so Paramount ensured they didn't make the same mistake with *Part VI: Jason Lives*. They should have seen it coming though, in fairness: John Carpenter tried to pull the same trick with *Halloween III: Season Of The Witch*, which had nothing to do with Michael Myers despite the title. Fans revolted and *Halloween 4: The Return Of Michael Myers* was subsequently released, minus the involvement of a now-disillusioned Carpenter.

Friday The 13th Part VI: Jason Lives (1986)

Director: Tom McLoughlin

Starring: Thom Mathews, Jennifer Cooke, David Kagen, CJ Graham

"I went to go cremate Jason... but I fucked up."

After pissing off long-time *Friday The 13th* fans by releasing a sequel in which Jason wasn't actually the killer (see my review of *Part V: A New Beginning*), Paramount wasn't taking any risks with the sixth film. That's why *Friday The 13th Part VI* comes with a fairly definitive subtitle that states, yes, Jason is alive and well in this one.

Not that his resurrection makes a lot of sense, mind. After surviving a *Friday* film for the second time, Tommy Jarvis (now played by a third actor, the frustratingly spelt Thom Mathews) escapes from his mental institution, heading to Jason's grave with his friend to convince himself he's gone once and for all. After digging up the grave he sees Jason's rotting body. Nice one, job done.

Except it isn't, because Tommy decides he wants to drive a metal pole through Jason's corpse, an act that comes back to munch on Tommy's arse when a lightning storm hits the pole and brings Jason back to life, all zombified and annoyed and that.

Thus marks the beginning of the 'zombie Jason' era in *Friday The 13th* lore. Before, he was just a man – a lumbering, powerful mountain of a man, mind you, but a man nonetheless – but in his resurrected state he's an undead, unstoppable zombie hell-bent on turning everyone in his vicinity into a mushy pulp.

Realising he might have done something a bit silly, Tommy heads to the nearby police station, where the sheriff – aware of Tommy's history and not willing to accept Jason is back in Crystal Lake – locks him in a cell.

Meanwhile, a new summer camp is just about to start up, and one of the counsellors is the sheriff's daughter, who takes a liking to the imprisoned Tommy. Ooooh, it's like *Eastenders* or summat.

If nothing else, credit has to be given to Jason Lives for featuring a summer camp that actually has children in it for once. Usually, due to the inevitable issues that come when shooting a film with child actors, slasher films set at summer camps tend to take place a few days before the camp opens, with all the trainee counsellors hacked to bits before a single kiddiewink arrives at the camp.

By pushing *Part VI* a bit further back so the camp is actually full of children, then, what inevitably resulted in countless headaches for the film crew also gives an extra sense of dread to proceedings, as there are now a bunch of genuinely vulnerable targets running around.

Deep down you know none of them will be killed (though not all slashers stick to that unwritten rule: see *Sleepaway Camp*), but it keeps things tense anyway.

Not that we'd have been subjected to a gory slaughter even if Jason had offed the sprogs, mind you. The *Friday The 13th* series has always had a hate-hate relationship with the MPAA (the American ratings board), and *Part VI* in particular suffers from some heavy censorship.

Almost every death was cut more than Jason's victims themselves, leading to a series of disappointing, anti-climactic moments that hint at something gruesome but quickly cut away.

That's not to say there aren't any inventive deaths in there. Over the course of the film's 86 minutes we're treated to a total of 18 kills, including a ripped out heart, a spear in the mouth, a triple decapitation with a machete and a head being crushed with Jason's bare hands. It's just a shame so much clearly had to be compromised and as such we barely get to see any of the special effects crew's handiwork.

Jason Lives is the slasher film equivalent of a soft porn film (um, I'd imagine). There's a degree of entertainment in enduring the bad acting and the cheesy one-liners, but when it comes to the bit where the guy sticks it in, you're left wanting more.

Um, that analogy makes me uncomfortable, so I'll stop now.

Two out of five

How to see it

See the 'how to see it' section for *Friday The 13th Part 2* - the same applies for this film.

Bits and pieces

- Here's a fun fact: this is the only *Friday The 13th* film, of all twelve released, not to feature any nudity. So this is the one to watch with your mum and dad over Christmas.
- Why exactly was Tommy Jarvis played by a completely different actor for the third movie in a row? Well, John Shepherd - who played Tommy in *Part V* - became a born-again Christian after shooting the film and decided he didn't want anything to do with *Part VI*. This series just couldn't get a bloody break.

Friday The 13th Part VII: The New Blood (1988)

Director: John Carl Buechler

Starring: Lar Park-Lincoln, Terry Kisser, Susan Blu, Kane Hodder

"There's a legend around here. A killer buried, but not dead. A curse on Crystal Lake. A death curse. Jason Voorhees' curse. They say he died as a boy, but he keeps coming back. Few have seen him and lived. Some have even tried to stop him. No one can."

The *Friday The 13th* series has jumped the shark so many times I'm surprised Jason Voorhees isn't dressed like Evel Knievel.

After apparently killing their iconic slasher villain for good in *Part IV*, introducing a copycat killer in *Part V* then resurrecting the original as a zombie in *Part VI* and chaining him to the bottom of Crystal Lake at the end, Paramount decided it was time to fill an entire swimming pool full of sharks, jellyfish and piranha and jump that instead.

Enter Tina Shepard, the heroine of *Part VII: The New Blood*. Not content with merely being the latest in a line of sole survivors in *Friday The 13th* films, Tina is different because (drum roll) she has telekinetic powers. Yes, she can move things with the power of her mind.

The film opens with a 10-year-old Tina causing her abusive father's death by destroying the dock near their house, causing him to fall into Crystal Lake and drown. Fast-forward a decade and a now-adult Tina is still struggling with the guilt of her dad's death, finding herself in a mental institution.

Tina's doctor suggests that it might be an idea to take her back to the scene of the incident so she can confront and defeat her guilt head-on, so she, her mum and her doctor head back to Crystal Lake to spend the week at their old house there.

The twist is, sneaky Dr McPrickface isn't interested in helping Tina at all. He wants to study her telekinetic abilities, which only seem to kick in when she's stressed, which is why he's taken her to the most stressful place she knows. What an asshole.

One night, after a particularly harrowing session, Tina runs out to the dock and believing she can resurrect her dad (no, I don't get it either) she inadvertently raises Jason from the bottom of the lake instead. Cue further slashy-choppy-killy hijinks.

Of course, it wouldn't be a *Friday The 13th* film without a bunch of randy teenagers eager to bump uglies with one another, so *The New Blood* sticks a load of them in a neighbouring cabin, as they wait to surprise one of their friends with a birthday party (unaware that Jason's already rammed a tent spike into his back).

This is the seventh *Friday The 13th* film I've reviewed, and each time I've reeled off a list of inventive deaths featured. *The New Blood* is no different.

Expect to see Jason punching through someone's chest, impaling someone to a tree, hacking a scythe into someone's neck, ramming a party horn into someone's eye and – in one the most famous deaths in the series' history – grabbing a poor lass in her sleeping bag and thwacking it against a tree until she's mush.

Again, sadly, most of these kills suffered at the hands of the MPAA and much of the gorier detail was left on the cutting room floor. Get your hands on the special edition DVD or the Blu-ray box set and you'll see the cut scenes in the extras menu – it only drives home the point that their removal is a real shame.

The New Blood's main highlight is the introduction of Kane Hodder as Jason. It may be odd to suggest that a certain actor can give a better performance as a character famed for wearing a mask, but Hodder's sheer size and aggressive body language make him a far more powerful, vicious Jason who seems truly capable of doing some real damage.

Hodder aside, this one's just silly. It was clear that by *Part VII* Paramount was starting to push it a little in terms of ideas, so having a zombie Jason fighting against a telekinetic girl takes things even further from the more traditional 'freaky man stalks helpless teens' formula that made the first few films a success.

It's certainly saying something, then, that despite the general silliness of the film the ending still manages to stand out as something particularly ridiculous. When Tina's zombified father, dead for ten years, comes out of the lake and drags Jason back underwater, a disbelieving cry of "oh, fuck off" is perfectly natural.

In fact, the only way it could get more bonkers is if Jason was to board a cruise ship and sail to New York. Anyway, what's next? *Part VIII: Jason Takes Manhattan*? Oh.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

See the 'how to see it' section for *Friday The 13th Part 2* - the same applies for this film.

Bits and pieces

- Tina may not have suited a fedora and a striped sweater, but she was originally supposed to wear one. That's because her character wasn't supposed to be Tina at all, but Freddy Krueger. Paramount (*Friday The 13th*) and New Line (*A Nightmare On Elm Street*) couldn't come to an agreement on how to handle it though, so out went Freddy and in went telekinetic Tina.
- An actress called Marta Kober auditioned for *Part VII* and got the job. However, she then let slip to the filmmakers that she had previously starred as one of the teens in *Part 2* (of which they had no clue), so in order to avoid confusion they had to let her go.

Frost (2012)

Director: Reynir Lyngdal

Starring: Anna Gunn, Guðmundur Guðmundsson, Björn Thors

"If anyone can hear me, my name is Agla Helgadóttir and I am calling from the base camp of the glacial research expedition. There are two of us here. One man is dead and five others are missing. Please send help, I don't know what is going on here."

Unlike many horror film fans, I'm not yet sick of the 'found footage' genre. First made popular with *The Blair Witch Project* (although *Cannibal Holocaust* preceded it by decades), when a film uses it properly it can be bloody effective.

Unfortunately, most films don't. For the most part, 'found footage' is a solution to a problem – usually a funding one – rather than a deliberate artistic style. Why bother with lighting, shot composition and the like when you can just go down the shakycam route and slash the budget drastically?

Frost is, unfortunately, one of the worst examples of this I've seen in a long time. Despite having a potentially interesting setting for a film of this genre and a trailer that genuinely excited me, the actual result falls short in so many ways it might as well have been directed by a midget to complete the full set.

Agla (the admittedly charming Anna Gunn) is part of a research team working on the outskirts of the Arctic Circle. She's there to study glaciers, which is about as exciting as it sounds.

Soon her lover Gunnar (Björn Thors) turns up to surprise her. Gunnar is a documentary filmmaker and he wants to make a documentary about glacier research. Um, I think I'll wait for it to end up on Netflix, mate.

Naturally, this means Gunnar films absolutely everything, from banal conversations to him and his missus shagging, because everyone knows a filmmaker has an infinite supply of tape, especially when shooting in extreme conditions.

The next morning, Agla realises the other five researchers who were working at the camp have completely disappeared, leaving her and Gunnar all alone. What could have happened to them? Well, don't get too interested because you barely find out.

The first 50 minutes of *Frost* are intolerably slow, something even less appealing when you consider the entire film only clocks in at 79 minutes (including five minutes of credits, natch).

If you're a fan of endless shots of people walking across snow and ice, getting a bit lost, then walking across more snow and ice, then this is your *Citizen Kane*. Otherwise... well, it isn't.

Occasionally the pair encounters something odd: be it the lights going out in their cabin, or one of their colleagues with a messed up face. But if you were to watch these scenes with a heart monitor attached, you'd need to keep checking to make sure it was actually switched on.

The apparently tense moments are just handled awfully, with a particularly infuriating effect overused every time the slightest hint of threat approaches.

Any time things look like they might be getting dodgy, the footage from their camera goes corrupt, freezing and showing scattered pixels as if the footage had been ruined. Every single time.

I get why they're doing it, of course – it's a cheap way to avoid having to actually choreograph any action or show anything dodgy – but if you're going to do that, then you better have a plan to actually deliver at the end.

That's what made *Jaws* and *Alien* so successful – you never really saw what the monster looked like until the end of the film. But at least you did end up seeing the bloody thing. *Blair Witch* also worked to a lesser degree because, while you never saw the witch, its ambiguous ending was still pretty iconic.

Frost doesn't do this. In fact, the very second it looks like it might be about to get interesting, it's pulled from under us with a horrible cop-out ending that answers no questions and asks a bunch of new ones.

Found footage films can still be effective – as my review of *Banshee Chapter* suggests – but most of them these days are half-arsed efforts whose shaky footage may partly disguise what's going on, but doesn't quite disguise the lack of effort and ambition on the part of the filmmakers.

Frost had the potential to be chilling, but instead it left me feeling cold. And if a film has the power to drive me to such bad puns, then you know it has to be shit. Actually, here's one more: it's not so much *Frost* as it is *Nixon*. Ahahahaha. Look, just go away.

One out of five

How to see it

I understand, I've sold you on it. *Frost* is out on DVD in the UK. It's got a single 'making of' feature, which in reality is just ten minutes of pricks standing in the snow. If you're an exceptionally cruel person and are trying to think of an inventive way to finish with your partner for Valentine's Day, then you can buy it here. America, you can't get it yet, so you'll have to 'miss out'.

Bits and pieces

- Supporting actor Helgi Björnsson was also in a movie called *Reykjavik Whale Watching Massacre*. Think I chose the wrong film to watch.

- It seems that almost every time I watch a 'found footage' film these days the process is the same: I'm interested for the first ten minutes, then my eyes glaze over as it gets dull as fuck, then nine times out of ten it never manages to redeem itself after that. In most (though not all) situations the fact the filmmakers have resorted to found footage to make their low budget film means there's a lack of imagination there and therefore an inability to think of a satisfying payoff at the end.

Full Metal Jacket (1987)

Director: Stanley Kubrick

Starring: Vincent D'Onofrio, R. Lee Ermey, Matthew Modine, Adam Baldwin

"Tonight, you pukes will sleep with your rifles. You will give your rifle a girl's name because this is the only pussy you people are going to get. Your days of finger-banging ol' Mary-Jane Rottencrotch through her pretty pink panties are over. You are married to this piece. This weapon of iron and wood. And you WILL be faithful."

I always find the classics are the hardest to review. After all, what can you say about *Full Metal Jacket* that hasn't already been said?

As a film widely believed to be one of the greatest war movies ever made, by adding my own critique to the never-ending onslaught of adoration it's received in the 26 years since it was originally released, I might as well be spitting into a swimming pool.

Still, I recently had the pleasure of watching it again (one of the joys of marrying a non-film buff is getting to re-experience classic movies for the first time through her) and so I decided there's no time like the present to add my own review to the countless others scribed over the past two and a half decades, especially considering my love for it isn't quite as strong as its reputation demands.

Initially, *Full Metal Jacket* seemingly follows the military career of Leonard Lawrence, nicknamed Private Gomer Pyle by his gunnery sergeant (perfectly played by real-life sergeant R. Lee Ermey, who was originally only brought in as an advisor and impressed Kubrick so much he was asked to replace the actor already cast).

As an overweight, bumbling, slightly stupid chap, Leonard continually angers his sergeant, who tries his best to turn him into an ideal soldier (using the tried and tested methods of screaming and mental abuse) but to no avail. Time after time Leonard fails the tasks set for him, and time after time he's lambasted for it.

Things get even worse when the sergeant starts punishing the entire platoon every time Leonard messes up, which leads to a shocking incident in which they decide enough is enough and punish him in their own way.

This in turns leads to a horrendous scene – one of the most powerful and disturbing I've seen – which firmly closes the shutters on both Leonard and his sergeant's further role in the film, if you catch my drift.

Unfortunately, by giving Leonard a loaded gun ("seven-six-two millimetre... full metal jacket"), Kubrick also shoots himself in the foot by removing the film's two most interesting characters by far.

Without them the back half of *Full Metal Jacket* becomes a standard Vietnam film that, while undoubtedly entertaining, never makes you think beyond the typical 'war is hell' and 'who are the real bad guys here' moral quandries.

With Leonard and the Sarge out of the way, the focus switches to Private Joker, Leonard's erstwhile friend at the training camp. Sent to Vietnam, Joker applies to be a journalist, writing for the army's Stars & Stripes magazine and therefore avoiding the need to kill anyone.

Wearing a peace symbol on his hat, Joker is supposed to be the 'hero' of the piece, the one who firmly believes that violence isn't the best solution.

The problem is that Joker's such an uninteresting character – one who wasn't given a chance to develop in the first act because we were all too busy focusing on Leonard and the sergeant – that it's difficult to care too much. In fact, with his condescending tone and constant John Wayne impressions, he's actually not that likeable.

Full Metal Jacket is an oddly paced film. Everything after that powerful first act feels like a collection of short, unrelated scenes that try to get across the sense of what it was like in Vietnam.

While the result is one that has to be commended – especially considering Kubrick never went to Vietnam and the entire film was actually shot in England – its plot suffers as a result of its bitty, structureless nature.

The above may sound like I don't like *Full Metal Jacket* – this is far from the case. The film is at times harrowing, horrific, hilarious and heartbreaking, and though it isn't Kubrick's finest film (not when he has the likes of *The Shining*, *2001*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Dr Strangelove* in his repertoire) it's still excellent.

That said, it isn't perfect, and while it opens with one of the strongest and most compelling first acts in cinema, it does lose its way a little in the second half when its two most interesting characters are promptly removed.

A must-see? Absolutely. A brilliant war film? Without a shadow of a doubt? A stone-cold classic? Only just.

Four and a half out of five

How to see it

As something of a classic, it should come as no surprise that *Full Metal Jacket* is readily available. Brits can get it as a standalone DVD or Blu-ray, both of which can be found very cheap. Alternatively, for a fuller Kubrick experience, you can go for the surprisingly affordable Stanley Kubrick: Visionary Collection Blu-ray set, which offers seven of his films for only £20.

Americians, your options are startling similar. You too have the option of a standalone DVD or Blu-ray, or the aforementioned Stanley Kubrick: Visionary Collection Blu-ray set, which will set you back roughly \$50 in Americanialand. It's worth noting that neither the UK or US box sets can be considered complete, as both are distributed by Warner Bros and therefore neither includes the Columbia-produced *Dr Strangelove*.

Bits and pieces

- Amazingly, most of *Full Metal Jacket* was not actually shot in Vietnam, but in the backlots of Pinewood Studios near London. This was because Stanley Kubrick had adopted Britain as his new home country in the '60s, shortly after filming *Dr Strangelove*.
- The title is a reference to a type of bullet. Full metal jacket bullets have a copper coating around them so they won't expand or break up once they enter a person's body. The Geneva Convention states that military personnel are only allowed to use full metal jacket bullets... because shooting someone with any other type of bullet would just be cruel.

Gremlins 2: The New Batch (1990)

Director: Joe Dante

Starring: Zach Galligan, Phoebe Cates, John Glover, Christopher Lee

"Because of the end of civilisation, the Clamp Cable Network now leaves the air. We hope you've enjoyed our programming, but more importantly, we hope you've enjoyed life."

The success of *Gremlins* in 1984 meant that a sequel would be inevitable, but director Joe Dante didn't want anything to do with it at first. The film lingered in development hell for years until the promise of a much bigger budget and full creative freedom convinced Dante to return and helm the sequel, which was finally released six years after the original.

Gremlins 2 is a very different beast to its predecessor. While they're both horror-comedies, the first film focuses more on the horror whereas the sequel plants its best foot firmly in the comedy camp. The first film was genuinely dark: the Gremlins killed people and some aspects of the script certainly weren't suitable for children (such as Katie's story about her father dying when she was a child after he dressed as Santa and broke his neck climbing down the chimney, where he lay for five days).

This time around there's no such nastiness, as *Gremlins 2* instead packs its 106 minutes with silly jokes and parodies of other movies. Not that this is a bad thing, of course, it just feels different to the original.

Not that you'd know it based on the plot, mind. Once again the cute and cuddly Gizmo finds himself away from the safety of Mr Wing's shop, this time ending up in a scientists' lab at the futuristic Clamp Enterprises office building. Once again, Gizmo ends up meeting Billy (Galligan) and Katie (Cates), who are coincidentally both working at Clamp Enterprises, and once again Billy warns the others that Gizmo shouldn't get wet, be exposed to bright lights or eat after midnight. And once again it all goes inevitably wrong.

This time though, once it all goes tits-up and there are hundreds of Gremlins roaming around, rather than go on a killing spree the film instead turns into a series of parodies and tongue-in-cheek references. *The Wizard Of Oz*, *Rambo*, *The Phantom Of The Opera*, *Marathon Man*, *King Kong* and *Batman* are all given the *Gremlins* treatment, and it's all entertaining enough, but it makes the Gremlins about as far from threatening as possible.

To add a bit of variety to proceedings this time, some of the Gremlins find their way to the lab and start drinking the various potions and chemicals the scientists have been working on. This leads to all manner of new Gremlins:— a bat Gremlin, a vegetable Gremlin, an electrical Gremlin, even what appears to be some sort of female prostitute Gremlin. Most notable though is 'Brains', the Gremlin who develops the ability to speak and have intelligent conversations with humans.

Gremlins 2 is a fun enough film but it hasn't aged quite as well as the original film. Many of the jokes, now over 20 years old, feel a little dated and whereas the first film's horror leanings mean it could still pass as a low-budget film today, the sequel is very much a product of the '90s. Dated, then, but still a laugh.

Three out of five

How to see it

Gremlins 2 is only available on DVD in the UK. In the US you can get it on DVD or Blu-ray.

Bits and pieces

- Joe Dante also directed cult werewolf movie *The Howling*. As great as it was, it spawned a number of significantly shitter sequels. The first of these, *The Howling II: Your Sister Is A Werewolf*, starred Christopher Lee. When Lee was cast in *Gremlins 2*, the first thing he did was walk up to Dante and apologise for it.
- What do *Gremlins 2* and Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* film have in common? They both led to the creation of a new cinema rating. *Gremlins 2*'s balance of family-friendly comedy and scary-looking creatures led to the MPAA in the US creating the brand new PG-13 rating system. Similarly, the presence of a few swear words in *Spider-Man* convinced the BBFC in the UK to drop the 12 rating (which didn't allow anyone under 12 to see the film) and replace it with 12A, which allowed them in if accompanied by an adult.

Halloween II (1981)

Director: Rick Rosenthal

Starring: Jamie Lee Curtis, Donald Pleasance, Charles Cyphers, Dick Warlock

"He was my patient for fifteen years. He became an obsession with me until I realised there was neither reason nor conscience or anything about him that was even remotely human. An hour ago I stood up and fired six shots into him and he just got up and walked away. I am talking about the real possibility that he is still out there."

Everyone (including me) always goes on about how incredible the first *Halloween* was, and with good reason. It was a landmark in horror history and one of the first true pioneers of the slasher genre. It's understandable then that its sequel doesn't get quite as much recognition but it's a shame because while it isn't quite as innovative or genre-defining as its predecessor it's still a strong slasher and a decent conclusion to what John Carpenter had only ever intended to be a two-film story.

Carpenter only wrote *Halloween II*, this time passing the directing duties to newcomer Rick Rosenthal. The film's first five minutes are a recap of the last five minutes of its predecessor, reminding us of the final confrontation between Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) and Michael Myers, and the eventual saving of the day courtesy of Dr Sam Loomis (Donald Pleasance). After the original film's ending, with Loomis firing six shots into Myers (though some dodgy editing means this time he actually shoots him seven times) and 'the Shape' legging it, the rest of the film then takes place from that immediate point on and shows what happens over the rest of the night.

As Laurie is taken to the nearby hospital to be treated for her injuries from her scrap with Myers, Dr Loomis and the Haddonfield rozzers continue their search for him. While in theory this shouldn't be too hard – after all, they just have to look for the guy with six or seven gunshot wounds – it turns out they're wasting their time, because Myers is actually at the hospital, trying to find Laurie and kill her.

Halloween II does lack a little of the atmosphere of the first film: while it still has a modest budget it's significantly higher than that of *Halloween* (\$2.5 million versus \$320,000) and as such it lacks some of its predecessor's gritty realism. While *Halloween's* unspectacular production values and normal-looking actors gave it an impressive authenticity at times, *Halloween II* feels more like a standard slasher movie with a more attractive supporting cast (including the inevitable good-looking actress who gets her baps out for slightly longer than necessary).

This is also highlighted in the film's various kills which are a little more over-the-top than in the first film. Simple stabbings and strangulations take a back seat to exploding cars, needles in the eye and an infamous scalding in a hospital therapy bath. Entertaining, but lacking in subtlety.

Had John Carpenter ultimately had his wish, and had *Halloween II* been the concluding chapter of the series, it would have been a decent ending. The Michael Myers backstory is expanded a little (it's revealed Laurie is his sister) but not too much that it gets ridiculous as it does in later films, and the ending is satisfactory enough, providing an adequate end to the story for Laurie, Myers and Loomis (though these days, with the knowledge that six films followed it, it seems a little silly).

While it lacks the importance and atmosphere of the first film, *Halloween II* is still a competent slasher and a reminder that *Halloween* did have a couple of decent sequels until the fourth and fifth films turned it all to shit. If you've never seen either of the first two *Halloween* films, they work together as a brilliant double-bill.

Four out of five

How to see it

Halloween II is available as a standard DVD in the UK, which you can get for around a fiver. If you want to get all highly-defined you'll need to import from the US, but be careful – only the 30th Anniversary Edition is region-free. Halloween devotees in the US will want to buy the Halloween: The Complete Collection Blu-ray box-set, which is a 15-disc beast.

Bits and pieces

- Other sequels that take part immediately after the events of their predecessors include *Back To The Future 2 & 3*, *Rocky II*, *REC II* and - as those of you reading this ebook in order will already know - *Friday The 13th Part 3*.
- The mask in *Halloween II* is actually the same one used in the first film, but you wouldn't know it to look at it. That's because it took a bit of a kicking over the years. During shooting of the first film, Michael Myers actor Nick Castle kept the mask folded up in his back pocket. Then, when shooting finished, producer Debra Hill took the mask home and kept it under her bed, where it yellowed due to her smoking habit. Then, when new Myers actor Dick Warlock put it on, it appeared wider because his head was a different size.

Halloween 4: The Return Of Michael Myers (1988)

Director: Dwight H Little

Starring: Donald Pleasence, Danielle Lloyd, Ellie Cornell, George P Wilbur

"We're not talking about any ordinary prisoner, Hoffman. We are talking about evil on two legs."

While *Halloween III: Season Of The Witch* wasn't a bad movie by any means (in fact, judging by the films to follow it was one of the better entries in the series), many moviegoers were enraged when they found that the film they'd gone to see didn't continue the story of evil stalker Michael Myers and was instead a completely different tale about a nutjob plotting to kill children with cursed Halloween masks powered by Stonehenge. A brilliant (if fucking insane) idea, sure, but you can understand people's annoyance at paying for a *Halloween* film and not getting to see Michael Myers.

As explained in the *Halloween III* review (see the first *That Was A Bit Mental* ebook), this was mainly down to John Carpenter's wish to make the *Halloween* movies a collection of unrelated stories all based on Halloween. The first two films would be the Michael Myers story, the third would be the one about the cursed masks, the fourth would be something completely different again. When the fans turned on this idea and the studio told Carpenter they wanted a standard slasher with Michael Myers in it he decided "fuck you then" and ditched the series altogether.

Determined to to make some serious greenbacks with a Myers return, producer Moustapha Akkad decided to start work on *Halloween 4*, being sure to include '*The Return Of Michael Myers*' as part of its title to ensure people who'd abandoned the series knew they were getting him this time. In a rush to beat the writer's strike of the late '80s, the entire film was written in 11 days. The result is a movie that, while not great, did a decent job of bringing back 'the Shape'.

Set ten years after the fateful night of *Halloween* and *Halloween II*, Michael Myers remains in a coma as he is transferred to the Ridgement Federal Sanitarium. Naturally, it doesn't go quite as expected and he wakes up in the ambulance en route, booting the shite out of everyone and causing the ambulance to fall off a bridge, crashing into a stream. Myers escapes and begins to make his way back to Haddonfield, to complete his task of killing the rest of his family.

What's that you say? The rest of his family? Oh, that's right, you didn't know he also has a niece who's never been mentioned before. You see, eight-year-old Jamie Lloyd (Danielle Harris) has been living with a foster family ever since her mum Laurie died nearly a year prior back. That's right, Jamie Lee Curtis was doing well for herself by this point and clearly didn't want to get involved with the *Halloween* sequels so her character was unceremoniously bumped off between films. Anyway, stalking an eight-year-old is much scarier than stalking a teenager and so Jamie Lloyd is the target this time.

For reasons never explained, Jamie is having nightmares about Myers, and has some sort of psychic bond with him so she knows when he's around. Her foster sister (Ellie Cornell) naturally just thinks she's a bit mental (ahem) but as Myers gets closer to Haddonfield and Jamie starts freaking out more and more, it becomes clear that she isn't fucking around.

When the Mickster finally makes it to town things essentially turn into a less powerful, less effective redo of the first film with Myers chasing Jamie and her step-sister around and killing their friends in the process. None of these kills are particularly inventive or scary, and there aren't many jump scares to speak of, meaning either people were complete pussies in the mid '80s or this just failed to get the job done. I don't know about you but I think I'm going with the latter.

Halloween 4 is harmless enough so I wouldn't quite hammer it with criticism in the same way its subsequent sequels deserve. What saves it is its ending, because after Michael Myers is 'killed' in one of the least convincing ways I've seen in any slasher film, there's a very clever twist that threatens to send the series in a completely different, fresh direction in the inevitable fifth film. Ultimately this didn't happen and *Halloween 5* bottled it, instead sending the series in the direction of a bucket full of cocks, but that's for the next review. *Halloween 4* is a slightly worse-than-average slasher with a significantly better-than-average ending.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

Halloween 4 is available on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Young actress Danielle Harris, who plays little seven-year-old Jamie Lloyd in *Halloween 4* and *5*, ended up starring in another *Halloween* nearly 20 years later. Appearing in Rob Zombie's 2007 remake of *Halloween*, she plays Annie Brackett and finally gets to be killed by Michael Myers, having survived twice in the '80s.
- John Carpenter was originally involved in *Halloween 4* and had written a treatment that focused more on the town of Haddonfield and how the events of the first two movies had had a psychological impact on its residents. The producers instead said they wanted a standard slasher movie so a livid Carpenter bailed.

Halloween 5: The Revenge Of Michael Myers (1989)

Director: Dominique Othenin-Girard

Starring: Donald Pleasence, Danielle Harris, Ellie Cornell, Wendy Foxworth, Don Shanks

"I prayed that he would burn in Hell, but in my heart I knew that Hell would not have him."

While *Halloween 4* wasn't the greatest slasher ever made, it did at least have a cracking ending that suggested the inevitable fifth film would take the series in a twisted new direction. This makes *Halloween 5* all the more frustrating then, because not only is it a pile of pish but its predecessor had practically spelled out how it could have done it better.

(spoiler alert for *Halloween 4* in the next paragraph, folks)

Halloween 4 ended with young Jamie Lloyd (Danielle Harris) going a tad mental and stabbing her foster mother while dressed up in a clown outfit, much like young Michael Myers did at the start of the original *Halloween*. Many took this to mean that Jamie was going to follow in her uncle's footsteps and continue his killing spree. Instead *Halloween 5* decides that her foster mum survived and Jamie was sent to a children's psychiatric hospital, where she recovered. Bottlers.

(spoilers end now, innit)

When we join Jamie at the start of *Halloween 5*, she's been in a psychiatric hospital for the past year. The trauma of the events in the previous film have led to her losing her voice, but her foster sister and her friend Tina (the annoying Wendy Foxworth) visit her regularly to bring her gifts and the like. She's also got a little friend, a fellow nine-year-old called Billy who's clearly trying to get fired in even though she's not much of a talker. Good man Billy, beggars can't be choosers.

As expected following his rather unconvincing 'death' at the end of the fourth film Michael Myers is alive and well, his body having floated down a river for a while until a loner found him and took care of him in his cabin for a year. When the next Halloween comes around though, Myers wakes up and batters his rescuer (that's gratitude for you) and heads to Haddonfield once again to finally teach that bloody niece of his a lesson once and for all.

We saw a brief glimpse of Jamie's psychic bond with Michael in the previous film where she started having visions of him as he was making his way back to Haddonfield, but this time her brain's more or less locked into his so every time he kills someone on the way home she goes into a fit, convulsing and 'screaming' (silently) until she's calmed down. The doctors think they're just random fits but Dr Loomis (Donald Pleasence), who's back once again and is in full-on ham acting mode this time, isn't having any of that pish. He knows Myers is on his way back so he concocts a plan to use Jamie as bait to finally catch and kill him once and for all. Good luck with that one, mate.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and without the knowledge that there was an even more ridiculous film on the way next I'd have said back when *Halloween 5* was released that it's clearly the low point of the series. A good slasher film generally has blood, brains (inventive deaths) and boobs (for the horny teens in the audience), and *Halloween 5* more or less draws a blank in all three categories. Almost every death is bloodless and generic, and the one kill with even an ounce of originality (involving a pitchfork) had already been done before in a *Friday The 13th* film a couple of years prior. In fact, there isn't much in *Halloween 5* that hadn't already been done (better) before.

By far the worst addition to *Halloween 5* however is the bumbling cops who appear at times and act typically brainless. That's not an exaggeration, they're deliberately meant to be dumb cops, to the extent that dopey music plays when they appear complete with 'boink' noises and slide whistles. I wish I was joking.

Also bemusing are the presence of a mysterious man in black who appears from time to time (and is involved in the horrible ending), and a similarly mysterious tattoo on Myers' wrist. They aren't explained until the sixth film, but it's revealed in a documentary on the DVD that the screenwriter actually had no idea what they meant and they were going to try to make something up by the time the sixth film came around. Nice.

At a time when the *Nightmare On Elm Street* series was pushing the level of fantasy in its films and the *Friday The 13th* movies were coming up with ever grittier kills, the *Halloween* series was carefully trying to walk both lines (it wanted to be a jack-o-lantern of all trades, if you will). With *Halloween 5* it fell flat on its arse, resulting in a film with fantastical elements that lacked the 'fantastic', and traditional kills that were less exciting than tradition dictated. Believe it or not, it was set to get even worse when the sixth film came around, but once again that's for the next review...

Two out of five

How to see it

Halloween 5 is available on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- If you want further proof that the filmmakers had no clue what they were doing with the 'man in black' character, they actually had Don Shanks (Michael Myers) play him, just in case they decided he was going to be Myers' dad.
- At one point in the film Michael Myers kills a dog. This is the fourth dog he kills in the series, meaning - since it's also the fourth film to feature Myers - at this point he was offing pups on a one-per-movie average.

Halloween: The Curse Of Michael Myers (1995)

Director: Joe Chappelle

Starring: Donald Pleasence, Paul Rudd, Marianne Hagan

“Enough of this Michael Myers bullshit!”

It says a lot about a film when the stories of its behind-the-scenes turmoil and tantrums are more interesting than the story that ended up on the screen.

This was the curious condition inflicted on *Halloween: The Curse Of Michael Myers*, the sixth film in the *Halloween* series. Plagued by in-fighting and studio politics before a single frame was even shot, the conflict continued to escalate throughout production.

It's said that the original script for the film was so powerful a Dimension exec couldn't sleep the night after reading it, and Halloween regular Donald Pleasence (who had starred as Dr Sam Loomis in four of the previous five films) loved it too.

However, despite this, director Joe Chappelle had other ideas and apparently completely rewrote the final act of the film, making it confusing and, well, a bit shit. Countless arguments between Chappelle, the producers and the studio led to reshoots and extensive editing.

What's more, when the legendary Donald Pleasence died shortly after filming, Chappelle cut most of his scenes from the film, saying they were “boring” anyway.

The result was a film that the cast and crew disowned and nobody was really satisfied with, to the extent that a bootleg version of the less butchered ‘Producer's Cut’ was leaked accidentally on purpose a couple of months after release. But I'll focus on that in a separate review: for now, let's have a look at the theatrical cut.

The Curse Of Michael Myers opens with Jamie Lloyd, the child heroine of *Halloween 4* and *5*, now aged 15 and pregnant. Kidnapped by an odd cult of doctors, she's placed in a secret prison in Smith's Grove Sanitarium (the asylum Michael escaped from in the first film) and forced to give birth to her baby, which is taken by the cult. It's all very grim stuff, and not really in fitting with the *Halloween* tone.

Finding her baby and escaping, it's not long before Jamie is hunted down and killed by Michael, but not before she gets to leave her baby with Dr Loomis and Tommy Doyle, who was the little boy across the street being looked after by Jamie Lee Curtis in the original *Halloween*.

Since Michael is obsessed with killing everyone in his bloodline, and since Jamie was his niece, this makes the baby the last person Michael needs to kill to satisfy his bloodlust,

meaning it's up to Tommy and Dr Loomis, along with the family who adopted Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis's character from the first two films) to protect the child.

Christ, it's all got a little complicated, hasn't it? Remember when *Halloween* was just a low-budget slasher film made to scare the piss out of babysitters?

Anyway, no longer a little boy but now a young man, Tommy has spent his life traumatised by his first encounter with Michael Myers and has spent years preparing for his return. Oh, and he's played by Paul Rudd.

Shot and released shortly before *Clueless*, this was Rudd's first ever theatrical role, long before the likes of *Friends* and *Anchorman* made him a star. It's clear from this early performance that he's a talented chap, but he does display some odd quirks that suggest he wasn't really suited to starring in a horror film.

The best example of this what's supposed to be a tense scene near the end of the film. Trying to rescue Kara Strode (the half-decent Marianne Hagan) from a cell, Tommy is battering at the door handle with a fire extinguisher when Michael Myers appears at the end of the corridor and starts walking towards him.

Rather than losing his shit and bashing the door with increased panic, Rudd instead stops to look at Myers and does a weird laugh thing. It's difficult to explain what the point of this really is, and it isn't the only time Rudd seemingly tries to incorporate almost comical reactions to what's supposed to be a really dark film. At times he looks like a normal guy in one of those live-action role-playing games, where everyone else is taking it seriously and he's standing there chuckling to himself.

This would be all well and good were this a normal goofy slasher film but when a 15-year-old's already been forced to give birth to an evil cult who then steals her baby, it doesn't really fit.

Rudd's performance aside, this film is a complete mess. As you'd expect from the behind-the-scenes bickering the plot is all over the place. The ending makes no sense whatsoever and so many questions are left unanswered. What's the point of the cult? Who's the father of the baby? What happens to Dr Loomis and Michael at the end?

All these questions were actually answered in the original cut of the film – the infamous Producer's Cut – but lopped from the theatrical version released worldwide, leaving a confusing muddle of a plot behind. The mysterious 'man in black' from *Halloween 5* also turns up a couple of times, once again with no explanation as to who he is and what he's doing there. It's a shambles.

It's also by far the worst portrayal of Michael Myers in the series' history. You might think it can't too hard to effectively play a killer wearing an emotionless mask, but so much about Myers is his body language, his cold, methodical movement like a predator.

Not so here: instead you've got a bumbling, graceless knob who sometimes walks as if the cast's stuffed all the scrapped script pages up his arse.

If you like your horror films to make sense, you'd probably do well to forget *Halloween: The Curse Of Michael Myers* exists. Either track down a bootleg version of the Producer's Cut (a review of that version is forthcoming), or just skip this film altogether and move onto *Halloween: H20*.

One and a half out of five

How to see it

In the UK you can only nab *Halloween: The Curse Of Michael Myers* on a barebones DVD from Miramax (it's pretty cheap, though). Americans, on the other hand, have a bunch of different options. As well as the barebones DVD there's also a double-bill disc which includes *Halloween H20*, but the best of the bunch (if you have the cash) is the *Halloween Complete Collection* Blu-ray box set. This contains every *Halloween* film ever made plus the rare (and significantly better) *Halloween 6* Producer's Cut. It's US-only for now, though.

Bits and pieces

- One of the film's few saving graces is a nod to the original *Halloween* in which Myers pins a victim to the wall with his knife and turns his head, looking at them with curiosity. Even then, recreated all those years later, it lacks the intensity of the original scene.
- Since this review was written the Producer's Cut has finally been made available to the public. It can only be bought in the *Complete Collection* box set mentioned above, but is well worth a watch because it's a far better film with far more Donald Pleasence in it (many of his scenes were cut by the studio).

Halloween H2O (1998)

Director: Steve Miner

Starring: Jamie Lee Curtis, Josh Hartnett, Michelle Williams, Adam Arkin, LL Cool J, Janet Leigh, Chris Durand

JOHN – "It just occurred to me today that I've never celebrated Halloween before."

MOLLY – "And why's that?"

JOHN – "Oh, we've got a psychotic serial killer in the family who loves to butcher people on Halloween, and I just thought it in bad taste to celebrate."

After the train wreck that was *Halloween: The Curse Of Michael Myers* I'm surprised Dimension Films and Miramax had the gall to bring ol' paleface back yet again.

Still, bring him back they did, in a film made to mark the 20th anniversary of the original *Halloween*. And you know something? They actually did a decent job this time.

Perhaps realising the previous film had become a confusing mess with a plot consisting of evil cults, a convoluted bloodline, adopted children and Paul Rudd, *Halloween H2O* scraps it all and instead provides an alternative timeline in which the events of *Halloween 4*, *Halloween 5* and *Halloween: The Curse Of Michael Myers* never happened.

No, as far as this film is concerned the timeline goes *Halloween*, *Halloween II*, *Halloween H2O*, bringing things back to basics and simply providing what made the original film so well-loved two decades before: a scary man chasing some teenagers.

After kicking off with an unnecessary but half-decent prologue in which a 16-year-old Joseph Gordon-Levitt gets an ice hockey skate embedded into his face, *H2O* turns its main focus to Hillcrest Academy, a private school.

The school's students are all set to head off on a trip to Yosemite, except for four of them: they've decided it would be a better idea to spend Halloween alone together in a big empty school building.

Here's the twist. One of the students, John Tate (Josh Hartnett), has never had the chance to properly enjoy Halloween. That's because his mum, 'Keri Tate', is actually Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) living under a new identity after the events of *Halloween* and *Halloween II* twenty years earlier.

Here's the second twist. She's the headmistress of the school, and she's staying behind too while everyone else goes off on their trip. And here's the third twist: Michael Myers is back, innit.

That's really all there is to it. There's no more weird cult, no more complicated plots, no more weird shit like *Halloween 6's* baby hunt and *Halloween 5's* mute telepathic child. Just Michael Myers and a group of people in an enclosed space running around like pricks.

As a result, with all the shite scraped off it, *H20* ends up being one of the better films in a series that's had more than its fair share of disappointments.

The main four teens are likeable enough and never really threaten to be annoying, and at least two of them (Hartnett and Williams: conveniently, the two who ended up making it big) succeed in accomplishing that all-too-rare slasher film feat of making the viewer actually care about their well-being.

Meanwhile, the real star is undoubtedly Jamie Lee Curtis. Playing a Laurie Strode who's no longer the fresh-faced teenager she was in the first films but now a struggling alcoholic in her late 30s, she's compelling to watch as she tries to deal with the fact that her son is becoming a young man and is becoming frustrated by her over-protectiveness.

It's usually the case that if a movie star got their first big break in a low-budget horror film they tend to want to forget it ever happened. Horror is still (wrongly) considered a genre with very little artistic merit in Hollywood, and as such most big actors with horror film pasts would rather they remained dirty little secrets.

Kudos then to Curtis, who has stated countless times in the past that she owes her career to *Halloween* and was more than happy to return in *H20* to repay the series. Despite becoming a well-respected actress with two Golden Globes and a BAFTA to her name in the years following *Halloween*, it's refreshing to see she didn't feel it was beneath her to return to the little slasher series that offered her the first rung on the career ladder.

(On a side note, Curtis is also notable for appearing and giving interviews in many of the behind-the-scenes and retrospective documentaries filmed for various *Halloween* DVDs, something Mr Depp and Mr Bacon have never done for *A Nightmare On Elm Street* and *Friday The 13th* respectively.)

While it's entertaining enough as a standard slasher, *H20* is also a celebration of *Halloween* as a whole and as such there are plenty of little in-jokes and references in there for fans.

As well as the new orchestral version of the famous score (which, if I'm being honest, I'm not too keen on: it's too grandiose when the original's effectiveness was in its simplicity), there are also little nods like Laurie turning off the radio when Mr Sandman plays (the song was used in *Halloween II*) and the reuse of the line "it's Halloween, I guess everyone's entitled to one good scare."

The references even go beyond the *Halloween* series at times, most notably with the presence of Janet Leigh as Laurie's secretary. For those not in the know, Leigh is the real-life mother of Jamie Lee Curtis, and is best known for her role in the Hitchcock classic *Psycho*. As a result, the scene in which Leigh leaves the school in a familiar car while equally familiar music plays is a treat for horror fans.

Halloween H20 was never going to be a deep, dark film that encouraged viewers to look deep within themselves and answer dark personal questions, but given how seriously previous entries had started to take themselves it's just the sort of mindless slasher story the series needed.

For the perfect triple-bill watch *Halloween*, *Halloween II* and *Halloween H20* back-to-back-to-back. Then you could conclude by watching the first ten minutes of *Halloween: Resurrection*, but more on that in the next review.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

Halloween H20 is only available on DVD in the UK. In the US it's available on DVD and Blu-ray, either standalone or in the Complete Collection box-set as mentioned in the previous review.

Bits and pieces

- When is a character dead and alive at the same time? When he's rapper-turned-actor LL Cool J. He plays the security guard at the school who is shot in the head at night by someone thinking he was Myers. Does he die? That depends on whether you watch the theatrical version or the edited-for-TV one. In both versions, Laurie later discovers him and notices blood on the back of his head, meaning he looks pretty dead. Later, at the end of the theatrical version, he's seen being stretchered into an ambulance with a bandage over his head, talking to his wife on the phone. At the end of the TV version though, this scene is never shown, meaning he's presumed to be dead.
- The scene I hint at in the review is one in which Janet Leigh leaves the school in the same car her character Mario Crane drove in *Psycho*, same licence plate and all. As she leaves part of the theme from *Psycho* is heard.

Halloween: Resurrection (2002)

Director: Rick Rosenthal

Starring: Jamie Lee Curtis, Brad Loree, Busta Rhymes, Bianca Kajlich, Sean Patrick Thomas, Daisy McCrackin

"Trick or treat, muthafucka."

Miramax achieved the impossible by taking the flatlining *Halloween* series and resurrecting it with the back-to-basics *Halloween H20*.

With Michael Myers relevant and scary again, it was therefore inevitable that another *Halloween* would come, even though it seemed Myers was well and truly dead after the last film. How did they manage to bring the pale pursuer back then? Well, I'll tell you, because I'm nice like that.

You have been warned: *Halloween H20* spoilers in the next couple of paragraphs.

At the end of *H20*, Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) seemingly ends her twenty-year feud with Mr Myers by lopping his head off with an axe. A ridiculous piece of retcon foolery, however, changes this tale.

You see, it turns out it wasn't Michael that Laurie beheaded but a paramedic who Michael had swapped places with previously, giving him his mask and handily crushing his throat so he couldn't speak and say "I'm not him, by the way".

Spoilers end, you lucky dog you.

Resurrection opens, then, with a ten-minute prologue in which both Laurie and Michael are very much alive. Laurie's been placed in an asylum but ol' Mick's tracked her down again, and this time he isn't letting her get away.

Without revealing too much, it's safe to say this prologue draws a definitive and satisfying line under the Laurie/Michael story arc and ensures Jamie Lee Curtis never feels pressured to return for any more appearances in the series that made her famous.

Had *Resurrection* just been a short 10-minute film that ended there it would have been a fitting conclusion to the entire series. Alas, with another 80 minutes still to fill, a brand new story begins: one featuring Myers' house, webcams... and Busta Rhymes, for some reason.

Mr Rhymes plays Freddie Harris, the man in charge of Dangertainment, a new website that offers customers live streaming videos of normal people investigating dodgy locations. As luck would have it, first up is the derelict house in Haddonfield belong to a certain Michael Myers.

The plan is that a group of six college students will enter the spooky house and spend the night trying to find out more about Michael Myers, all while a captivated audience watches them online. It's *Ghostwatch* without the actual ghost, essentially.

Of course, Busta has plans of his own to fuck with his six explorers. Since the Myers house has been abandoned for decades he's planted some suitably creepy stuff in there to keep things interesting, and at some point he plans to dress up as Myers and scare his unwitting victims.

You don't need a set of tarot cards to know what happens next. The real Michael Myers – tired from settling his unfinished business with Laurie – finally heads home, no doubt ready to have a well-deserved, relaxing bath. Instead he finds a bunch of pricks running around inside. Stabby stabby!

Although you'd think a reality TV format would provide plenty of potential for interesting ideas, *Resurrection* never actually makes use of them. The only thing that separates this from a standard slasher movie is that sometimes the picture quality is shit.

Even the odd occasion where we get to watch a first-person POV view from one of the housemates' personal cameras – something that has the potential to offer *Blair Witch* style scares – falls flat. Director Rick Rosenthal (previously responsible for directing *Halloween II*) somehow manages to completely suck any tension out of these scenes to the extent that when Myers appears you're never really on the edge of your seat so much as fidgeting in it.

All this pales in comparison to the presence of Busta fucking Rhymes though. Any hope that *Resurrection* would be a genuinely scary film are completely dashed with this bloody joker involved. Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of Busta's music (Flipmode Squad represent and such) but his role here as the comic relief is just off, as the quote at the top of the review indicates.

It all culminates in a ridiculous climactic battle in which Busta Rhymes fights Michael with some over-the-top comedy cho-socky kung fu, complete with Bruce Lee style "wahaaaa" screams. And of all the ways to kill a slasher villain, thrusting a live electrical wire into their balls is pretty far down there.

After its genuinely brilliant first ten minutes, the rest of *Halloween: Resurrection* is mindless. It's perfectly watchable but you will not give an ounce of shite about any of the characters in it, and may actually end up feeling sympathy for the killer as he tries to get these irritating twats out of his house.

Indeed, the best thing about it is that after it was released to unanimously bad reviews (far worse than this one, given the anti-horror stance some more serious reviewers have), Miramax decided to give Michael Myers a rest, opening the door for Rob Zombie to reinvent the series with an impressive remake.

Two out of five

How to see it

Halloween Resurrection is only available on DVD in the UK. In the US it's available on DVD and Blu-ray, either standalone or in the Complete Collection box-set as mentioned in the previous review.

Bits and pieces

- *Resurrection* marked the first time two *Halloween* films shared the same director. Rick Rosenthal had previously directed *Halloween 2* a mere 21 years earlier. A lot must have changed over the years, since that was fantastic whereas this... well, you've just read the review, haven't you.
- By the time the credits roll on *Resurrection*, Michael Myers' total body count for the entire series is a round 80: that's 76 humans and four dogs.

Hellgate (1989)

Director: William Levey

Starring: Ron Palillo, Abigail Wolcott, Carel Trichardt, Petrea Curran

"Take this, you zombie bitch!"

Have you ever suffered from PMS? I have. No, you fool, I don't mean that. I'm talking about Plot Missing Syndrome.

You know how it works. Sometimes you're watching a film and you're slightly tired. You nod off without realising it and wake up 30 minutes later, none the wiser.

Slowly you start to realise that the film isn't making sense any more. Characters are talking about things that haven't happened. The hero and his love interest suddenly hate each other for some reason. One guy's missing a leg.

It eventually dawns on you that you must have fallen asleep. You rewind back to the last scene you remember and, more often than not, are stunned that you managed to miss around half an hour without noticing.

When I first watched *Hellgate*, I thought PMS had struck again. So I watched the film a second time from start to finish and realised, to my bewilderment, that it actually hadn't.

Now, the nature of *That Was A Bit Mental* means that many of the films I watch are likely to feature bits that don't entirely make sense. It goes without saying that most of the '80s horror films I indulge in tend to have moments that are so charmingly bizarre all you can do is chuckle and mutter "what the fuck" to yourself.

But *Hellgate* is so batshit insane and its plot makes so little sense that even explaining the film's plot becomes a messy string of confusing words and ideas.

I'll try anyway, mind.

Okay, so the film opens with a woman telling her friends an urban myth about the Hellgate hitchhiker. Apparently a biker gang kidnapped a teenage girl and took her to the nearby town of Hellgate, where her father tried to rescue her and a big battle broke out.

The girl died, her dad's face was permanently scarred and the leader of the bikers, badly injured, escaped and vowed never to befriend any strangers again. Whatever that has to do with anything.

Fast-forward an indeterminable number of years and Hellgate is a ghost town, albeit one where the girl's dad is still living. Some drunk guy enters a cave and finds a crystal which

brings a dead bat to life. He shows the crystal to the girl's dad, who uses it to bring a goldfish to life, then a turtle for some reason.

Somehow, even though everything he brings back is evil, the dad decides he's going to use the crystal to resurrect his daughter. The deal is that his undead daughter will seduce men and bring them back to Hellgate, where her dad will kill them for reasons never explained.

Said daughter does indeed come to life, and she does indeed seduce a chap and bring him back to Hellgate. However, he escapes and finds his mates in a nearby town, telling them about the shit that just went down. They decide to go to Hellgate to sort them out.

Oh, except, when they get to Hellgate it's full of fucking zombies and ghostly can-can dancers and a weird English guy who cuts his fingers off and I don't fucking know just leave me alone.

I'm deliberately missing out all the other random nonsensical stuff dotted throughout the movie that only throws you even further off the plot.

The local cafe worker who is instantly smitten with the main guy in a way I've never seen anyone act before. The disgruntled garage worker who I think is supposed to be the Hellgate hitchhiker but never really reveals it and slowly disappears from the rest of the film.

Oh, and there's a scene where police officers talk about what's going on and then are never seen again in any other scene. It should be clear by now that I don't know why this is.

As if it doesn't help, the acting is atrocious. On one hand, it's understandable: the film was shot in South Africa and almost all the cast consists of South Africans trying to do American accents. On the other hand, I don't care what country you're from, this shit doesn't fly with me:

By now you're probably all but certain that there's going to be, at most, a 'one out of five' at the end of this review. You may be surprised to see the final score, then.

You see, the thing is, I don't rate films based on their quality, I rate them based on how much I enjoyed them. There's a difference. And as incomprehensible and confusing as *Hellgate* was, I still had fun watching it.

So, amazingly, I recommend it. Don't watch it expecting a coherent plot or a satisfying three-act story, but do watch it if you want to see something you can happily say you've never seen before.

Three out of five

How to see it

There are a few different ways to get hold of *Hellgate*. The UK's had a DVD version of it for a couple of years ago, though the quality isn't the best. Meanwhile, in the US it's available on a double-bill DVD along with the excellent *The Pit*.

By far the best version, however, is the UK Blu-ray/DVD combo recently released by Arrow Video (the version this review is based on). It's limited to only 1000 copies but the quality's fantastic and it contains some brilliant extra features, including a half-hour chat with the director (who it seems may be a tad over-confident).

Bits and pieces

- *Hellgate* was recently the opening film at the second That Was A Bit Mental shit film double-bill screening. Word of advice: if you're somehow able to show this film to a large group of people, definitely do it. The atmosphere is brilliant, as everyone in the room slowly starts to lose track of what in the realm of fuck is going on.

- When I watch *Hellgate*, I like to play a little game called 'I'm Out'. The rules are simple: watch the film until you've got absolutely no idea what's happening anymore, then declare "I'm out" to the rest of the room. That's about it, really.

Heretic (2012)

Director: Peter Handford

Starring: Andrew Squires, Michael J Tait, Jen Nelson, James Zakeri

TOM – “You need to go now, Father. You need to walk away.”

JAMES – “I can’t do that, Tom.”

TOM – “Yes you can. You did when we asked for your help. I came to you, I confessed to you. And so did she. And what did you do? Three Hail Marys and a Go Fuck Yourself.”

I don’t think I could be a priest. One of the reasons for this is I haven’t been to a chapel in years (I’m fairly sure one of the requirements is you have to do that every now and then), but another is that I couldn’t be trusted to keep my parishioners’ confessions a secret.

“What’s that? You’ve been fiddling the dog? Um, say a Hail Mary and... um, hang on... what? No, I’m just texting... someone. It’s unrelated, I promise.”

Father James Pallister has problems with confession too, but not for the same reasons I would. His problems begin when 15-year-old Claire confesses that she’s pregnant and he refuses to condone an abortion.

Visiting her house later that day, James finds Claire lying in the bath with her wrists slit. After she dies, James leaves the village and vows never to return.

Unlike most priestly vows though, James has to break this one when Claire’s stepdad also commits suicide (hmmm, wonder why he did that) and he agrees to come to the funeral.

Now an alcoholic, James doesn’t want to be around any of his friends in the village. Fellow priest Will keeps trying to get him to talk about the incident, a girl called Suzie keeps trying to chat him up and another, Melissa, is also pregnant and looking for both an abortion and James’s blessing. Leave the bloody guy alone, eh?

Walking home drunk one night, James sees the bloodied Claire standing at the entrance to her house. Following her inside, James finds himself locked in the house and unable to leave. Cue all sorts of spooky shit as the ghost of Claire and a mysterious man in black start putting the willies up him (not like that).

I tend to watch a film completely ‘cold’ if I can, with absolutely no knowledge of the plot or production. I’ll then read up on it after it’s finished. Usually when a horror film’s low-budget I can tell fairly easily.

It often looks too clean, the actors tend to be a bit pish and it'll try one or two set-pieces which invariably fall on their arse. *Heretic* is so adept at avoiding these telltale signs that I was certain there had to be a relatively big budget behind it.

I was surprised and impressed, then, when I watched the film again with DVD commentary and discovered that the total budget from pre-production to release was just under £30,000. In Hollywood film budget terms, that would probably barely pay for someone to do Scarlett Johansson's eyeliner.

I mention this incredibly low budget not to mock, but to applaud. *Heretic* is one hell of an achievement given the financial limitations placed on the crew, and one of the finest British horror films I've seen in a while.

For example, all the outfits in the film were bought in Primark (except the priest's outfit: that was Asda Living), then sold on eBay after shooting had finished to earn back some money for post-production.

If you're looking for a comparison, the ultimate low-budget film *The Blair Witch Project* apparently cost around \$60,000 (£36,000) to make, after post-production.

Andrew Squires is an interesting lead actor. I'll admit, at first I didn't really take to him but that's probably more because he reminds me of James Blunt than anything. Over time though his natural, realistic performance grows on you, especially later in the film when he gets to show off his personality a little more (though the less I say about that the better)

With a cover like the one you see above and promises of a ghost girl, the natural question you'll probably have is how scary it is. The answer is the annoyingly non-committal "quite scary, but not really". There's a constant tension running through the film with long periods of silence keeping you on edge, waiting for the inevitable moments where shit goes down and a loud musical sting makes you jump.

Thankfully *Heretic* doesn't resort to these tactics too much, except for one odd scene in which the screen goes completely black for a couple of beats before a loud scream and a pair of scary eyes force your heart up your lungs. For the most part the scares focus more on imagery, only using sound to build tension by making the background noise progressively louder rather than constantly going "boo" every couple of minutes.

In all, there are probably only three or four genuinely scary sections in the film, but that's okay because *Heretic* isn't trying to be *The Exorcist* (despite what the quote on the DVD cover tries to convince you). The focus isn't on the creepy girl, it's on the troubled priest, and the 'horror' isn't so much the hauntings going on in the house as those going on in his mind.

Interspersed throughout the film are flashback scenes filling in more of the story and shedding more light on James's dark secrets. Forget the scary bits, these are the most involving scenes in the film, paced perfectly to slowly reveal more plot information one

nugget at a time and keeping you wondering what really happened to Claire and her stepdad all the way up to the final twist.

Heretic is an impressive British horror film. The quote on the DVD cover is exaggerating a tad by claiming it's "a cross between *The Exorcist* and *Carrie*" – it's not really in the same ballpark, other than the fact it's got a priest in it and a girl with blood on her frock – but for a low-budget film that punches far above its financial weight it's a fun ghost story that's worth a watch.

Four out of five

How to see it

Heretic was recently released on DVD and Blu-ray in the UK. Sorry Americans, it isn't out in your neck of the woods yet.

Bits and pieces

- I'd highly recommend picking up the *Heretic* disc if you're a budding indie filmmaker because the commentary by director Peter Handford and producer Bethany Clift is one of the most informative ones I've listened to, giving countless tips on how to shoot films on a low budget.
- Of course, everyone will already recognise Andrew Squires for his memorable role as 'Prosecution Lawyer' in episode 5,238 of UK soap *Emmerdale* in 2009. And by 'everyone' I mean 'Andrew Squires'.

Hideous (1997)

Director: Charles Band

Starring: Mel Johnson Jr, Michael Citriniti, Jacqueline Lovell, Rhonda Griffin, Tracie May

"You're fired! You're fired from everywhere! You're fired from the fucking universe!"

What's the oddest thing you've ever found in a sewer? What's that? You don't do raking around in sewers? Oh. Right. Um, me neither.

But if I did, chances are I probably wouldn't come across odd little mutant baby things. That's what one sewage treatment worker finds at the start of *Hideous!*, another low-budget grotfest from indie horror studio Full Moon.

The man hands over said mutation to Belinda Yost, a woman who specialises in selling mutations to collectors. Which is one hell of a niche market, but let's go with it for the sake of the film.

There's a problem. Other than the whole selling of freak babies bit, I mean. Two different collectors believe they have first dibs on the mutation, so when one buyer picks it up from Belinda, he's attacked as he drives home by the other buyer's assistant.

Did I mention that said assistant is a topless woman wearing a gorilla mask for no reason? Well, there you go. After tying up the poor chap, she steals the mutation and brings it back to her boss.

Feeling understandably irked, the original buyer hires a detective to accompany him to the other guy's mansion (along with Belinda's secretary, who was also in on the deal), so they can sort out this mess once and for all and decide who the true owner is.

Cue loads of fighting and the appearance of a bunch of other mutants who eventually all decide to get involved. A bit.

Hideous! is pleasantly rubbish, but rubbish nonetheless. As with *The Creeps*, another Full Moon film which was released shortly after it (and is reviewed elsewhere in this ebook), the standard of the acting is so low only dogs can hear it.

This is partly due to the presence of Rhonda Griffin, who stank up *The Creeps* with her woeful schtick and is no better here. Granted, she isn't helped much by once again being given some atrocious dialogue to work with, but even so.

Then there's former nude model Jacqueline Lovell, she of the aforementioned topless gorilla-masked scene, who isn't much better. When she isn't freezing her nips off in the snow she's constantly wearing an odd waistcoat thing that barely covers her breasts.

Of course, nudity in a horror film is nothing new, but it generally only happens once or twice. To have someone's baps jiggle about throughout the entire movie is about as shameless as you can get.

Eventually the titular 'hideous' mutations are awakened and start getting involved. Except, since they're puppets that would even be considered low budget by Full Moon's standards, they don't really do much.

Instead, they spend most of the back half of the film hiding behind chairs and tables, standing in the shadows and gawping at what's going on.

The few times you do get a good look at them they're reasonably well designed, but certainly not the sort of classic monsters you'd expect to carry a film on their own (as the title clearly suggests they were meant to).

I've seen worse films than *Hideous!* but not by any notable order of magnitude.

There's a slight degree of charm in the hokey acting and laughably bad script, but the final act is such a snoozefest (literally: I fell asleep during it and had to watch the last half-hour again) that I can't really recommend it to anyone but the most die-hard B-movie buff.

One and a half out of five

How to see it

Hideous! was recently released on DVD in the UK by 88 Films as part of its Grindhouse collection. As well as an audio commentary it also includes the 30-minute Full Moon Videozone feature that originally came with the film on VHS, complete with making-of documentary. It's an above-average treatment for a below-average film and you can get it fairly cheap. US readers, you can also get it on DVD.

Bits and pieces

- This was the film debut for Rhonda Griffin and it's clear by watching the Videozone feature provided with the *Hideous!* DVD that Full Moon was banking on her being a big star for the studio. She appeared in its next film, *The Creeps* then she was punted, presumably because someone at Full Moon actually decided to watch either film.
- The chap who buys the freak babies first and is then attacked is Mel Johnson Jr, who's best known as Benny in *Total Recall*. I'm fairly sure no other actor on Earth can boast both 'mutated taxi driver in an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie' and 'buyer of black market mutant babies' on their CV.

Hitchcock (2012)

Director: Sacha Gervasi

Starring: Anthony Hopkins, Helen Mirren, Scarlett Johansson, Danny Huston, Jessica Biel

"You may call me Hitch. Hold the Cock."

Films about Alfred Hitchcock are just like buses – you wait ages for one and then two come at once (the other being *The Girl*, with Toby Jones and Sienna Miller). This particular bus is being driven by Anthony Hopkins with Helen Mirren as the conductor. Mind you, buses don't have conductors any more. I don't know what she does, then, but the fact is she's on the bus anyway and she does a ruddy good job doing whatever it is she does. In hindsight, let's just scrap this bus pish because I'm clearly in over my head.

Hitchcock recounts a particular point in the legendary director's life. Having just finished *North By Northwest* and getting increasingly frustrated by the media's portrayal of him, Hitchcock decides his next film is going to be a controversial film that pushes the boundaries of taste and decency: *Psycho*. *Hitchcock*, then, follows the events from *Psycho*'s original conception right through to the film's theatrical premiere.

Anthony Hopkins is impressive as Hitchcock. The make-up is interesting in that while he doesn't look exactly like the man himself, the transformation is so radical you wouldn't know it was Hopkins unless you were told. Of course, Hopkins can't help how he looks, but he can help how he sounds and he manages a convincing Hitchcock impersonation throughout.

Despite the title however, this is really a film about Hitchcock's wife Alma – played masterfully by Helen Mirren – as she struggles to cope with her husband's obsession with his other love, his film career. As Hitchcock gets more and more engrossed in the making of *Psycho*, Alma starts wondering if it's really worth sticking by her husband's side, and the newfound attention placed on her by screenwriter Whitfield Cook sees her faced with a difficult decision.

As well as the strength of the two leads, *Hitchcock* is also blessed with an impressive supporting cast. Scarlett Johansson is immensely likeable as Janet Leigh, while James D'Arcy plays a perfect Anthony Perkins.

The film recreates many of the famous stories surrounding the *Psycho* shoot – the way Hitchcock took over from Perkins during the shower scene, his odd proposal to an unconvinced Paramount to get the film green-lit the fact that he didn't like the famous Bernard Hermann music during the shower scene but his wife insisted – it's all in here.

Only one aspect of *Hitchcock* had me scratching my head: the Ed Gein sub-plot. It's well known that *Psycho* was based on the real-life story of mass murderer Ed Gein (as was *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*), but *Hitchcock* takes it one step further by implying the ghost of

Gein was haunting Hitchcock and appearing in hallucinations during the course of the filming. It's all very silly and feels a bit jarring given that the rest of the film is supposed to be based on true events.

That aside, *Hitchcock* is a must-see for anyone interested in the legendary director or the making of his most famous film. With fantastic performances throughout and a clever script that will cause more than a few wry chuckles, it's well worth a watch. Just bear in mind as you watch it that, as far as I'm aware, Ed Gein's ghost wasn't actually involved in the production.

Four out of five

How to see it

Hitchcock is available on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Although most people associate Hitchcock with his classics – *Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Vertigo*, *North By Northwest*, *Rear Window* and so forth – he actually directed an impressive 54 movies in his career, as well as 17 episodes of his TV series, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*.
- In a way, *Hitchcock* was a sort of closure for Helen Mirren. In the early '70s, she was approached by Hitchcock to play a murder victim in his film *Frenzy*, but she turned it down. It was a decision she says she's always regretted, so playing his wife here may have gone some way to making up for her decision to never be in a 'proper' Hitchcock movie.

House Of Wax (2005)

Director: Jaume Collet-Serra

Starring: Elisha Cuthbert, Chad Michael Murray, Brian Van Holt, Paris Hilton

"It is wax. Like, literally."

I've had my own experiences with real-life atrocious wax museums in my life – the Movieland museum in Niagara Falls springs to mind – but at least I wasn't turned into a wax model while I was there. Mind you, I'd have probably made for a more accurate Mr T than the one that featured there.

The original *House Of Wax* (1953) was a cracking, eerie film about an insane waxwork artist (played by Vincent Price) who turned real people into wax models. That concept – humans as wax models – is the only thing other than the title to remain in this remake. What's been learned in the ways of suspense and film-making in the 52 years between each film? Not much, it seems.

The 2005 version of *House Of Wax* starts off, as so many generic teen horror films do these days, with a bunch of annoying students on a road trip. This time they're heading to 'the biggest football game of the year' (because presumably 'The Superbowl' was trademarked or something) and decide it's best to cut through the countryside roads to get there. As night draws near, they decide to camp out in the middle of nowhere.

Except it's not quite the middle of nowhere because there's an odd town nearby with a waxwork museum as its main highlight. When the group wake up the next morning and find the one of their two cars has been sabotaged they split up: some of them take the working car to the football game, the others stay behind to try and fix the car, ultimately finding the creepy town and House Of Wax in the process.

Cue the appearance of a pair of fucked-up twins (both played by Brian Van Holt) who have a habit of turning people into wax models. In fact, there's something about the entire town that doesn't quite feel right, but I'm wary of straying into spoiler territory so I'm not going to wax lyrical too much (WAX! HAHAAHAHAHAHA! Look, shut up, I haven't done this for a while).

House Of Wax provides an interesting mix of expected and surprising moments. It was expected that Paris Hilton would be about as good at acting as she is at finding a boyfriend who ensures what happens in the bedroom stays in the bedroom, and she doesn't disappoint with a performance about as thrilling as sitting a book in the window for six months and watching the sun fade the colours out of it. However, the level of gore is surprising given the MTV-gen audience Miss Hilton's presence was clearly aimed at.

Fingers are cut off with pliers, someone's decapitated, there's a graphic neck-stabbing, a face is peeled off... you might be surprised by how graphic the film is at times, especially

considering its BBFC 15 certificate. Fair play to the film-makers then for not being afraid to push the limits.

Hilton aside, the rest of the cast are adequate enough though it's only really Cuthbert as the lead heroine and Van Holt as the twin villains who stand out as above average. Perhaps the most interesting character of all is the House Of Wax itself: it's dripping (literally at times) with atmosphere.

House Of Wax is an adequate enough slasher and the final confrontation in the house is impressive, though with a runtime of nearly two hours it's a tad too long. Only really a must-see if you desperately want to see Paris Hilton die a grisly and graphic death: which, to be fair, some people probably do.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

House Of Wax is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in the UK and US. Both include a few extras including an alternate intro with a nice face-smashing scene and some frothy behind-the-scenes shit about how they made the film with "very few optical effects" (supported – perhaps by a mischievous editor – with a before-and-after pic of a scene that's almost entirely CGI).

Bits and pieces

- The original *House Of Wax* was a '50s horror film starring the legendary Vincent Price. Its main selling point was its use of stereoscopic 3D, which was a new gimmick used by numerous horror films during that decade. It's aged pretty drastically but it's still charming enough to be worth a watch.
- The film itself may not be the best thing ever made but its official soundtrack is fairly decent. Featuring the likes of Spitfire by The Prodigy, Minerva by Deftones and Dirt by The Stooges, it's safe to say it's spent far more time playing on my iPod than the film has on my Blu-ray player.

Humanoids From The Deep (1980)

Director: Barbara Peeters

Starring: Doug McClure, Ann Turkel, Vic Morrow

Also known as: Monster

"It's my theory that these creatures are driven to mate with man now in order to further develop their incredible evolution."

When all's said and done, you can't beat a good Roger Corman film. Corman is the godfather of B-movie cinema and has produced well over 300 low-budget films over the past 50 years, the vast majority of which have been cheesy horror films heaving with gore, titillation or both. *Humanoids From The Deep* falls into the 'both' category and is silly fun, though there it does have one or two questionable moments.

It's set in the small fishing resort of Noyo, where the townsfolk are in the process of celebrating the announcement of a salmon cannery which is to be built there, greatly increasing the fishermen's productivity. Good news!

Oh, except for the fact that the company building the cannery is also responsible for experiments in salmon growth hormones, which have spread into the sea and somehow led to the creation of bizarre slimy half-man half-fish monsters that like to swim out of the sea and onto land, ripping the faces off any men they find and raping the women. And, in case you hadn't guessed, it's here where *Humanoids From The Deep* gets a bit iffy.

Rape scenes are never fun to watch, that much goes without saying. But, when you watch as many horror films as I do and there's no argument that being raped is widely considered one of the most horrific things anyone could ever experience, it's somewhat expected that it comes with the territory and these scenes do pop up from time to time. But watching a large, slimy sea monster doing it is even more unsettling, especially when deep down we know it's only in there because it's a Roger Corman film and he wants an excuse to get some nudity on-screen.

It's particularly disturbing when one woman's corpse is found and it's clear she's been the victim of more than just murder: it sort of darkens the tone of what should really be a silly, entertaining film. Thankfully, by the end of the film the rapey bits are out of the way and anyone still craving some baps can be happy with the classic 'shirt getting ripped off as they try to escape' technique instead.

Corman was always good at getting once-great actors who were struggling with their careers and convincing them to star in his pictures. That's why *Humanoids From The Deep* stars Doug McClure, one-time critically acclaimed actor, in the lead role of fisherman Jim Hill. It's amusing to watch a once respected and much loved actor wrestling with giant slimy fishmen and still carry it off with all the sincerity of a divorce drama.

Dodgy scenes aside, *Humanoids From The Deep* is a compelling little film. Of particular note is the sub-plot involving a Native American character who doesn't want the cannery because he's happy selling fish independently. He's met with racism and violence from the other fishermen, and it's perfectly possible at times to forget the whole 'killer fish-men' plot and focus your attention on this sub-plot instead.

The creature effects are well-handled by Rob Bottin (*The Thing*, *Total Recall*, *Robocop*, *Se7en*). This being a Corman movie, the typical *Jaws* and *Alien* rule of not seeing the monster until near the film's end goes completely out the window and you get a good look at the humanoids from fairly early on, so it's a testament to Bottin's excellent make-up and creature design that they're never a disappointment.

If you can stomach a couple of needlessly dark scenes, *Humanoids From The Deep* is otherwise a great laugh and the perfect film to watch with a group of mates. It's typical Corman B-movie cheese, and offers everything you'd expect from a hammy 80s creature feature. Oh, and the ending is ridiculous too.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

Humanoids From The Deep is available on DVD in the UK and while the print quality isn't amazing it's dirt cheap: some people are selling it through Amazon for only 1p and only charging a couple of quid postage. In the US it's available on DVD and Blu-ray.

Bits and pieces

- I can't take the word 'humanoid' seriously because back in the day legendary WWE commentator Bobby 'The Brain' Heenan used the exact same term to refer to the fans in a disparaging manner. It's a lot harder to take the monsters in the film seriously if you consider them to be mutated wrestling fans.
- The rape scenes in the film drew ire from reviewers at the time. Time Out magazine said of it back in the day: "Despite the sex of the director, a more blatant endorsement of exploitation cinema's current anti-women slant would be hard to find; Peeters also lies on the gore pretty thick amid the usual visceral drive-in hooks and rip-offs from genre hits; and with the humour of an offering like *Piranha* entirely absent, this turns out to be a nasty piece of work all round."

The Killers (1964)

Director: Don Siegel

Starring: Lee Marvin, Angie Dickinson, John Cassavetes, Clu Gulager, Ronald Reagan

"It's not only the money. Maybe we get that and maybe we don't. But I gotta find out what makes a man decide not to run. Why, all of a sudden, he'd rather die."

I've never been a professional hitman (*taps nose*) but I'm sure if I was I wouldn't be surprised to see most of my targets leg it as soon as they noticed their time was potentially up.

Charlie (the legendary Lee Marvin) shares my opinion. That's why, after being hired to put a hit on a guy said to have stolen a million dollars, Charlie is curious to know why said chap didn't try to run away before he was shot down.

Eager to know what's going on, Charlie and his hitman partner Lee (Clu Gulager) begin a line of enquiries that see them visiting a string of friends – and enemies – of Johnny North, the man he was paid to kill.

Eventually Charlie begins to piece together Johnny's backstory: who he was, how he got involved with a "thrill-happy dame" (Angie Dickinson) and her dubious friend Jack (Ronald Reagan), and how his relationship with both changed drastically.

To say any more would spoil the plot and I'm being more careful than usual not to do this with this review, because *The Killers* is so heavily reliant on its narrative and the way its flashbacks link together that to go into too much detail would make it far less engaging when you watch it (which you should).

What I will talk about though, with great pleasure, is *The Killers'* outstanding cast. *Rosemary's Baby* star John Cassavetes is brilliant as Johnny North, the racecar supremo who slowly falls for the woman of his dreams.

You really want to root for Johnny – he's a likeable guy and he's down on his luck – and a great deal of that is down to Cassavetes' endearing characteristics.

Meanwhile, Dickinson smoulders as Sheila, the woman Johnny falls for. Her confidence and the way she plays Johnny like a two-bit pinball machine make her one of the stronger characters in the film, and the one the plot ultimately revolves around.

Then there's good ol' Ronnie Reagan as Jack, Sheila's friend. Though he doesn't have much of a presence during the first half of the film, he soon becomes a crucial character as it reaches a climax.

Interestingly, years later Reagan said *The Killers* was his least favourite film, because it was the only time he played a villain and he was particularly ashamed of a scene in which he slaps a woman.

It's a shame he feels this way, because of the films I've seen starring Reagan, this is easily the most impressive I've seen him.

By far the real star of the show, however, is Lee Marvin as Charlie. His piercing stare and deadly serious voice makes every single one of his lines sound like the most important thing you'll ever hear, and he's just such an intimidating character it's impossible not to be impressed by his screen presence.

There's a telling example of this given in one of the extras provided on the recently released Arrow Video Blu-ray of *The Killers* (which was viewed for this review).

Apparently Clu Gulager, who plays Marvin's sidekick, wanted to have various affectations and quirks as he acted, to give his character a little more depth and make him more interesting.

"That's fine, kid," Marvin reportedly told him. "Everyone in the audience is going to be watching me anyway." Cocky as fuck, but you'd better believe he was completely right. It's impossible to watch a scene with Marvin in it and not be utterly focused on him.

The Killers was supposed to be the first ever made-for-TV movie, but a combination of its violent content and the recent assassination of President Kennedy meant this plan was scrapped and it was released in cinemas instead.

Looking at it now it may seem pretty tame, but bear in mind American cinema in the '60s was still very sensitive. After all, this was only a few years after *Psycho* broke taboos by showing a flushing toilet for the first time on screen.

The Kennedy assassination and Reagan's subsequent political career also combine to inadvertently make one of its scenes look oddly dodgy in hindsight.

You see, near the end of the film there's actually a scene where Reagan's character shoots someone (no spoilers) with a rifle from the window of a nearby building.

The parallels between this scene and the Lee Harvey Oswald / JFK incident are especially poetic these days, when you consider the scene essentially shows a future President of the United States killing a man in exactly the same way a past President was (allegedly) assassinated.

The Killers is a brilliant '60s crime drama and is still well worth watching 50 years after its original release. It does away with any extraneous nonsense and provides a tight narrative, full of plot twists and heaving with outstanding performances from both its leading and supporting cast.

Four out of five

How to see it

UK readers who want to see *The Killers* will have to have a Blu-ray player, as the only readily available version is the recently released Arrow Video Blu-ray. It's a cracking disc though, with over an hour of interviews and the option to watch the film in its original intended TV aspect ratio or the widescreen cinema ratio. As for US readers, *The Killers* is currently out of print so you'll have to stump up a chunk of change for the Criterion Collection DVD. As with all Criterion offerings it's pretty definitive, with the 1946 version starring Burt Lancaster also included.

Bits and pieces

- In the world of Scottish slang, Lee Marvin has always lived in the shadow of his namesake, musician Hank Marvin. If a Scot is extremely hungry, they are occasionally known to declare "I'm Hank Marvin", i.e. "I'm starvin'". Sadly, Lee Marvin is very rarely, if ever, used in his place.
- *The Killers* is very loosely based on the Ernest Hemingway short story of the same name. Any Kindle-reading types keen to read it can find it as part of his short story compilation *Men Without Women*, but if you buy it you're an idiot because, oddly, you can also get *The Complete Short Stories Of Ernest Hemingway: The Finca Vigia Edition* on the Kindle store: it costs less yet contains everything from *Men Without Women* as well as another 40 or so stories.

Leprechaun In The Hood (2000)

Director: Rob Spera

Starring: Warwick Davis, Ice-T, Anthony Montgomery

"A friend with weed is a friend indeed, but a friend with gold is the best I'm told."

By the time the *Leprechaun* series reached its fifth instalment horror's pint-sized Paddy had already terrorised a young Jennifer Aniston, hunted for a bride, rampaged through Las Vegas and even gone into space. Logic therefore dictated that there was only one place left for him to go: the hood.

It probably goes without saying given the title and the premise, but this film is madder than a caravan filled with seahorses. Rapper-turned-actor Ice-T plays Mack Daddy, a pimp who discovers the Leprechaun in a fossilised state and steals his magic flute, which gives him the ability to enchant anyone who hears it.

In time Mack Daddy becomes a huge rap star thanks to the flute, but when a trio of young up-and-coming rappers ask him for some help and he 'disses' them (as the youth of today say) they break into his house, steal the flute, hide out at a drag queen's house for some reason then use the flute to kick off their own rap career. Oh, and during all this, the Leprechaun's come out of his stony state and is ready to fuck up whoever has his flute.

Leprechaun In The Hood throws the odd curve ball on occasion. For the most part it's as cringeworthy as you'd expect, with some truly terrible rhyming lines emerging from the titular titch's tongue throughout ("look at all these glittering goods, I've got more loot than Tiger Woods") and some horribly unfunny moments like a stereotypical Chinese shopkeeper dancing and "getting down with his bad self". Yet from time to time, it does hit you with a genuinely funny line that takes you by surprise and makes you question why the film isn't always this consistent.

Ultimately the bad outweighs the good, and while the film's clearly meant to be cheesy sometimes it just gets so bad that you can't help but shake your head. A completely random and pointless cameo from Coolio (who doesn't even say anything) is bewildering rather than bedazzling, and the rap during the end credits, in which the Leprechaun himself and three tone-deaf hoes chant "Lep in the hood, come to do no good" has to be one of the most painful sequences in cinematic history.

Still, as long as you go in expecting pure cheese (and how could you not, bearing in mind what it's called) then *Leprechaun In The Hood* will satisfy to a degree. It's definitely not going to end up in your top fifty horror films list (or even your top ten killer midgets list) but it's odd enough to keep you entertained for a while.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

Unsurprisingly, *Leprechaun In The Hood* is DVD-only.

Bits and pieces

- You've got to give production company Trimark Pictures credit for their pumpkin-sized balls. It's easy enough to draw criticism when the latest film in your horror franchise is essentially a gimmick: *Friday the 13th* putting Jason in space in *Jason X*, *Halloween* being given the reality TV treatment in *Halloween Resurrection* and so on. But putting your character in a ghetto? Christ.
- It obviously wasn't a very wise decision, mind, because *Leprechaun In The Hood* ended up being Trimark Pictures' last ever movie. The company ended up merging with Lion's Gate Pictures and *Leprechaun* continued under the latter's name. The next entry? *Leprechaun: Back 2 Tha Hood*. Sigh.

The Lost Boys (1987)

Director: Joel Schumacher

Starring: Corey Haim, Corey Feldman, Jason Patric, Kiefer Sutherland, Dianne Wiest, Jami Gertz

"Look at your reflection in the mirror. You're a creature of the night, Michael, just like out of a comic book! You're a vampire, Michael! My own brother: a goddamn, shit-sucking vampire. You wait 'til mom finds out, buddy!"

If you want to see how to do a teenage vampire movie properly, here's a handy guide.

- 1) Take the *Twilight* films, on either DVD or Blu-ray format.
- 2) Shove them right up your arse.
- 3) Watch *The Lost Boys* instead.

It may be 25 years old now but *The Lost Boys* is still a fantastic film, with a superb script and a brilliant '80s rock soundtrack. It's telling that of the many 'teens as vampires' movies released since, only a tiny handful (such as *Near Dark*) have come close to matching it for quality.

It tells the story of Sam Emerson (Corey Haim), whose parents' divorce sees him moving to the small beach town of Santa Carla along with his mum and brother Michael (Jason Patric). Eager to get involved with the local nightlife, Sam and Michael go to a party where Michael becomes enamoured with a girl called Star.

Unfortunately, Star hangs around with a dodgy crowd, a crowd who don't like the daylight, if you catch my drift. They're not fans of garlic, if you get me. They can't see themselves in mirrors, if you follow what I'm saying. They're fucking vampires. So, in an attempt to get in with the in crowd (led by a young Kiefer Sutherland) and win Star's heart, Michael decides to join the gang and become a vampire too.

Desperate to stop his brother becoming a creature of the night forever, Sam enlists the help of the Frog brothers (Jamison Newlander and a hilariously deep-voiced Corey Feldman), a couple of odd teens who run a comic book shop but are vampire hunters in their spare time. The Frogs agree to help Sam find out who the head vampire is, as killing him is the only way to kill the other vampires and turn the other 'half-vampires' who haven't bitten anyone yet (like Michael and Star) into humans again.

Where *The Lost Boys* succeeds is that despite the unrealistic premise of teenage vampires hanging out in a beach town it's still a believable film, thanks in no small part to the cast. You genuinely believe Michael has fallen for Star hook line and sinker, to the extent that, yes, he'll become a vampire in order to be with her (young love eh, bunch of muppets). Even the sillier characters – in particular Corey Feldman's Edgar Frog – get the job done because you believe them in the context of the story. In any other film Feldman's clearly fake deep

voice would sound absurd but when he applies it to Frog, a kid keen to sound tough and authoritative, it makes sense.

Another surprising and refreshing element is the lack of blood throughout most of the film. While there's the odd scene where the crimson starts to flow (especially during the final battle), considering the state of horror movies in the 1980s and the popularity of gory, special effects-laden films *The Lost Boys* is somewhat toned down in comparison. That certainly doesn't go against it, mind you, because the lack of flashy set-pieces only makes more room for character development and more of the film's brilliant script.

Rounding things off is a soundtrack that not only would have been achingly hip at the time but still manages to hold out today. The likes of Run DMC, INXS and The Doors feature as background music at times, while the main theme – despite very much being an unashamed 80s rock ballad – can still be appreciated in the 2010s by open-minded people. The sort of people open-minded enough to watch a teenage horror film where the kid from *The Goonies* plays a gruff-voiced vampire hunter.

It's difficult to say much more about *The Lost Boys* because if you've managed to go all this time without seeing it and without finding out much about it then you really should check it out without having any more of it ruined for you. Above all else, if you're a *Twilight* fan and haven't seen this or *Near Dark* yet, stop reading this and hunt them both down immediately, then realise Stephenie Meyer is really a bit of a prick.

Four and a half out of five

How to see it

As it's an 80s classic it's pretty easy to get hold of *The Lost Boys*. It's currently available in both Blu-ray and DVD flavours. Both feature similar extras.

Bits and pieces

- The laws of horror physics dictate that the longer a horror classic remains a standalone film, the more inevitable an unnecessary sequel becomes. Sure enough, despite being a perfectly great horror film on its own merits – one that stands the test of time and remains brilliant to this day – *The Lost Boys* eventually got two completely unneeded sequels. *Lost Boys: The Tribe* was released in 2008, and was quickly followed up by *Lost Boys: The Thirst* in 2010. Corey Feldman returned to star in both: because let's face it, what else has he been up to?

- The Frog brothers' names are Edgar and Alan, a reference to legendary horror fiction writer Edgar Allen Poe.

MoniKa: A Wrong Way To Die (2012)

Director: Steven R Monroe

Starring: Jason Wiles, Cerina Vincent, Jeff Branson

REAGAN – "So, uh, they say you're dead. That you were killed."

MONIKA – "That would appear to be the case."

It's said that during the filming of *Star Wars*, Harrison Ford turned to George Lucas and, frustrated by its flowery script, moaned: "You can type this shit George, but you sure can't say it."

The same accusation can be aimed directly at *MoniKa*, which has some of the least realistic dialogue I've heard in a while. It didn't bother me though, because hokey script aside it's a decent little film.

When we're introduced to the protagonist, Reagan, he's lying hung-over in his bedroom. A call from his friend Double (who's a famous actor: in the film, of course, not real life) sets the ball rolling when it's suggested Reagan should fly to Nevada to stay with him for a while and "have some fun" with the sister of a lady friend he's started getting frisky with.

Off Reagan goes to Nevada, then, but before he manages to find Double he encounters said sister, Monika. She suggests they go to the local bar to try and find Double and her sister, but when it turns out they aren't there the couple instead start getting to know each other.

One thing leads to another and the two go back to Monika's motel room to do the no-pants dance. Reagan is smitten, and he's convinced things are finally starting to look up for him. The end.

Only kidding, that would be a shite ending. Instead, Reagan wakes the next morning to find Double and Monika's sister. The latter is in a state of shock, and the reason why is a doozy: her sister – the one Reagan was smuggling his sausage inside last night – was shot dead the day before. Whaaaaaaaaaaaaat.

Not entirely sure how he could have dated and mated with a corpse, Reagan isn't completely convinced that all is as it seems. He goes off on a hunt to find Monika, and things get a little crazy when he actually does.

You see, it turns out Monika is still sort of alive, but it's only her ghost. She explains that when she was alive she had stolen money from a dodgy gang, and without that money the gang is going to take out their frustration on Monika's sister.

Reagan needs to help Monika deal with the gang, then, before her soul can finally rest in peace. But it's a bit weird because, unlike most other movie ghosts, everyone can see and

interact with her. It's an odd premise then, but an interesting one when handled well, which it is for the most part.

Monika (Cerina Vincent) is a curious character. She's attractive in an unconventional way, making it easy to see why Reagan would be smitten by her even if we don't necessarily feel the same way.

She's compelling to watch in that she knows everything (the whole business with the gang and the money) and yet, at the same time, she doesn't (she has no clue why she's seemingly a ghost).

Speaking of the gang, they're undoubtedly the weak point of the film (other than the aforementioned dialogue). The numpty who's involved with Monika is bad enough but the boss, played by Andrew Howard, is perhaps the worst British gangster cliché I've ever seen in a film.

He may be played by a genuine Brit – Howard is from Cardiff – but it's unclear why he keeps switching between Cockney and American accents at random.

That script, though... Jesus. As with Ford's *Star Wars* quandry, I have no doubt that written down in a screenplay (or, even better, in a novel) the dialogue would have seemed very clever and thoughtful. But something happens to it between there and the screen, and when the needless hyperbole starts streaming out of Monika and Reagan's mouths it's about as realistic as Sweden's chances of winning the World Cup (they didn't qualify).

Right at the end (no spoilers, don't worry) the film comes dangerously close to closing on a brilliant twist.

The final scene is a bit of a rollercoaster: at first you think you've been hit with one of the biggest, most clichéd cop-outs in film history, but then there's a genuinely clever twist that, had it ended there, would have been a perfect way to conclude.

Instead, not content with one shit twist and one clever one, it decides to try the shit one for a second time before rolling the credits. Infuriating doesn't begin to cover it.

Get past its niggles – the overly flowery dialogue, the varying acting ability, that bloody triple ending – and *Monika* is a decent effort with a lovely art style and a brilliant soundtrack. Those with a relatively high tolerance for ball-dropping should check it out.

Three out of five

How to see it

Monika was released on DVD in the UK by 4Digital Media. It's not available to buy in the US as yet.

Bits and pieces

- Cerina Vincent, who plays Monika, also played Areola - the naked high school exchange student - in *Not Another Teen Movie*. What's that? A shite *Scary Movie* spoof rip-off? My friend, you clearly haven't seen it: read my review in a few pages' time.
- She was also the Yellow Ranger in *Power Rangers: Lost Galaxy*, otherwise known as 'one of the *Power Rangers* series that nobody cares about'. Sadly, the Vietnamese girl who played the original Yellow Ranger, Thuy Trang, died in a car accident aged 27.

Monster House (2006)

Director: Gil Kenan

Starring: voices of Mitchel Musso, Sam Lerner, Spencer Locke, Steve Buscemi

“Are you guys mentally challenged? Because if you are, I’m certified to teach you baseball.”

DJ and Chowder have the feeling that not all is right with the creepy house across the road. After its owner, the evil Mr Nebbercracker (Buscemi), has a heart attack and is sent to hospital the house appears to take on a life of its own, terrorising the local residents. But surely there has to be a more logical explanation for this... after all, houses don’t just come to life and eat people, do they? You bet your balls they do.

After witnessing the creepy chateau coming alive and saving a girl called Jenny from its evil clutches DJ, Chowder and their new lady chum decide to work together to put an end to the evil house so the rest of the street will be safe.

Despite being a movie aimed at children, *Monster House* feels a lot like *The Goonies* and *The Monster Squad* in that it appeals to adults too because the children in it are so believable. There’s no “gee whiz mom” lines or zany 'mwa wa waaa' musical stings throughout, this is a film that feels surprisingly realistic despite its use of stylised CGI animation.

A large part of this is down to the cast. The three leads, who were essentially unknowns before taking on this role, have a real chemistry that shines through even with a layer of CG animation in the way. As for the supporting cast, there’s a large list of well-known names in there including Maggie Gyllenhaal, Jon Heder, Jason Lee, Kevin James, Kathleen Turner and Fred Willard, the majority of whom have unique voices that lend themselves perfectly to this sort of movie.

The dialogue is by far *Monster House*’s strong point. The script is so perfectly handled you’d swear the writers had just held a dictaphone under a group of kids and written down everything they said. They argue, they wind each other up, they try to hide their inadequacies or family problems, and they pretend to be cooler and more grown-up than they actually are, often failing miserably (one particular adults-only line has them finding the house’s uvula, causing Chowder to sagely note “oh, so it’s a girl house”).

The strength of the dialogue ultimately means that the final act, which is pretty much all action, does suffer and things start to feel more like your standard kid’s cartoon movie, albeit one that still looks great. Mr Nebbercracker’s revelatory speech in which he explains the house’s secret goes some way to make up for it, offering a twisted and surprisingly dark tale that is likely to take audiences young and old aback.

When I reviewed *The Monster Squad* (read it over the page) I trumpeted the old fogey’s lament that “they don’t make them like this anymore”. While I stubbornly maintain this is still the case, *Monster House* is the closest I’ve seen a film return to those glory days in a

while. It's a kids' adventure that doesn't patronise its audience and in doing so makes it perfectly acceptable for a solely adult audience as well as the younger one it's aimed at. The third act's a little weak, but check it out anyway.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

You can get *Monster House* on DVD and Blu-ray. If you're a Fancy McFancypants, you can also get the 3D Blu-ray here but you'll need a 3D TV and a 3D Blu-ray player. You poser.

Bits and pieces

- Here's what you call clever marketing in action. There's a scene in the movie in which our heroes encounter Skull, a massive nerd voiced by Jon 'Napoleon Dynamite' Heder. When they meet Skull, he's in an arcade playing a fake 8-bit style game called Thou Art Dead. Here's the clever bit – during the first few years of its release, fans could head to the *Monster House* website to actually play Thou Art Dead, which played a bit like *Castlevania*.
- Unlike most CG animated movies, the performances in *Monster House* were completely motion-captured. In fact, by as late as 2012 it was still the only motion-captured film based on an entirely original story.

The Monster Squad (1987)

Director: Fred Dekker

Starring: Andre Gower, Duncan Regehr, Tom Noonan

"The Creature stole my Twinkie."

Kids' films in the 1980s were much better than they are today. They had an edge to them, a realism that most of today's films are too scared to address. You only need to look at Spielberg's 2002 re-release of *ET*, in which he digitally removed the guns being held by the agents and replaced them with walkie-talkies. In short, today's children's movies are for pussies.

Anyone who's recently watched *The Goonies* will know exactly what I mean. The kids in that film acted realistically, they had an attitude, they got into nasty scrapes, they wanted to see women's boobs, they make fun of the fat kid, and every now and then they'll swear to sound tough (but only in each other's company, mind, never when an adult's around). It felt real. Ditto, then, with *The Monster Squad*, a similar film of that era which for some odd reason never gained the same cult following as that other much-loved 'group of kids go on an adventure' movie.

The Monster Squad gathers some of the greatest Universal monsters (albeit visually redesigned versions so as to not piss off Universal, this being a Tristar film and all) and dumps them in a small American suburb. Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, the Wolfman, the Mummy and the Creature From The Black Lagoon are all in town to find a special, indestructible amulet which is said to maintain the balance between good and evil. Once every hundred years the amulet loses its invulnerability for a short time, at which point it can be destroyed and evil can rule the world, and as luck would have it that time is about to occur.

Meanwhile, a secret club of kids who love talking about monsters and call themselves *The Monster Squad* get hold of an ancient book written by Professor Van Helsing in which he documents what happened 100 years prior when the amulet was nearly broken, and they realise that it's set to happen again. They decide to team up and use their monster knowledge to stop the fearsome fivesome from taking over the world.

The Monster Squad is genuinely funny at times, and shares the same realistic childlike sense of humour *The Goonies* is famed for having. When the kids are together talking about monsters in their treehouse you're transported back to a time when you used to have similar conversations with your friends about such ridiculous things: did the Wolfman have balls so you could kick him in them? Can you buy silver bullets at K-Mart? And does the scary German guy across the road really want to kill children? (Incidentally, it turns out he doesn't: and the film cleverly changes the audience's perception of him at one point with one poignant shot).

The monsters themselves, meanwhile, range in effectiveness. It's a shame Universal passed on the story, because the film could have done with a little extra authenticity. Instead, Stan Winston (the late effects maestro behind the likes of *Terminator 2* and *Jurassic Park*) does his best job at reimagining these famous freaks, and while some are impressive – the animatronic *Creature From The Black Lagoon* head is brilliant and the Mummy is creepy to watch – others aren't so remarkable. Dracula looks like a bit of a drip, for example, and the Wolfman doesn't look quite as scary as he has in other films.

The Monster Squad is recommended viewing for anyone who loved *The Goonies*. It's funny, it's got great action, it's imaginative and while the final 30 minutes lose the magic a little it's still a great slice of '80s childhood joy.

Four out of five

How to see it

The Monster Squad is currently unavailable in the UK, but the Blu-ray recently released in the US has no region coding and will work on British players (it's what I used for this review). It's also out on DVD in the US.

Bits and pieces

- It may be a light-hearted horror film but many believe Duncan Regehr's portrayal of Dracula is one of the finest in the history of the character. I wouldn't quite go that far but there's no denying he does a great job.
- If the Wolfman's face looks a little familiar in *The Monster Squad*, that's because it's based on that of Stan Winston, who created the special effects.

The Muppets (2011)

Director: James Bobin

Starring: Jason Segel, Amy Adams, Chris Cooper, Kermit The Frog, Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, Gonzo, Animal

STATLER - "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were reciting some sort of important plot point."

WALDORF - "I hope so. Otherwise I would've bored half the audience half to death."

STATLER - "You mean half the audience is still alive?"

I've been a huge fan of the Muppets ever since I was really young. As I grew and managed to get hold of more and more Muppets stuff I managed to grit my teeth and ignore the worst parts of Muppet history (*Muppets In Space*, the early laugh-free *Saturday Night Live* stuff) and focus on the classics: *The Muppets Christmas Carol*, *The Muppets Take Manhattan* and, of course, *The Muppet Show* itself.

The Muppets have been out of the public eye for so long however that when I heard another movie was on the way I felt excitement and trepidation in equal measure. Would this be the long-awaited return of the Muppets I've been hoping for for years, or would it be an anachronistic, out-of-date embarrassment that would sound the death knell for my beloved puppets? Thankfully, the answer is the former, and by some distance.

The Muppets tells the story of Walter, a young puppet who lives with his brother Gary (Jason Segel). Walter is the world's biggest Muppet fan, so when Gary and his girlfriend Mary (Amy Adams) ask him to travel to Hollywood with him he jumps at the chance to visit the hallowed Muppet Studios.

Unfortunately, since the Muppets haven't done anything of note for years, Walter arrives at the Muppet Studios to find it rundown and dilapidated. While there he hears a deal being made by the evil Tex Richman, who claims he wants to buy the Muppet Studios to turn it into a museum but in reality wants to demolish everything and drill for oil.

Distraught, Walter decides to try to find the reclusive Kermit and convince him to regroup the Muppets and put on one more show to raise enough money to buy the Studios back, but there's just one problem: they've all lost contact with each other since they disbanded years ago, and Kermit and Miss Piggy left on bad terms. Can they save the day and buy back the Studios? You might be surprised.

The Muppets is hilarious. Newcomers will get a laugh from the jokes and such but this is clearly a film for the fans and as such is packed with previous references to *The Muppet Show* and the various movies. While most of these references are fairly well-known, die-

hard fans will have fun spotting the odd appearances of some of the more obscure Muppets that only featured in a couple of sketches 30 years ago.

Some may turn their nose up at its numerous attempts to break the fourth wall by making constant references to the fact they're in a movie (when Kermit tells Walter the gang probably won't get back together, Mary remarks that "this is going to be a really short movie"), but this was always a part of The Muppets' comedy. After all, *The Muppet Show* featured countless backstage sections where they discussed the running of the show as it was happening, so it makes sense that they'd know they're in a movie too.

The music is also sensational: you'd hope so, considering the film is essentially a musical. The songs are written by Bret McKenzie of Flight Of The Conchords fame and fans of that band/TV show will hear some definite Conchordian elements to many of them. Indeed, 'Man Or Muppet', the song that won McKenzie an Oscar, has a pleasantly similar vibe to 'I'm Not Crying' from the first episode of *Flight Of The Conchords*.

It does have one or two iffy moments. One of the main plot points involves the Muppets needing to find a celebrity to present their show, and there's plenty of fuss made over Kermit and others desperately trying to find someone as time is running out. Everything is seemingly being set up for a special celebrity cameo to appear at the last minute and surprise us, but when they eventually settle for a celeb who already appeared at the start of the movie it feels a little cheap and is a bit of a let-down.

This isn't the end of the world, mind you, and is merely a disappointing drop in an ocean of joy. *The Muppets* is essential viewing for everyone, because it wonderfully introduces these fantastic characters to those too young to know them, while also ensuring it does justice to their heritage and history for long-time fans to feel like this is a suitable end to their journey. And the ending is a pleasantly refreshing surprise too (at least until the film bottles it and quickly squeezes in a more conventional conclusion during the end credits).

In fact, the only reason I'm not giving *The Muppets* five out of five is because, for whatever reason, of the literally hundreds and hundreds of popular and obscure Muppets who all feature in the film there's no sign of Robin, Kermit's little nephew and coincidentally my favourite character. Yes, that's horribly biased of me, but this is my site so nyaaah.

Four and a half out of five

How to see it

The Muppets is available on DVD and Blu-ray in all regions.

Bits and pieces

- Although the vast majority of Muppets feature in the film, there was fairly major outcry from the fans (including me, hence above) when it became clear that neither Rizzo the rat or Kermit's nephew Robin were in it. This was remedied with a clever cameo in the sequel, *Muppets Most Wanted*, in which Rizzo appears and points out that older characters aren't getting much attention, before leaving with Robin, who lets out a dejected sigh.

- Speaking of the sequel, its name was *Muppets... Again* all the way through production and was only changed to *Muppets Most Wanted* shortly before release. This makes for an awkward situation in the film in which, at the end of the first song, Walter suggests they name their movie *Muppets... Again*. Whoops.

Nazis At The Centre Of The Earth (2012)

Director: Joseph J Lawson

Starring: Dominique Swain, Jake Busey, Joshua Allen, Christopher Johnson

Also known as: Bloodstorm (UK DVD)

"Come on, you bobble-headed zombie Nazi son of a bitch! Fick dich!"

I've spoken in the past about The Asylum, the delightfully shameless film studio that have no qualms about constantly releasing low-budget rip-offs of popular films to trick confused mothers at video rental stores (*Snakes On A Train*, *Paranormal Entity* and *Atlantic Rim* spring to mind).

With said rental stores on the way out though, The Asylum have instead seemingly switched their focus to original movies, albeit completely ridiculous ones.

Recently they struck gold with *Sharknado*, the does-what-it-says-on-the-tin film that's so bonkers it ended up trending on Twitter in the UK when it aired on SyFy. This one, though, may have taken things a little too far.

Let me just explain the plot to you. For a bit of fun, as you read, try to imagine you're a film executive and someone's pitching this film to you. See how long you'd last until you'd say: "Let me stop you there chaps, we have a stringent anti-drugs policy at this studio and you've clearly fucked it many times over."

The film opens with two scientists (Joshua Allen and ex-Lolita starlet Dominique Swain) drilling through the ice in Antarctica. They soon come across a hidden tunnel which drops them hundreds of feet (so not quite to the 'Center Of The Earth' then) and lands them outside a massive underground complex.

This is no ordinary underground complex, not that they're usually that ordinary anyway. It's run by Nazis. Not modern day citizens who have decided to follow the Nazi way of life, mind you, but the actual same Nazis from the 1940s.

Living in their underground labs they've managed to find a way to stay alive all these years by grafting other people's skin to their bodies. But they're running out of said people. Hang on a minute, aren't scientists people? Da da dummm.

Worried that their colleagues have gone missing, another group of scientists (led by Gary Busey's son Jake) decide to go looking for them, eventually stumbling upon the tunnel themselves. Entering the German complex they meet Dr Josef Mengele.

If that name's familiar to you then you're probably already offended. If it isn't, he's the real-life 'Angel of Death' who supervised victim selection at Auschwitz and performed horrible

experiments on its Jewish prisoners. Again, this wasn't in a film, this was a real man who did those real things. And now he's the villain in a shit sci-fi movie.

Clearly deciding Mengele's presence alone isn't questionable enough, the film continues to push the envelope. And when I say 'push' I mean 'jam it into an orphan's fragile face'.

The scientists are told they have to work with the Nazis and help them with their experiments, or be killed and have their skin become that year's spring/summer line. Naturally, some object, and things get nasty.

A warning: the next few paragraphs are particularly grisly. If you're easily offended you might want to skip forward a bit.

Three of the girls are sent to the shower room (remember, under the supervision of the guy from Auschwitz). In a completely uncalled for scene, one of them is stripped and raped by six Nazi zombies.

Another reveals to Busey – who's already agreed to help the Nazis – that she's pregnant with his child. He apologises and punches her in the face. The next scene – and this is no word of a lie – sees her awake and screaming while Busey and a Nazi abort her foetus and take its stem cells.

Those stem cells are then used to kick off the film's final, insane act, as Busey uses them to bring to life – and let me make sure I use the correct technical term here – a FUCKING MASSIVE ROBOT HITLER. That's a giant mech with Hitler's actual resurrected head attached.

The thing that's wrong with *Nazis At The Centre Of The Earth* is that it can't decide which sort of horror film it is, and therefore it tries to be both. But it can't be both, it doesn't work.

You can't have a robot Hitler firing laser beams at helicopters (bet those who skipped the spoilers are wondering where the fuck robot Hitler came from), but also have Josef fucking Mengele ordering sexual violence. Either it's serious or it's a piss-take, it can't really be both.

Ultimately, the film suffers due to its insistence on controversial scenes. Its title and its studio's heritage will be enough for most to come on board expecting silliness, and while they do eventually get it they have to sit through a number of extremely uncomfortable moments to get there.

I'm torn, then. The final act with robo-Hitler is among the best work The Asylum has ever released, offering plenty of CGI-fuelled action at its silliest. But the second act is so poorly handled, so tonally wrong, so offensive, that I can't recommend it as a must-watch.

Two out of five

How to see it

Nazis At The Center Of The Earth can be found on DVD and Blu-ray in both the UK and US. In the UK it's got the alternative title of *Bloodstorm* though it does occasionally also play on the British version of SyFy with its original name.

Bits and pieces

- I don't want to get nitpicky but I really shout reiterate that a tunnel hundreds of feet into the ground is nowhere near the 'Centre Of The Earth', so if you watch this expecting magma-encrusted Nazis from the Earth's core, I think you're going to be disappointed. Mind you, if you willingly watch a film with a title like this expecting anything of real value then I'd imagine disappointment has a recurring role in the TV show that is your life.
- Right at the end of the film, after the credits roll, you see Robot Hitler's hand move slightly. Could we see a *Nazis At The Center Of The Earth 2*? Christ, I hope not.

Not Another Teen Movie (2001)

Director: Joel Gallen

Starring: Chyler Leigh, Chris Evans, Jaime Pressly, Eric Christian Olsen

"Let's make like a tree and... branch. Out of here."

Everyone has their guilty pleasures, and *Not Another Teen Movie* is certainly one of mine. While there have been countless atrocious spoof movies released over the years following the success of *Scary Movie*, this piss-take of teen flicks from the '80s and '90s is one of those rare few that are actually genuinely funny.

Perhaps it's because its spoofs are so accurate to the movies they're parodying, but with jokes not so specific that they'll be lost on those who haven't seen these films.

Or perhaps it's because both generations of teen flick fans – the '80s kids and the '90s kids – are catered for in equal measure. '80s films like *The Breakfast Club*, *Pretty In Pink*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *Porky's* are imitated to perfection, while '90s movies like *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Bring It On*, *American Pie* and *Cruel Intentions* are also aped. This also extends to the soundtrack, which mainly consists of '80s songs being covered by modern bands. Well, modern by late '90s standards.

Of all the films getting the parody treatment though it's *She's All That* which forms the basis of *Not Another Teen Movie's* plot. Star quarterback and all-round cool guy Jake Wyler (Chris Evans) makes a bet with his friend that he can turn the ugliest girl in a school into the prom queen. The 'ugliest' girl chosen (in a school that features an albino hippie, a hunchback and conjoined twins among its pupils) is Janey Briggs (Chyler Leigh), a rebellious art-loving girl who is quite clearly attractive but is considered ugly because she wears glasses and has a ponytail.

Cue a whole bunch of familiar scenes as Jake tries to convince Janey to like him and accompany him to the prom. He takes her to a generic teen house party where she jumps off the roof into a swimming pool (a la *Almost Famous*), he tries to seduce her with a whipped cream bikini much like Ali Larter's in *Varsity Blues*, and his attempt to win her over by singing from the bleachers as she takes an art class on the football field is straight out of *10 Things I Hate About You*... though on this occasion his song choice is far less successful.

Then there are the various cameos that should have people chuckling away. Melissa Joan Hart (*Clarissa Explains It All*, *Sabrina The Teenage Witch*) gives an important lesson on slow clapping, Mr T gives some sage football advice and Molly Ringwald gives her true feelings on teenagers. It's brilliant.

If you see this on TV or have access to the US version of Netflix and spot it on there, try to avoid that nagging doubt that suggests this is going to be an embarrassing pile of pish like 99% of the other 'hilarious' spoof films directed by 'the guy who made the tea on the *Scary*

Movie set'. As one of the few proper efforts released shortly after *Scary Movie* this is one of only a handful of truly decent examples of the genre before it all went to shit. Yes friends, I have no shame in saying that I am a fan of *Not Another Teen Movie*.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

Not Another Teen Movie is available on DVD in both the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- I will fight to the death anyone who lumps *Not Another Teen Movie* in with the other abysmal spoof movies that have tried to cash in on *Scary Movie* over the years. If you dare assume that *Not Another Teen Movie* is in the same bottom-of-the-bargain-bin league as the likes of *Meet The Spartans*, *Epic Movie*, *Superhero Movie*, *Vampires Suck* and (sigh) *The 41-Year-Old Virgin Who Knocked Up Sarah Marshall And Felt Superbad About It*, then you're about as wrong as pickled onions in ice cream.
- If you really want to get the most out of *Not Another Teen Movie* and want to ensure you'll get most of the major jokes, watch the following films first: *She's All That*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Varsity Blues*, *Cruel Intentions*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *American Beauty*, *Porky's* and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

Paranormal Activity (2007)

Director: Oren Peli

Starring: Katie Featherston, Micah Sloat

MICAH – "What if we just get this Ouija board and we find out what it wants and then we give it what it wants? Then it's gone."

PSYCHIC – "Because what it probably wants is Katie."

You wake up in the middle of the night. In the darkness you can just about make out a black shadow standing at the door. It doesn't move. It's just standing there, watching you. You close your eyes but when you open them again the shadow is still there. In a panic, you slowly reach down to the side of your bed, being careful not to take your eye off the shadow, and grab your phone, turning it on. What little illumination it provides is just enough to dimly light the room and reveal... a coat, hanging from the door. Relieved, you lie back down again and close your eyes, but something lingers in your head that maybe, just maybe, the coat was a trick and the real monster is still quietly and invisibly watching over you.

If you can relate to this sort of thing and have experienced similar moments before where you've nervously studied shapes in the dark to figure out what they are, then *Paranormal Activity* may quite frankly scare the shite out of you, despite what the 'big men' say.

You know the sort of people I mean: the ones who pipe up any time *The Exorcist* is mentioned, just so they can sound tough and say "*Exorcist*? Ha, that wasn't scary at all... in fact, I laughed all the way through it". Deep down you know that either they're lying, they didn't allow themselves to get so emotionally involved with it or, as is increasingly likely these days, they didn't watch it in the right conditions. And it's the latter that's crucially important when watching *Paranormal Activity*. But more on that later.

The film follows Katie and Micah (the actors used their real names), a couple who have just moved into a new place having been together for three years. One day Katie decides to tell Micah that when she was younger she experienced some paranormal goings-on involving ghosts and the like, and that she's getting concerned because odd little things have now started happening in their house, such as the lights flickering and whatnot. Rather than getting an electrician in, the excited Micah decides to go and buy a video camera so he can document everything and pretend to be a ghost hunter. As the days pass, these incidents become more regular and more extreme, until it becomes clear that the otherworldly being that hassled Katie when she was a young'un has followed her to her new home and is kicking the haunting up a notch.

As you may have guessed by the whole video camera thing, *Paranormal Activity* is one of those 'found footage' jobbies in the style of *The Blair Witch Project*, *Troll Hunter* and *Cannibal Holocaust* in which it's claimed that the people in it are completely real and the

events actually happened. It opens with a message of thanks to the parents of the two lead characters for their co-operation, and closes with a simple copyright message with no credits whatsoever as if to suggest nobody 'worked' on it and it's just some footage that a couple shot themselves.

This isn't the case, of course, but *Paranormal Activity* is so well put together you'd have to really be paying attention to the camerawork to realise this, meaning the vast majority of viewers don't because they're too busy watching Katie and Micah.

Indeed, it's Katie in particular who truly helps *Paranormal Activity* feel authentic. Since Micah's the one doing the filming for the most part it's Katie who takes up the majority of screen time and she does a wonderful job. It may sound like an insult that she never seems like she's doing much acting, but it's actually the best compliment I can pay her: it's very easy to believe she's just a normal, scared young woman instead of an actress playing the role of one, and it's this believable performance that gives the film that crucial authenticity.

The other thing handled masterfully in *Paranormal Activity* is its structure and pace. Fairly early on the film makes its intended pattern clear to the audience: there'll be daytime scenes where Katie and Micah interact with each other and build our emotional investment in them, followed by night scenes where spooky shit will happen, followed by more daytime scenes where Katie and Micah discuss what happened the night before. This may seem like a boring, rigid structure but it's actually cleverly designed to focus your attention on other things.

In fact, the whole film is laid out in a way to make sure your attention is fully directed at what it wants you to be looking at. At night the camera is put up on a shelf and overlooks the whole darkened bedroom, and since it's quickly made clear that 'night time = ghost time' then your entire attention is focused on every tiny aspect of the room: you'll scrutinise every shadow, every hard-to-make-out shape, every slight movement for signs of ghostly presence.

Suddenly you feel like you're back in your room, squinting at that black shadow on the door again. This time though you don't have your phone to make things clearer, meaning you have to keep squinting in the dark. And when you're concentrating that hard your senses are heightened, meaning when something does happen – and unlike *Blair Witch* it does actually happen regularly, be it in the form of a moving door, footprints appearing on the floor, bedsheets moving or even loud roars and bangs coming from downstairs – the fear is greatly amplified.

Later, just as you're getting used to the film's 'daytime is fine, night-time is scary' routine, it shakes things up and creepy stuff starts happening in broad daylight. A Ouija board bursts into flames, a photograph smashes itself, and it slowly dawns on the audience that everything they thought they knew was wrong: after setting its own rules and waiting for us to accept and trust in them *Paranormal Activity* has broken them, betraying our trust and leaving us uncertain all over again. And that's genius.

It's not a perfect film. Micah isn't a very likeable character and while his attempts to wind up the demon and his decision to use a Ouija board against Katie's wishes are obviously there to advance the story, it does make it harder to feel sympathetic towards the far more likeable Katie as you feel she's bringing it on herself a little by putting up with his bollocks.

The ending (the main theatrical one at least) is also a little disappointing, making use of CGI right at the end to go for a cheap scare that wouldn't be out of place in one of those annoying 'screamer' YouTube videos. For a film that so expertly delivers its suspense slowly and progressively throughout, it's a shame that it resorts to cheap tactics right at the end for a generic Hollywood-style 'final scream'. That said, it does have two other endings (one involving the police and another with a throat-slitting) which can be found online and don't really fare much better, so maybe this is just a film that can't really be concluded in a satisfying manner.

If you're going to watch *Paranormal Activity*, please do yourself a favour and watch it under the optimal conditions: lights out, sound up, no other distractions. If you watch this film with a group of mates at a party or if it's just on the telly in the background and you're not really paying attention, the impact will be lost. This is a film that requires your full attention and really needs you to be studying every centimetre of its screen during the night scenes, so in order to get the most out of it you need to have a completely silent environment, the lights completely off and the sound up high enough that you can hear the slight buzz from the camera during the night scenes. Watch it like that and you will be terrified, no matter how much you lie about it to your pals afterwards.

Four out of five

How to see it

Due to its huge worldwide success, *Paranormal Activity* can be found dirt cheap these days on DVD and Blu-ray. Unlike *The Blair Witch Project*, this film was shot on a hi-def video camera so Blu-ray does make a difference.

Bits and pieces

- The number of films with the word 'Paranormal' in the title released since *Paranormal Activity* is fairly shocking. Some of the more shameless examples in the past couple of years include *Paranormal Entity*, *Paranormal Diaries*, *Paranormal Incident*, *Paranormal Captivity*, *Paranormal Asylum*, *Paranormal Adoption* and *Paranormal Xperience 3D*.

- *Paranormal Activity* is the most profitable film of all time in terms of percentage of return on initial investment. Paramount acquired the rights to the film for \$350,000 and it ended up making \$193 million.

Paranormal Activity 2 (2010)

Director: Tod Williams

Starring: Sprague Grayden, Brian Boland, Molly Ephraim, Katie Featherston, Micah Sloat

"We just can't let this affect us that much. If we do that, the terrorists win."

After the success of *The Blair Witch Project*, the inevitable sequel followed. Rather than sticking with what worked and going with another low-budget handheld camera effort, the filmmakers went with a big \$15 million production that felt nothing like the original. It was a moderate success but most fans of the first film hated it (personally, I liked it but that's for another review). No doubt with this in mind, the makers of *Paranormal Activity* instead decided if it wasn't broke they shouldn't try to fix it, and so *Paranormal Activity 2* is more or less the same as the first movie.

Once again we've got a couple moving into a new home, and once again we've got the whole thing captured on home video cameras (with security cameras chucked into the mix too this time). Once again weird shit starts going down, and once again it seems clear that there's some sort of demon terrorising them.

Unfortunately, *Paranormal Activity 2* seems to lose something that the original had: the sense of intimacy that made it so powerful. Whereas the original film simply consisted of a couple moving in together for the first time, using a single store-bought camera to record the weird goings-on that have started to happen, this time so many new elements are introduced to try and add some variety. Instead though, they just make the situation more complicated.

This time, rather than just a couple, we've got a married couple moving to a new home. Plus their baby. Plus their 14-year-old daughter from the husband's previous marriage. Plus their dog. Plus their Spanish maid. Plus the house has loads of security cameras installed. Plus there's now a big garden area with a swimming pool. Plus the couple from the original film are back (this is mainly a prequel), as it turns out Katie is the sister of the new female protagonist.

So now we've gone from a film that had two characters and one handheld camera to a film that has eight characters, one handheld camera and a house full of security cameras. While the film manages to do a good job of keeping the same atmosphere as the original to a degree, ultimately there's just too much information for the audience to keep track of, meaning there's too much time spent wondering where everyone is rather than looking out for the tiny, subtle details that made the original so terrifying.

There's no longer a key area in the house, an iconic shot that strikes fear into the audience every time they see it. The original had the famous shot of the bedroom, with the night-vision cam overlooking the entire room and just glimpsing the hallway, where the audience were subconsciously guided to fix their eyes firmly each time they heard footsteps coming

up the stairs. It was clear that any time we saw the bedroom there could be trouble. This time we could expect it from the baby's room one minute, the living room the next, the couple's room the next, the front garden the next and the pool area the next. There's even some sort of creepy area in the basement that the dog keeps trying to reach. There's too much to keep an eye on.

It also oddly doesn't seem quite as shocking, even though it throws more at you than the original film. While the first 50 minutes of the sequel pass without much incident, once it gets going you've got people getting dragged down stairs, the baby being dragged out his crib, the dog getting attacked, a ridiculous shaky-cam scene in the basement reminiscent of *.REC* and a big scare moment involving kitchen drawers and cupboards. Yet despite all this I managed to sleep soundly at night after watching it, which certainly wasn't the case with the original.

The pacing's just wrong, too. As I said above, nothing really interesting starts to happen until nearly an hour into the film. It's obviously trying to emulate the structure of the original film by starting off with peaceful nights and slowly ramping up the tension night by night, but it takes things too far by offering too little for too long. By the time you've seen the same still shot of the pool for the eighth time it slowly begins to dawn on you that there's perhaps a lot of padding taking place under the pretence of tension-building.

This suspicion is confirmed when ultimately nothing happens in the pool, other than a hokey 'revelation' that the pool cleaner equipment slides out the pool each night. Even then we don't get to witness it for ourselves as it happens, which is sort of the whole point of the film: instead we have to watch it over the shoulders of the characters as they check back the security footage.

If nothing else, *Paranormal Activity 2* is proof that its predecessor was just the perfect blend of shocks and subtlety. Much like a game of Buckaroo, by trying to add too many things to the mix it just ends up all over the place. Despite an interesting final ten minutes, which act as both a prologue and epilogue to the original film, this is a shadow of the first *Paranormal Activity*. And just a normal shadow, not a creepy demon shadow.

Two out of five

How to see it

Paranormal Activity 2 is out on DVD and Blu-ray. As with the original, the handheld stuff is filmed on an HD camcorder so the Blu-ray really does make a difference at times, but the introduction of blurry security camera footage makes it a little less essential.

Bits and pieces

- To date, *Paranormal Activity 2* holds the record for the biggest US opening weekend for a horror film ever, earning \$41.5 million. Given that it cost \$3 million to make and promote, it's no wonder Paramount keeps churning them out.
- Brian De Palma, the director of *Carrie*, was originally considered to direct the sequel. That would have been pretty bloody interesting.

Pee-wee's Big Adventure (1985)

Director: Tim Burton

Starring: Paul Reubens, Elizabeth Daily, Diane Salinger, Mark Holton

PEE-WEE – "There's a lotta things about me you don't know anything about, Dottie. Things you wouldn't understand. Things you couldn't understand. Things you shouldn't understand."

DOTTIE – "I don't understand."

Though he was something of a household name in America during the 1980s, Pee-wee Herman was never really that famous in the UK. This is no doubt because his much-loved children's show *Pee-wee's Playhouse* was never given the national exposure as it was in the States, instead relegated to an early-morning spot on then-obscure satellite channel Nickelodeon in the early days of Sky. The Americans loved him though, and that's why he was popular enough to spawn two films (this and *Big Top Pee-wee*) with a brand new third one on the way courtesy of Judd Apatow.

Pee-wee's Big Adventure tells the story of man-child Pee-wee Herman (Paul Reubens) and his quest to find his missing bike. Pee-wee is obsessed with gadgets and gizmos, and his house is littered with all manner of weird and wonderful inventions, but it's his special red bike that he holds dearest to his heart, much to the annoyance of his rich neighbour Francis. After heading into town and popping into a local joke shop Pee-wee returns to discover his bike has been stolen. Heartbroken, he vows to find out who's responsible and bring them to justice.

If you're new to Pee-wee Herman, the character may at first seem a little odd. From his squeaky voice to his bizarre array of laughs, you'd be forgiven for feeling a little confused as you watch him brush his teeth with an oversized toothbrush then completely cover his face with sticky tape. His childish sense of humour soon grows on you though, and by the time he's cracking schoolboy-level "I know you are but what am I" jokes you're guiltily chuckling away with him.

The film is essentially a series of set-pieces as Pee-wee finds himself travelling across America to find his bike in Texas (after being told it's in the basement of the Alamo by a hack psychic). One minute he's hitching a ride with a murderer fugitive on the run, the next he's watching the sunset inside a giant dinosaur with a waitress while her huge fiancé waits angrily outside, the next he's performing a dance number in a bar full of Hell's Angels in an attempt to win them over and avoid a kicking.

As Tim Burton's directorial debut *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* is missing much of the dark and gothic imagery that his later work would become synonymous with, but there are still the odd scenes that are clearly Burtonesque. The sequence in which Pee-wee dreams of his bike

being stolen by a bunch of evil clowns and then dunked in a pool of lava by a massive robot is one such example of future Burton shining through.

The film's final twenty minutes are brilliant slapstick humour as Pee-wee finds himself being chased by guards through Warner Bros Studios and causing trouble in all sorts of movie sets and film shoots. It's a brilliant, hilarious final act that gives the impression that the filmmakers just thought "fuck it, let's go mental".

Despite its age and its deliberately childish sense of humour, *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* is a hilarious film that still manages to hold its own. As the first ever Burton-Elfman collaboration it's worth seeing for that alone, but even if you couldn't care less about that this is a treat. Perhaps if more people in the UK had seen *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* or his TV show then his character would have been more successful in the UK, but as it is, it's merely a cult favourite on these shores and one you should certainly check out if you fancy a laugh.

Four out of five

How to see it

You can get *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* on DVD or Blu-ray in the US but in the UK it can't be bought standalone. The only way to get it in Britain is as part of the Tim Burton Collection box set (on either Blu-ray or DVD), which contains the film as well as *Batman*, *Batman Returns*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Corpse Bride*, *Mars Attacks* and *Beetlejuice*.

Bits and pieces

- It saddened me (though didn't completely surprise me) to find out that the shopping district Pee-wee visits near the start of the film has completely changed in appearance since the film was shot. There's a YouTube video doing the rounds that shows what everything looks like now. Sadly, Chuck's Bike-O-Rama – the bike shop that plays a pivotal role in the film – is now a mobile phone shop.
- Paul Reubens went on to star as Pee-wee in another film – *Big Top Pee-wee* – but although these films are what he's best known for in the UK, in the US he was more famous for *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. I used to be obsessed with this kids' TV show (which aired early in the morning on the UK version of Nickelodeon way back in its first few months), which saw man-child Pee-wee piss around in a house filled with talking furniture. The set design was bizarre, and it's little wonder: a young Rob Zombie was a production assistant on the show.

Phantom Of The Paradise (1974)

Director: Brian De Palma

Starring: William Finley, Paul Williams, Jessica Harper, Gerrit Graham

“Look, Philbin. I am a professional. I have been in this business a long time. Now, if I don’t want to perform, it’s not because I got stage fright. It’s because some creature from beyond doesn’t want me to do the show. Now gangway.”

This '70s beauty from *Carrie* director Brian De Palma is undoubtedly what you’d end up with if you were somehow able to execute a bizarre four-way cross-breed between *The Phantom Of The Opera*, *Faust*, *The Picture Of Dorian Gray* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Now, this one has a hell of a lot going on during the first 45 minutes so bear with me here, because my plot summary’s going to be longer than usual.

The film stars lanky, pop-eyed William Finley as Winslow Leach, a singer and composer trying to make it big in the music industry.

One night, while performing as a support act for doo-wop rock & roll nostalgia act The Juicy Fruits – who he despises, incidentally – Winslow catches the ear of famed record producer Swan (played by singer-songwriter Paul Williams).

Swan thinks Winslow’s music would be perfect to open his new concert hall, the Paradise, but he doesn’t think Winslow has star quality. The solution? His right-hand man takes Winslow’s sheet music, fobbing him off with a promise that Swan will get back to him regarding a possible record deal.

After hearing nothing for while and eventually deciding to gatecrash Swan’s mansion to see what’s going on, Winslow meets Phoenix (*Suspiria*’s Jessica Harper), who is auditioning to sing his song at the opening night of the Paradise.

Unhappy that his song is being used without his credit, Winslow tries to complain but is beaten up by Swan’s henchmen and, framed for drug possession, is given a life sentence(!) in Sing Sing prison.

This is where it starts to get a bit silly. After six months in Sing Sing – during which time all his teeth have been removed and replaced with steel ones as part of a Swan-funded experiment – Winslow hears one of his songs on the radio being sung by the Juicy Fruits.

Going berserk, he attacks a guard, breaks out of prison, and heads to Swan’s Death Records label HQ where he starts destroying the Juicy Fruits’ albums.

An accident with a record press, however, results in Winslow melting half of his face and, fleeing from the police, he plunges himself into a river, presumed dead. But obviously not

actually dead because that would be a bullshit movie (not to mention an extremely short one).

Eager for revenge, the hideously scarred Winslow (now wearing a helmet) heads to the balcony of the Paradise and tries to kill the Juicy Fruits (now known as the Beach Bums) with a bomb while they rehearse for the opening night. Swan confronts Winslow and cuts him a deal.

Winslow has to agree to two things: firstly, don't be a dick and try to sabotage the Paradise's opening night. Secondly, write Swan a whole new concert in time for opening night.

In return, Swan will not only let Phoenix sing the songs (which is what Winslow wants), he'll also give Winslow the recording contract he wants, promising to use all manner of electronic gizmos and doo-dahs at the studio to restore his original singing voice.

Phew. I could go on, but that's really still the first act and I don't want to spoil much more of the craziness that ensues.

Without going into too much detail, *Phantom Of The Paradise* continues to introduce a variety of mental plot points and other bizarre asides, including a deal with the devil, a vampire-themed band who cuts off fake limbs while performing, magical ageing photographs and a glam-rock junkie singer called Beef.

All of this is presented in typical Brian de Palma fashion, with all manner of weird and wonderful camera angles and, at one point, his signature split-screen effect (more famously used later in *Carrie*).

Being a musical, the film also packs a number of songs into its 90-minute runtime. These songs (all written by Swan actor Paul Williams) aren't quite as catchy as those in other musicals, and some kill the film's pace by going on a little too long.

However, there isn't a true stinker in there and things are kept relatively fresh by the fact they're performed by a bunch of different acts throughout including Phoenix, Winslow, the Juicy Fruits, the aforementioned Beef and said vampire band.

Acting-wise, the performances are fairly solid throughout, with the star of the show undoubtedly being Gerrit Graham as Beef. He's only in the film for 15 or 20 minutes but is consistently hilarious during this time with his overblown ultra-campy leading to numerous laugh-out-loud moments.

It's the Phantom who remains in the memory after the film ends though, albeit not necessarily for all the right reasons.

William Finley puts in a solid stint as Winslow, but as soon as the helmet goes on he starts putting on the most overly dramatic performance you'll ever see in a film, with the viewer asked to endure continuous shots of him looking aghast and agape at the drop of a hat.

Still, there's no denying that there's nothing quite like *Phantom Of The Paradise*, and while it may not have developed the same cult following as the likes of *Rocky Horror* it's still a fantastically eccentric film that you really have to see.

Interestingly, as a side-note, the film did inspire two young boys who, after becoming friends when they were thirteen, ended up seeing the film more than twenty times in the cinema.

Enamoured with the Phantom's costume of a leather jacket and helmet, they adopted a similar outfit for their electro house music performances. You might have heard of them: a little-known French duo called Daft Punk.

Four out of five

How to see it

Phantom Of The Paradise was recently released on Blu-ray in the UK by the ever-reliable Arrow Video, complete with nearly three hours of interesting extras including an hour-long interview in which Paul Williams is questioned by fan of the film Guillermo Del Toro. There's currently no DVD version in the UK. As for America, it's only available on DVD, courtesy of 20th Century Fox.

Bits and pieces

- If you're a fan of *Phantom Of The Paradise* you may feel at home living in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. The film was a massive flop when it was first released theatrically but, bizarrely, Winnipeg was the only place in North America where it was a success, staying on cinema screens for months after others ditched it.
- The film features a band that keeps reinventing itself over the course of the story. At the start of the movie they're doo-wop band The Juicy Fruits but later on they switch to surf music and become the Beach Bums. After Swan attempts to murder them, they then change again, this time to glam/Goth band The Undeads.

Please Don't Eat My Mother (1973)

Director: Carl Monson

Starring: Buck Kartalian, Lynn Lundgren, a load of other people shagging

HENRY – "Well, that's murder or something!"

EVE – "Never heard of a plant getting arrested, have you?"

Henry Fudd (which is an even more appropriate name in Scotland) is a weird bastard. He spends his lunch break spying on couples having sex, then after work he goes back home, where he lives with his possessive mother, and locks himself in his room, the walls of which are covered with pages of porno magazines. Oh, and he has a plant called Eve that eats people.

Please Don't Eat My Mother is essentially a low-budget rip-off of *Little Shop Of Horrors*, only (as it's produced by 'Sexploitation King' Harry Novak) with more sex scenes and less quality. Eve starts off as a tiny sapling that Henry feeds normal plant food, but before too long she's grown dramatically and adopted a sexy woman's voice. The plant asks Henry to bring him increasingly larger food, starting with flies and upgrading to frogs, dogs and eventually people, including – you guessed it – Henry's mother.

It's a story that might have been more interesting had it been handled better (of course, it already had), but *Please Don't Eat My Mother* is a bucket of pish. Buck Kartalian is a bizarre actor to watch: it's clear the film is supposed to be a cheesy comedy but he makes some truly odd facial expressions, constantly chewing the scenery (literally, at times).

The 'special effects' (and I mean special in a different way than usual) are the sort of thing you'd expect to see in a school play. The plant looks like a ridiculous papier-mâché creation and its movement is so limited (its mouth moves and that's it) that it always eats its victims off-camera (complete with over-the-top slurping sound effects and unconvincing whimpers from the victim).

Distractingly, it also seems to think it's a porno too. There are constantly people shagging in this film for seemingly no reason, and it goes surprisingly far too (you see a half-hearted hand-job at one point). It contributes nothing to the plot whatsoever, meaning we have to keep seeing shots of Henry watching them every ten seconds, gurning and grinning like a five-year old watching *Iron Man*.

Ultimately, this is the worst thing about *Please Don't Eat My Mother*. It tries to be a number of different types of movie and essentially fails on all counts. When it's trying to be a comedy it suffers by not actually being very funny. When it's trying to be a horror film it suffers because it's not scary in the slightest. And when it's trying to be a porno it doesn't actually show the stuff you'd expect to see in a porno, and it keeps cutting to an imbecile

acting like a pervert so anyone looking for that sort of thing will be disappointed too (I'd imagine).

This is sadly another case of a low-budget film that doesn't live up to its brilliant title. Whatever you do, don't pay money to see it, because unlike its plant monster and some of the sans-clothes 'actresses' who star in it, you'll find it hard to swallow.

One and a half out of five

How to see it

Please Don't Eat My Mother is only available in the UK as part of The Harry Novak Collection Vol 3 along with *The Pigkeeper's Daughter* and *The Sinful Dwarf* (that guy knew how to name a film). In the US it's on DVD courtesy of Something Weird Video, who have packed the disc with trailers and other short films as they usually do.

Bits and pieces

- The similarities to *Little Shop Of Horrors* are no accident: this was fully intended to be a softcore take on Roger Corman's cult classic.
- Buck Kartalian, who plays Harry Novak, joined the film fresh from a small role in *Conquest Of The Planet Of The Apes*, in which he played a gorilla.

The Prophecy (1995)

Director: Gregory Widen

Starring: Christopher Walken, Elias Koteas, Virginia Madsen, Eric Stoltz, Viggo Mortensen, Moriah Snyder

Also known as: God's Army

"I'm an angel. I kill firstborns while their mamas watch. I turn cities into salt. I even – when I feel like it – rip the souls from little girls. And from now until kingdom come, the only thing you can count on in your existence is never understanding why."

Angels, eh? They're a bloody nuisance. They're not happy with being all immortal and that, they want control of Heaven too. That's why there's a ruddy big war up in the clouds, and that's why some angels have come to Earth to try to find something that will gain them an advantage in their holy war.

As luck would have it, they're both after the same thing: the soul of a dead colonel who was, by all accounts, a bit of a hard man and a complete prick, as most men who peel the faces off Chinese soldiers tend to be. The angels believe that with this soul, they can finally win the war in Heaven.

Good angel Simon finds the soul first, and hides it by placing it inside a little girl called Mary. Meanwhile, fallen angel Gabriel (Walken) is looking for it too and is perfectly willing to rip Mary apart to get it. It's up to a police detective (Koteas) and Mary's teacher (Madsen) to make sure that doesn't happen. No wonder teachers strike for better wages.

Christopher Walken is by far the best thing about *The Prophecy*, and probably the main reason the film spawned four sequels (two of which Walken returned for). As Gabriel he's genuinely creepy and, in true Walken style, you can never really tell what he's thinking. Is he genuinely angry with the humans he encounters (the "monkeys", as he calls them), or is he just toying with them? It's difficult to tell, and this makes his performance so unsettling.

I wish I could say the same about the rest of the cast, but for the most part it's Dull City all round. Elias Koteas puts in a reasonable shift as the police detective struggling with his own lack of faith and his religious past, but you never really feel for him.

Meanwhile, Virginia Madsen puts in more or less the same effort as she did in *Candyman*, which is to say not that much. You find yourself thinking "she's a bit like Gillian Anderson", then wishing she was Gillian Anderson, then remembering that Gillian Anderson was pretty wooden too, then ultimately deciding that it would still probably have been worth having her instead just because she's Gillian Anderson.

And don't even get me started with the introduction of the Native American healers later in the movie. They're called on to try and get the soul out of little Mary, but it genuinely seems

like the filmmakers just went to a central reservation, found some Native Americans and paid them a few thousand bucks to just sit there and not react to anything. Whether it's souls coming out of children, bodies bursting into flames or cars driving through the side of their homes, they just sit in the background not bothering in the slightest.

Luckily, acting aside *The Prophecy* isn't too bad. While its plot is a pretty serious one it places its tongue in its cheek from time to time, with funny dialogue keeping things entertaining (when Madsen tells Walken to go to Hell, he snarkily replies "Heaven darling, Heaven. At least get the zipcode right"). Then during the final act, the film improves with the last-minute addition of Viggo Mortensen who turns up as Lucifer to fuck about with things.

I wouldn't be in a rush to watch *The Prophecy* if I were you unless you're a huge fan of Christopher Walken, wars in Heaven or catatonic Native Americans. Walken does save it from being a complete borefest but even the inimitable delights of his stop-start dialect can't turn it into an essential film.

Two out of five

How to see it

The Prophecy is only available in DVD in the UK, either as a standalone release or as part of The Prophecy Collection box set, which also includes the second and third films. In the US it's on DVD and Blu-ray, either on its own or as part of the Prophecy Complete Collection box set featuring all five films in the series.

Bits and pieces

- There were a total of five films (to date) in the *Prophecy* series. If you want to collect them all you're looking for *The Prophecy*, *The Prophecy II*, *The Prophecy 3: The Ascent*, *The Prophecy: Uprising* and *The Prophecy: Forsaken*.
- Although he doesn't star in too many horror films, Christopher Walken has still dabbled in the genre from time to time. He starred in Stephen King's *The Dead Zone* and was also the Headless Horseman in *Sleepy Hollow*.

Psycho II (1983)

Director: Richard Franklin

Starring: Anthony Perkins, Meg Tilly, Vera Miles

"I don't kill people anymore."

NOTE: Spoilers for the original *Psycho* ahead: don't read this if you don't know (or don't want to know) who the killer is in the original film.

When it comes to sequels created long after their predecessors, it'd take some doing to beat *Psycho II*. Released a massive 23 years after the original *Psycho*, the only thing even more amazing than this hefty gap is that despite the number of years that have passed the sequel still sees the return of Anthony Perkins in the lead role of Norman Bates.

Having spent more than two decades in a psychiatric hospital after the incidents of the first film, Norman is released on good behaviour and free to go back home. It doesn't say much for the American justice system that he's allowed to return to the house and motel where he committed two murders and start living there again, but there you have it.

In an attempt to integrate him back into society and get him living a normal life again, Norman's doctor gets him a job at a local diner. There he meets Mary (Meg 'Jennifer's Sister' Tilly), a 20-something girl who's having boyfriend troubles. Norman offers her a free room at his motel and they become friends. The end.

Except it isn't the end, because that would be the most boring film since *Romeo & Juliet II: They're Still Dead*. You see, Norman may have been released on good behaviour, but that doesn't mean he isn't still nuttier than squirrel shit. And this is a squirrel who eats Snickers bars between his predominantly nut-based meals.

Norman once again starts imagining his mother is alive in the house. 'Mother' doesn't approve of her son hanging around with a young woman and seemingly wants Norman to kill Mary. But is he really going mad again, or is someone messing around in the background in an attempt to make Norman lose his mind once more?

It should come as no surprise to anyone who's seen the original film that Anthony Perkins is once again the best thing about *Psycho II*. Although Hitchcock's sensational directorial style is sorely missed – making the film feel more like a standard '80s horror flick rather than something truly special – Perkins is still a treat to watch.

He's so difficult to read and yet so clearly disturbed that it's nearly impossible to tell if he truly is capable of killing again, or whether he's just a tormented soul trying to make amends but still plagued by the events of 1960.

Psycho II emulates its predecessor in one respect, in that it introduces a fairly big twist long before the film's over. Whereas the first film killed off its supposed lead actress Janet Leigh 45 minutes in, shocking audiences worldwide, the second sheds a disturbing light on Mary and reveals that there's more to her (and her own mother) than meets the eye.

You see (spoilers for the rest of this paragraph!), it turns out Mary's mother is the sister of Janet Leigh's character (played by Vera Miles, who also returns from the 1960 original), and she's the one pretending to be Norman's mum to try to make him go nuts. Mary's in on it too, but after befriending Norman she begins to feel sorry for him and becomes convinced he's innocent. Thus begins a battle between Mary and her mum, as the former tries to stop the latter from turning Norman cuckoo again.

Some may say this twist comes too early, but it does throw an interesting spanner into the works as otherwise the easy conclusion to come to would be that Norman has indeed lost it. This way a very real element of doubt is introduced.

Psycho II may not have been anywhere near as successful as its iconic predecessor, but that doesn't mean it's a dodgy sequel that should be ignored. It's an interesting '80s take on a '60s classic, and one that's worth seeing if you're even a little curious to know what happened to Norman Bates after the first film.

The daft ending aside (where Norman's family tree is unnecessarily shaken, the events of the first film are trivialised a tad and it all gets a bit silly), it's also a unique chance to see how an actor who isn't Sylvester Stallone can evolve a much-loved character more than two decades after its last appearance.

Three out of five

How to see it

At the time of writing, the only way to get an in-print version *Psycho II* in the UK is by buying the Psycho Collection DVD box set, which contains all four Psycho movies. In America, there are a few options, including a Collector's Edition Blu-ray version, a standard DVD version and a DVD box set featuring *Psycho II*, *III* and *IV*.

Bits and pieces

- Alfred Hitchcock was known for making cameo appearances in many of his films, so to pay tribute to the legendary director *Psycho II* also features a 'cameo' of sorts. When Norman opens the door to his mother's bedroom for the first time, a shadow of Hitchcock's famous 'profile' silhouette can be seen on the wall.

- A further four *Psycho* films were made after this. *Psycho III* was a continuation of the *Psycho II* storyline whereas *Psycho IV: The Beginning* was a prequel showing Norman's childhood. Then there was an NBC movie in the '80s called *Bates Motel* - in which Norman's former asylum roommate inherits the motel - and the 1998 remake by Gus Van Sant, which... well, let's not talk about that because it makes me sad.

Religulous (2008)

Director: Larry Charles

Starring: Bill Maher

“Of course [you don’t believe in Santa Claus], that’s ridiculous, it’s one man flying all over the world, dropping presents out of chimneys, that’s ridiculous. But one man hearing everybody murmur to him at the same time... that I get.”

Bill Maher is no stranger to controversy, but in *Religulous* he tries to take it to the next level by discussing, criticising and mocking every religion he can think of, usually to the faces of those deeply involved with said religions.

For the record, I’m a part-time Catholic. I was raised Catholic, went to a Catholic school, used to go to chapel on a weekly basis and consider myself Catholic. That said, I’m not the greatest Catholic in the world. I don’t go to chapel anymore and I pick and choose which of the Bible’s rules I live my life by because society has changed a lot since then: if slavery was okay 100 years ago and it isn’t now, what’s to say the stuff we were being taught 2000 years ago is still valid?

So while I still consider myself a Catholic, I’m by no means as ardent a follower of Christ as some others are: I generally live my life by some of its teachings (all the 'be good to each other' stuff, basically) and that’s that. I’m perfectly cool with those who are more devout Catholics than me though, or those who are Jewish, Muslim, Mormon or what have you. Bill Maher isn’t.

Religulous sees Maher travelling around the world, meeting with various high-ranking religious types and generally criticising their faith, asking them awkward questions and butting in every time they try to answer so he can make a wry comment to make them feel awkward. It’s the documentary equivalent of going to your friend’s house for dinner and telling their whole family their living room smells like dead people.

I’m all for a debate about religion and the famously non-believing Maher does raise a lot of good questions and discussion points, but he undermines this by using unfair techniques to help enforce his own point. As well as his aforementioned continuous interruptions while his interviewees try to answer his questions he’s also shown making fun of them in his car after the interview is over, and he often deliberately interviews the most extreme divisions of each religion in order to make them look as bad as possible. For example, he won’t just interview an evangelist, he’ll interview a seemingly corrupt one known for asking his parishioners for large donations.

I generally like Bill Maher, or at least what I’ve seen of him – as he’s an American commentator he doesn’t get much coverage here in the UK – but while *Religulous* admittedly never promises to be an objective discussion on religion the fact it’s so one-sided is ultimately a bit disappointing. He’s since admitted he fooled his interviewees into taking

part in the film by telling them it was called *A Spiritual Journey* and was going to be pro-religion.

It's just so frustrating to watch at times. The only time Maher meets his match – an anti-Zionist Rabbi who continues to give long answers and doesn't let Maher interrupt, saying "please let me finish" every time he tries to – Maher himself storms out of the interview. And when he starts to approach the subject of the Muslim faith, the apparently fearless Maher suddenly starts pussy-footing around it and is far less critical.

Religulous is a film made for atheists, and it doesn't pretend to be otherwise. I personally have no problem with atheism, but what I don't like is atheists who aren't simply happy to not have a faith, but take time to criticise everyone else's faith because they're "wrong".

Is *Religulous* funny? Yes, it is. Is it worth watching? Yes, if only because it encourages a lot of thought and Maher does make some genuinely interesting points at times. But is it a fair and respectful documentary about modern faith? Not in the slightest.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

Religulous is available on DVD only in the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- While I'm on a rant against notable figures mocking religion, fuck Ricky Gervais too. While I love his work and was as big a fan of *The Office* and *Extras* as you could ever hope to find, I strongly object to him using his fame to mock Christians on Twitter. Everyone's entitled to their own religious beliefs (or, indeed, to have none) but I hate people who condescend those whose beliefs happen to be different. He acts like a 17-year-old who's just discovered what atheism is and suddenly thinks he's enlightened.
- Well, that escalated quickly.

Resurrecting The Street Walker (2009)

Director: Ozgur Uyanik

Starring: James Powell, Tom Shaw, Lorna Beckett

"I'm trying to make myself indispensable."

The mockumentary has been done so many times now that it would take something pretty special to grab people's attention these days (case in point, *Troll Hunter*). *Resurrecting The Street Walker* manages this on an incredibly low budget and left me very impressed with the results, despite it ultimately not being the zombie prostitute film I thought the title was promising.

James is a budding filmmaker who's desperate to get into the industry. He becomes a runner at a small production company in London in the hope that his hard work will eventually get him noticed and eventually move him up the filmmaking ladder.

While sorting out the company's archives one day, James comes across some reels of *The Street Walker*, a (fake) 1980s video nasty that was ultimately never finished when the cast and crew went AWOL. Sensing an opportunity to make a name for himself, James convinces his boss to let him film the remaining scenes of *The Street Walker* and bring it out as "the film that was never released". Meanwhile, James's mate Marcus, himself a filmmaker, starts a documentary following James as he starts work on his project.

Eventually the pressure starts to get to James and he starts losing his grip a little. The early shots he films don't meet the approval of his boss, who assigns his irritating, bossy, snide assistant (who both despises and is despised by James) to oversee the rest of the production. A shoot in a basement goes wrong as something catches fire and the crew is trapped underground in darkness while they try to escape. A couple of weeks later, one of the actresses dies from an asthma attack. And on top of all this, James and Marcus start to get the feeling that the original *Street Walker* film may have actually been a snuff movie, which would explain the absence of the cast and crew.

Despite the low-budget nature of the film, *Resurrecting The Street Walker* does make for compelling viewing at times. The majority of the cast help the film's authenticity with believable performances (though a couple, like James's mum, are a bit unconvincing) and it's well-paced throughout, and the ending – so often a problem point with this genre, as *Troll Hunter* and *The Blair Witch Project* prove – is actually really effective and disturbing without being gory or gratuitous.

I was pleasantly surprised by *Resurrecting The Street Walker*. It clearly didn't cost a lot of money to make but that clearly didn't matter to its cast and crew, who delivered a fun and creepy little mockumentary-within-a-mockmentary that's well worth a look if you fancy something different.

Four out of five

How to see it

This little beauty is only available on DVD in the UK at the moment: it isn't on Blu-ray and it isn't out in the US.

Bits and pieces

- If you were hoping for something a little more literal from the title, I instead recommend you check out *Frankenhooker*, an '80s gem in which a lonely chap does indeed resurrect a number of street walkers to create a prostitute Frankenstein's monster.
- Sadly, neither director Ozgur Uyanik nor lead actor James Powell have been involved in any other feature films in the five years since this was released. I hope this changes, because both showed real promise in this.

The Ring (2002)

Director: Gore Verbinski

Starring: Naomi Watts, Martin Handerson, Brian Cox, David Dorfman, Daveigh Chase

"My wife was not supposed to have a child."

Legend has it there's a dodgy video tape doing the rounds, one with no markings on it and no cover. If you watch it you're presented with a strange series of images and eerie sounds, after which the phone will ring in your house and a child's voice will inform you that you have seven days to live. Sure enough, one week later, if you don't figure out the tape's secret and do what you're supposed to do, you'll die a grisly death. If you ask me, these anti-piracy campaigns are getting a little heavy-handed.

Of course I'm pulling your leg, you cheeky young tyke. I'm instead referring to the cursed tape in *The Ring*, the American remake of the cult Japanese favourite *Ringu*. When journalist Rachel's (Watts) niece watches the tape with her friends and all four die separately at exactly the same time, Rachel decides to investigate and see what's really going on. By watching the tape first to see if the same thing will happen to her, naturally.

Those who know me well will know I have a general dislike for remakes. The vast majority lack that certain spark their precursors had, changing what made them special and worth remaking in the first place in order to fit them into a more modern or regionally relevant setting. *The Ring* is one of those few examples that, while still not quite managing to live up to the original, doesn't do it a disservice either. In short, it's one of a very small number of remakes that I'd actually recommend to someone instead of turning my nose up like a chef would if someone had shat in their toaster.

The main difference between the two versions is in the second act. While the Japanese film has its female protagonist discovering the story of Sadako, a young girl shunned by society for her powers who ultimately uses them for evil purposes to wrong those who punished her, the remake instead tells the tale of Samara, a girl who was very much evil in the first place. Rachel's investigation takes her to a completely different location: a farm where Samara's father still lives, haunted by the memory of his daughter's deeds and his wife's suicide. It's all a bit miserable, really.

That's not to say it isn't handled well, mind you. Gore Verbinski's direction and Bojan Bazelli's cinematography are superb, with each shot bathed in moody blues and greens and more gloomy, rainy scenes than a Noah biopic. The soundtrack by Hans Zimmer (*Gladiator*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Lion King*) is haunting, with its simple nursery rhyme theme repeated throughout and creepily sung at times by Samara herself.

Where the remake falls apart a little however is in the way it feels the need to pander to its audience. In the original *Ringu*, many of the film's locations and scenes are foretold by the

imagery on the tape, and it's expected that the viewer (either while watching for the first time or during repeated viewings) will pick up on these images and feel unsettled by them.

The Ring, meanwhile, doesn't want to take the chance that its audience might not pick up on these scenes (even though they're far more obvious), so when Rachel sees a large ladder leaning against a wall we're then 'treated' to a flashback of the ladder being shown on the tape. Same goes with when she learns of Samara's mother's suicide and when she attracts the attention of a particularly jumpy horse on a ship. These are only a handful of examples in a film that constantly nudges us in the arm and says: "Hey, remember? Remember you saw that before? On the tape? Remember? It was on the tape. Do you remember it?"

The infamous twist ending is also ruined a little by needless CGI effects and a silly car chase scene cut in the middle to break the tension. Without giving too much away, the Japanese original's ending worked a lot better because once you started to realise what might be about to happen it was already happening and you didn't have time to prepare for it. By inserting a car chase scene halfway through, the remake gives the audience a chance to gather their thoughts, digest what they've seen so far and prepare for what they think is about to happen next.

While it's a respectful remake, then, *The Ring* doesn't quite manage to match the original film in terms of atmosphere, mood and subtlety. It certainly comes much closer to its predecessor's quality than other remakes do though, and as such if you're the sort who isn't keen on subtitles or confusing Japanese mythology then this is still a very good alternative.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

The Ring is available on DVD in the UK, where you can also get it in a two-pack with *The Ring* 2. No two-pack in the US but the presence of a Blu-ray version is more than sufficient consolation.

Bits and pieces

- At the time of directing *The Ring*, Gore Verbinski only had a couple of directing credits to his name: Lee Evans comedy *Mousehunt* and Brad Pitt film *The Mexican*. It all took off after *The Ring* though, when just one year later he took on directing duties for a small low-budget indie film called *Pirates Of The Caribbean: The Curse Of The Black Pearl*. You may have heard of it.
- As a big *Donnie Darko* fan, it was odd for me seeing Daveigh Chase (the girl who played Donnie's little sister) in the role of the evil Samara. When it gets to the bit where the viewer is watching surveillance tapes in which she's being interviewed by psychiatrists, I kept expecting her to resort to her *Donnie Darko* role and ask "what's a fuck-ass?".

The Rise And Fall Of A White Collar Hooligan (2012)

Director: Paul Tanter

Starring: Nick Nevern, Simon Phillips, Rita Ramnani

"Being a hooligan isn't a matter of life or death, it's much more complicated than that."

Don't be fooled by the title of this one, because *The Rise And Fall Of A White-Collar Hooligan* is as much about the ins and outs of football hooliganism as *The Simpsons* is about the inner workings of a nuclear power plant. Yes, you do see the odd spot of layabout soccer yobbery but in total it takes up around 45 seconds of screen time. In reality, it's actually a film about a large-scale credit card scam, though obviously that idea isn't as immediately appealing as football hooliganism so that's why it isn't called *The Rise And Fall Of An ATM Scammer*.

The film tells the story of Mike, a football thug who's down on his luck and doesn't have much money. His far-too-understanding girlfriend is trying her best to keep his spirits up but he realises it's only a matter of time before she gives up on him. Things look up when Mike meets Eddie, an old mate of his, during one of his hooligan outings. Eddie tells him about a possible dodgy deal that he's involved in, one that could make Mike rich if he fancies a piece of the action too.

It involves taking hundreds of cloned debit cards and withdrawing a few hundred pounds out of each cash machine with them. In time Mike, along with the other guys working together on the scheme, will make millions for a mysterious boss man, who in turn will pay them thousands nightly for helping out. And it's win-win because since the debit cards don't belong to anyone, only the banks are being screwed: and God knows they deserve it, eh?

Naturally, things don't go quite according to plan, and while at first Mike is rolling in money and able to live a lavish lifestyle of cocaine and hookers (all while his far too accommodating girlfriend looks on concerned), it all eventually goes tits-up, coming to a head when he's nabbed by the police in a foreign country.

While it's a fairly decent plot and it's apparently based on a true story, *The Rise And Fall Of A White-Collar Hooligan* is just packed with clichéd and uninspiring scenes. Even the poster tagline (which is paraphrased in the film, as seen in the quote above) has been churned out a million times before.

Even worse, it's impossible to feel any sort of empathy for a 'protagonist' who is, quite frankly, a complete prick. The fact that he's a football hooligan aside, he's a wanker to his girlfriend (making her buy him a season ticket for him even though he's skint) and later cheats on her with prostitutes while blowing all his money on drugs. And we're expected to be behind him?

I just felt empty watching this film. It isn't terrible but it's just a generic London crime film and has more or less nothing to do with football hooliganism despite its title. It's one of

those films that's so dull and by-the-numbers I'm certain I will have completely forgotten the entire plot by the end of the week. Don't bother.

One and a half out of five

How to see it

I wouldn't waste my time if I were you but if you've got a boner for misleading British crime films then knock yourself out: it's on standalone DVD and on Blu-ray in a two-film set with its similar rubbish sequel, *White Collar Hooligan 2: England Away*. UK only, mind, but I doubt too many Americans will lose sleep over that.

Bits and pieces

- Inexplicably, in only two years this has already spawned not one, but two sequels. Step forward and bow your head in shame, *White Collar Hooligan 2: England Away* and *White Collar Hooligan 3*.
- Lead actor Nick Nevern clearly has the hooligan bug, for some reason. Not only did he star in this and *White Collar Hooligan 2*, he went on to star in and direct spoof *The Hooligan Factory*. Yes, there's a spoof film about hooligan movies. What a world we live in.

Robocop (1987)

Director: Paul Verhoeven

Starring: Peter Weller, Nancy Allen, Kurtwood Smith, Miguel Ferrer, Dan O'Herlihy, Ronny Cox

REPORTER – "Robo! Excuse me Robo, any special message for all the kids watching at home?"

ROBOCOP – "Stay out of trouble."

What can be said about *Robocop* that hasn't already been said? Probably that it's a satirical medieval-themed romp about an enchanted candlestick. And that's probably because that isn't entirely accurate.

Still, I might as well throw my opinion into the endless ocean of praise it's received since its released back in 1987, just in case you've already heard 17,000 people say it's great and you're the sort of person who isn't convinced unless you've heard 17,001.

Robocop is set in a futuristic version of Detroit, where crime is high and the city is in tatters (top marks to screenwriters and probable soothsayers Edward Neumeier and Michael Miner for their spot-on prediction skills).

Hotshot cop Alex Murphy is transferred to the city to work for the DPD, the privately owned police force struggling to keep Detroit's crime under control.

Murphy's plan to help clean up the city goes noticeably breasts-up almost immediately when he heads out on an assignment and finds himself face-to-face with Clarence Boddicker, a crime boss who also happens to be a bit of a prick, having already killed 31 cops.

It's therefore no surprise when Boddicker and his gang, who are a dab hand at offing officers, proceed to gun down Murphy, reducing his body to numerous tiny pieces in a brutal firearms-based reprise of the Black Knight scene from *Monty Python And The Holy Grail*.

Left with little more than a head and torso, Murphy's all but dead, which is probably just as well because unless I'm mistaken, it's not possible to get employment as a real-life table football character.

There's still hope though. OCP, the corporation that runs the police department, is planning to use a massive sentry droid called ED-209 to ride Detroit of crime. Sadly, ED-209's initial boardroom demonstration fails spectacularly when it malfunctions and pumps endless bullets into an OCP bigwig in a gratuitous shower of blood.

This leaves room for another exec, Bob Morton, to step in and suggest OCP go with his own project: Robocop. The idea is to take cops who have been killed in the line of duty and put their head inside a robotic body.

That way you'd get a cop with the invulnerability of a machine, but the mind and smarts of a former pro cop. Now, If only there was some sort of police officer who had recently been reduced to no more than a mannequin at a wig shop...

Murphy's head is promptly plonked into its new metallic home, and Robocop is born. Well, built. Either way, it's a second chance for Murphy, but not before his memory is almost entirely erased. Mind the word 'almost' there, it's going to be important in a bit.

At first it seems making Robocop was a good idea. On just his first night on duty, he stops a newsagent from being robbed and prevents an attempted rape. Not too shabby.

The problem is, he's starting to get his memories back. He starts remembering how he used to be a person, how he used to have a family, and how he was gunned down by Boddicker and his men. What happens next? Well, that'd be telling and that.

It goes without saying for anyone who's seen it, but *Robocop* is a tremendous film. It's one of the few 80s action movies that appeals to a relatively wide range of audience sensibilities.

Of course, it ticks the major action film boxes. If you're looking for big explosions, how does a massive one at a gas station sound? If you're looking for gory gunfights, there's plenty of that. If it's one-liners you're after, you can't move for them here.

But crucially, it also speaks on a more intellectual level, with plenty of commentary on the likes of business practices, the privatisation of public services and the dumbing down of TV news (the hilariously lighthearted way background news reports deal with deadly serious world incidents is sadly even more relevant nearly 30 years later).

Peter Weller is also brilliant as Murphy / Robocop. Oddly, he's at his best once he's been robofied, as he manages to somehow deliver a deliberately wooden and monotone performance yet still show there's a glimmer of life and part of a human still hiding away in there.

If you haven't seen *Robocop* yet you're doing yourself a great disservice. If you're a teenager and it was released long before your time that's fine, I understand.

But I promise you it's as relevant today as it was back in 1987 and it's a damn sight better than the remake that, while still entertaining enough, was missing that certain something.

Yes friends, this is the droid you're looking for.

Sorry.

Four and a half out of five

How to see it

Robocop is currently available on both DVD and Blu-ray in the UK and US. You can also get it as part of the Robocop Trilogy, also on DVD and Blu-ray.

Bits and pieces

- Keep an eye out for the That Was A Bit Mental Volume 3 ebook, in which I review *Robocop 2* and *Robocop 3*. Spoilers: neither are as good as the original. And incidentally, though it goes without saying, nor is the 2013 remake.
- *Robocop* also spawned a bunch of iffy TV series. The second of these, *Robocop: Prime Directives*, consisted of four feature-length episodes which were subsequently released on DVD. Look out for *Robocop: Dark Justice*, *Robocop: Meltdown*, *Robocop: Resurrection* and *Robocop: Crash & Burn* if you're interested.

Robot Wars (1993)

Director: Albert Band

Starring: Don Michael Paul, Barbara Crampton, James Staley, Lisa Rinna, Danny Kamekona

DRAKE – "It's getting ugly out here chief, request surface troops on the double."

LT PLUNKETT – "Request denied. Stop acting like a weak sister."

As you may have guessed, this review isn't about the 1998 BBC TV show in which Craig Charles commentated while a bunch of pale recluses battled their own custom-made robots, before fidgeting nervously as the producers cruelly got a beautiful woman to try to get an excruciating interview out of them.

No, this is yet another low-budget offering by beloved B-movie studio Full Moon, this time pitting two massive mechanical monstrosities against each other while the filmmakers cruelly get a beautiful woman to try and solve a mystery in the process.

So you see, it's very different. Except for the big robots and the beautiful woman. And the cruelty.

The film's set in the year 2041, where most of the cities we knew and loved have been long destroyed and people live in the likes of 'New Chicago' instead while desert wasteland lies in between.

One company offers a tour service that cuts through this wasteland, allowing passengers to visit new areas. Oh, and the vehicle they use to do this isn't a bus or a train, but an enormous robot scorpion.

Shit's about to go down, though. You see, the company's head chief has arranged a deal with the 'Eastern Alliance': he'll give them their Mega Robot 2 model in exchange for funding to make and upgrade new robots.

What he doesn't know is that the Eastern Alliance representative, Chou-Sing, has devious intentions. When he gets to take out the Mega Robot 2 for a test drive he suddenly reveals his true colours, threatening to destroy everyone as only a large steel scorpion can.

If only there was a man who could stop the evil Chou-Sing, preferably one with rugged good looks and a level of self-confidence that would be downright infuriating were he a real person. Enter Drake, a walking cliché of a man and every bit the typical '80s action hero.

As you'd expect, Drake is something of a hotshot robot pilot, but his bad attitude and a disagreement with the chief saw him getting booted off the tour run. After Chou-Sing turns nasty though, a spot of humble pie munchery from the lieutenant brings Drake back, ready to blow up some stereotypical Asians.

Also accompanying Drake is journalist Leda, played by Barbara Crampton, who you may remember from *Re-Animator*. Unless you haven't seen it.

Leda thinks there's something dodgy going on in the nearby town of Crystal Vista (which looks suspiciously like LA), so she goes on a tour there and deliberately misses the return... um, journey (flight? Drive? It's a fucking scorpion) so she can hang around and investigate.

There's also a rather rotund chap called Stumpy, who Drake considers his wingman. He reminds me a lot of Kyle from *Tenacious D*, and that's about as deep as his character gets.

Of course, all this pesky storyline nonsense is mere foreplay leading up to the final climactic battle between the aforementioned robo-scorpion and Drake's own mech, the Mega Robot 1 (which was deactivated by the company and had been lying underground for years, presumably only so someone could activate it and dramatically punch through the ground above it in the future).

Considering its budget, the robot fights actually aren't too bad. A mix of puppetry and stop-motion animation, they're never quite believable but certainly never threaten to stray into laughable territory either. Indeed, the final blow is pretty effective.

It's also got a fairly brisk pace, no doubt due to its 71 minute runtime. Other than its needlessly long intro sequence during which it feels like nearly every crew member is given their own credit, there's very little pissing about and you're kept entertained throughout.

It's no *Pacific Rim*, not by any stretch of the imagination, but if you're looking for some cheap and cheesy mechanised scrapping then you could do far worse than *Robot Wars*, despite / because of the lack of Craig Charles (delete as applicable).

Three out of five

How to see it

Robot Wars was recently released on DVD in the UK by 88 Films. As well as a selection of upcoming 88 Films trailers, it also contains the original Full Moon Videozone feature on the making of *Robot Wars* that appeared on the VHS version of the film. It's only ten minutes long though, compared to the usual half-hour Videozones. Still, it's worth a watch regardless. You can also find it on DVD in the US, but I'd recommend you instead go for the double-bill DVD containing both *Robot Wars* and the similarly cheesy giant robot movie *Crash And Burn*.

Bits and pieces

- *Robot Wars* was directed by Albert Band, a legendary low-budget filmmaker. Band started his career in the early '50s and then helped his son, Charles Band, set up a production company called Empire Pictures. The studio ended up folding in the late '80s, at which point Band then formed Full Moon, the iconic B-movie horror studio responsible for the likes of the *Puppet Master* series.

- *Robot Wars* is a spritual successor to *Robot Jox*, a 1989 film directed by *Re-Animator* legend Stuart Gordon. It takes place in a post-WW3 world where war is outlawed and robots fight instead.

The Shrine (2010)

Director: Jon Knautz

Starring: Cindy Sampson, Aaron Ashmore, Meghan Heffern

"There is no retribution."

Top tip for any budding filmmakers out there: if you're going to set a film in a foreign location, make sure you read up on it first. Otherwise you'll end up like *The Shrine*, a film set in the fictional Polish village of Alvania. That's Poland, as in the country that doesn't use the letter V in its language. That said, cultural inaccuracies aside, *The Shrine* is a half-decent horror that starts slow but ultimately ends well.

It tells the story of Carmen, a journalist who's investigating claims that some tourists are travelling to Europe and going missing, only for their bodies and luggage to turn up in separate European countries. Carmen uses one of the missing persons' journal to discover that they were last seen in Alvania, so she heads there with her photographer boyfriend and Sara, her intern.

When they get there they find an odd, dense fog in one section of forest, inside which sits an evil-looking statue. After entering the fog and seeing some weird shit, Carmen and Sara decide it's time to leave but before the trio can get out of Alvania they're captured by the locals, who it turns out don't take too kindly to people who stand in their creepy fog.

To say too much more about *The Shrine* would be spoiling it, so I won't. One thing I will say though is that it takes a pretty long time to get going. Once the three are captured things pick up a little and a couple of particularly nasty, gory scenes set the tone (tip: if you're squeamish about sharp things slicing your heels or poking your eyes, it might be best to look away).

As the film progresses it seems more and more likely that *The Shrine* is just going to be a rip-off of *Hostel*, what with its remote Eastern European location, its gory murders and its group of townsfolk who all seem to be in on some sort of plot to kill tourists. And then, with fifteen minutes to go, the film takes a clever twist that makes you question whether the locals were so evil after all, and whether they maybe just knew something we didn't.

It also gets a little silly at the end, with daft *Exorcist*-style shenanigans and certain people transforming into demonic mutant things. It's not that scary, mind you, unless you're scared of the vampire make-up in *Buffy* and *Angel*, since it's remarkably similar to that.

Despite all this, *The Shrine* is fairly standard stuff for the most part. It does try to make things interesting by having the dialogue almost completely in Polish with no subtitles for the last 45 minutes or so, though while this was no doubt intended to make the viewer feel just as perplexed as to what's going on as the protagonists do it does eventually get a little frustrating (and from what I gather the Polish dialogue isn't even that accurate anyway).

Still, it's by no means a terrible film and while I wouldn't necessarily demand you track it down you should still give it a go if you get the chance, if only because it's well shot, is suitably moody and has a decent score which, amazingly, was recently nominated for a Grammy for some reason.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

The Shrine is available on DVD and Blu-ray in the UK thanks to the wonderful people at Arrow Video. Unfortunately, despite being an Arrow title, it doesn't have a single extra feature. Same deal in the US, although it's instead distributed by the oddly named KimStim.

Bits and pieces

- Before he went on to direct *The Shrine*, Jon Knautz also wrote and directed the entertaining *Jack Brooks: Monster Slayer*, starring Robert 'Freddy Krueger' Englund.
- I wonder what it'd be like watching this film if you were (or could at least fluently speak) Polish. Considering the second half of the film is filled with moments where the natives speak without subtitles - creating a sense of confusion and dread by their would-be victims - I wonder if the audience feels less tense if that feeling of fear is removed by their ability to understand what they're saying.

Slaughter High (1986)

Directors: George Dugdale, Mark Ezra, Peter Litten

Starring: Caroline Munro, Simon Scuddamore

"They say he still roams the nuthouse, ever hopeful of a chance to escape, so he can take his evil revenge out on us all."

After *Friday The 13th* made the cheap slasher movie popular, a slew of imitators were quickly churned out over the following years. One notable example was *Slaughter High*, which was originally called *April Fool's Day* but had a quick last-minute title change after it was noticed that Paramount had its own film called *April Fool's Day* set for release that year.

The moniker modification came so late, in fact, that the film's title card still says '*April Fool's Day*' with a hastily added '*AKA Slaughter High*' superimposed on the bottom! Turns out *Slaughter High* was a much better title anyway, because not only is it actually set in an abandoned high school, you can also do some tinkering with your video box and change the title to the far more appropriate *Laughter High* fairly easily.

Slaughter High begins with a flashback in which the implausibly nerdy Marty (Simon Scuddamore) is coaxed into the girls' locker room by the school hottie, Carol (Caroline Munro), for some apparent sexy times. What he doesn't realise is that it's April Fool's Day (sorry, I mean *Slaughter High*) and Carol and her friends are actually playing an elaborate practical joke on him. After an extremely embarrassing incident involving a surprising degree of male nudity and inappropriate touching, Marty flees to the emotional security of his beloved chemistry lab to continue his school project. Unfortunately, there he becomes the victim of another, harsher practical joke, one which sets the lab on fire and leaves Marty hideously scarred for life.

Fast-forward five years and we catch up with Carol and the rest of the bully kids, now older, wiser and doing their own thing (though they all still look exactly the same: at the age of 37 when this was filmed, Caroline Munro wasn't exactly a convincing high school student to begin with). They've all received an invitation to a school reunion and, eager to meet up with their friends again, they all head off to the school.

When they get there they find the school all locked up and fenced in, seemingly abandoned. They manage to find their way in there anyway and eventually find a room decorated with 'welcome back' messages and food so, happy that there seems to be a party after all, they stick around. And that's when they start getting killed off one by one. Could it be Marty, seeking revenge after all these years? Well, no shit.

Curiously, although *Slaughter High* was actually filmed in the UK with British actors – Caroline Munro was well-known for her roles in various Hammer horror films, for example – it masquerades as an American film, with all the actors putting on their best American accents. Perhaps they thought a slasher film set in the UK wouldn't have worked, so

everyone tries their best to convince the viewer the film's set and made in America, even if the occasional shots of English countryside do make that difficult to believe.

Shallow as it sounds, given its target audience a film like *Slaughter High* lives or dies on two things: the quality of the kills and the amount of nudity on show. While the former is of a half-decent standard, anyone watching this film in hope of seeing decent helpings of the latter (you perverts) will be disappointed and perhaps a little disturbed, because both instances of nudity end in horrible disfigurement. Ever taken a bath in acid? *Slaughter High* shows why you shouldn't. It doesn't explain why you'd ever want to take a bath in an abandoned school in the first place, mind you.

The thing that will stick in your mind long after you've seen *Slaughter High* however – other than its bizarre, over-the-top ending, that is – is the soundtrack, created by the king of hilariously bad scores, Harry Manfredini. He's the man responsible for the music in most of the early *Friday The 13th* films, and if you've ever enjoyed the cheese-fest that is the *Friday The 13th Part 3* disco theme then you'll be happy to hear that the *Slaughter High* score is even worse yet still somehow remains frustratingly catchy. You'll find yourself singing it in your head then immediately getting angry with yourself for accepting such a shite piece of music into your mind.

And when he's not filling your brain with pishy music, Manfredini outright steals his own musical stings from *Friday The 13th's* scare scenes and reuses them here. Were it not for the fact that the killer's a nerd wearing a jester mask instead of a mongoloid wearing a hockey mask, you'd be forgiven for thinking it was another *Friday The 13th* film.

Slaughter High is a fun example of mid-80s slasher cheese. It sticks to all the typical horror rules, taking them to extreme levels at times (we know if you get naked you die in these films, but does it have to happen before they get their kit on?) and the acting's ever-so-slightly bad enough to keep you smiling throughout. It's no masterpiece but it passes the time well enough.

Three out of five

How to see it

Slaughter High got a fancy DVD special edition in the UK last year courtesy of Arrow Video. Americans have to make do with a slightly less spectacular DVD.

Bits and pieces

- One tragic little afternote that may affect your enjoyment of the film as you watch it: Simon Scuddamore, the British actor who played the lead role of Marty, committed suicide at the age of 28 shortly after the film was released. This does make it a little harder to watch and makes the odd ending seem even more sinister when you consider the mental demons the real actor was suffering at the time.
- If you're in the UK and fancy visiting the school from *Slaughter High*, you'll actually need to travel to two different locations. Its exterior is Holloway Sanatorium in Surrey, while the interior was filmed at St Marylebone Grammar School in Westminster.

Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers (1988)

Director: Michael A Simpson

Starring: Pamela Springsteen, Renee Estevez, Tony Higgins

Also known as: Nightmare Vacation II (UK VHS)

ANGELA – "I did my time. Two years of therapy, electroshock, was on every pill you ever heard of, plus an operation. I'm completely cured. If I wasn't they wouldn't have let me out. How do you know so much about me?"

SEAN – "My dad's a cop. He helped arrest you. You should have heard him the day you got out."

ANGELA – "That's too bad. Wait until he hears what's happened to you."

Warning: The following review spoils the identity of the killer in the original *Sleepaway Camp*. However, it does not spoil its big twist ending, so if you don't mind knowing who the killer was you can feel free to read on, safe in the knowledge you're still in for a shock when you watch the original. Which you really should, you know.

Sleepaway Camp caused something of a dilemma. When you end a film in such a shocking, outrageous manner, how exactly can you follow that up? *Sleepaway Camp II* decided the answer was to give the original's killer a completely different personality.

Years after butchering a load of kids in Camp Arawak all those years ago, Angela Baker has gone through extensive electro-shock therapy and psychiatric treatment. She decides the best thing to do is get a job as a counsellor at a new summer camp called Camp Rolling Hills, seeing as everything went so well the last time.

As you'd expect, Angela still hasn't got all the teen-slaughtering out of her system, and having been subject to countless mind-altering treatments over the years she's gone a little nuts.

In her eyes, all teens who commit sins – be it sex, drugs or just a general lousy attitude – are to be killed as punishment. Preferably in the most imaginatively gruesome way possible.

Since *Sleepaway Camp II* apparently takes place a number of years after the original, Angela is no longer played by Felissa Rose, who was 14 while filming the first film and, at 19, would have been a tad young to play a counsellor in the second. If only there was some sort of famous rock star's sister who wanted to get into acting...

Step forward 26-year-old Pamela 'Bruce's Sister' Springsteen, looking like the impossible same-sex love child of The Boss himself and Dave Grohl. Springsteen takes on the role of

Angela with gusto, and it's clear she has a brilliant time playing a nutcase as she inevitably decides to slay a bunch of teenagers.

It's said a villain is less effective without a worthy adversary, and Angela has one in the shape of another celebrity sibling, Renee Estevez.

The sister of Emilio and Carlos 'Charlie Sheen' Estevez, Renee may not deliver the same sort of energetic, intense performance her brothers are known for – quite the opposite, in fact – but her timid nature does bring some charm to proceedings and you do want to see her survive Angela's killing spree.

It's quite a spree, too. With double the original film's body count (eighteen compared to nine) *Sleepaway Camp II* should keep slasher fans satisfied with an average of one death every four minutes.

The various slayings are relatively inventive too, though even the more original offerings on offer – a tongue being removed, an outhouse drowning, battery acid thrown in someone's face – don't quite match up to the first movie's more unique killings (the bee attack, scalding and that 'curling tong in the unmentionables' incident spring to mind).

One area in which the sequel does outdo its predecessor, though, is the development of Angela's character. While the quiet, painfully shy girl in the original film didn't really offer much scope for development, Angela is by far a more interesting character this time around.

In a classic example of the 'misguided morality' trope, most of Angela's kills come with a lecture in which she explains to her victim where they went wrong in life and why they deserve what's about to happen. In her mind, by slaughtering these rude and badly behaved teens she's absolutely doing the right thing.

Indeed, when the pure and kind Molly (Estevez) eventually becomes one of the few surviving teens, Angela is reluctant to kill her, instead merely tying her up.

It's only when Molly tries to escape and stabs Angela in the hand in the process that Angela decides to fight back. "If it's any consolation," she tells Molly when it appears she's fallen to her death, "you almost made it".

At its core *Sleepaway Camp II* is still just a daft '80s slasher with a short running time (a whisker under 80 minutes), a variety of deaths and plenty of horny teen-pleasing nudity.

But in *Angela* it also offers an interesting villain, one who believes she's the hero and who, at times, may actually make you feel sorry for her even as she racks up a kill count that goes well into double figures.

Of the countless *Friday The 13th* clones released in the 1980s, this has more going for it than most. It has a very different, more jokey vibe to its more disturbing predecessor, but while watching the first film is in no way essential in enjoying this sequel I'd still highly recommend doing that first.

Three out of five

How to see it

Sleepaway Camp II is available on standalone DVD from Anchor Bay. However, I'd recommend you buy it as part of the *Sleepaway Camp* Trilogy DVD box set, which also includes the fantastic *Sleepaway Camp* and the equally silly *Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland* (reviewed over the page). There's no Blu-ray version at the moment but an HD print does exist since it's been shown in 720p on American television, so if you're a high-def nut it might be worth holding back to see if it gets the Blu-ray treatment one day.

Bits and pieces

- Fun fact: I actually owned a light blue Camp Rolling Hills shirt that belonged to one of the extras in the film. Like an idiot, I decided to wear it. Multiple times. Until it got worn out and I had to chuck it. Sorry random *Sleepaway Camp II* extra, your shirt is gone forever.
- If you haven't read the *That Was A Bit Mental* Volume 1 ebook yet, you really should: it's got reviews of *Sleepaway Camp* and its recent 'canon' sequel, *Return To Sleepaway Camp*.

Sleepaway Camp III: Teenage Wasteland (1989)

Director: Michael A Simpson

Starring: Pamela Springsteen, Tracy Griffith, Michael J Pollard, Mark Oliver

Also known as: *Nightmare Vacation III* (UK VHS)

CINDY – "Why are you doing this to me?"

ANGELA – "Because you're a cheerleader, a fornicator, a drug taker, a nasty snotty bigot... and besides that, you're real nice."

Here's some advice. If you're ever at a pub quiz and one of the questions is "what do *Sleepaway Camp* and *Back To The Future* have in common?", your response should be two sentences.

The first: "That's a pretty fucking obscure film to be bringing up in a pub quiz, considering the public in general aren't familiar with the *Sleepaway Camp* series."

The second: "Nevertheless, the answer to your niche question is that both had their second and third movies shot back-to-back."

Yes, just as *Back To The Future Part 2* and *Part 3* were filmed in one go then released as separate films, shooting on *Sleepaway Camp III* started almost immediately after its predecessor *Sleepaway Camp II: Unhappy Campers* wrapped.

It should come as no surprise then that lead actress Pamela 'Bruce's Sister' Springsteen returns to play killer Angela Baker again in the third film, nor should it shock you that it's directed by the same chap and is, by and large, similar to the second movie.

This time the movie opens with Angela killing an underprivileged teenager and stealing her place at Camp New Horizons, a council-funded camp designed to bridge gaps between troublesome, poor teens and snotty rich kids.

As you'd expect, attempts to make gang members and hooligans interact with upper-class toffs don't work too well, with abuse inevitable. And, being the moral soul she is, Angela doesn't take too kindly to that sort of bad behaviour. Time to get killing then!

Despite the slight change in plot, *Sleepaway Camp III* still feels very much like an extension of the second film. Ample nudity and cheesy one-liners remain the order of the day, and Angela continues to lecture her victims on their behaviour while she's butchering them in increasingly original ways.

Not that you get to see much of them this time, mind. Whereas the second film more or less escaped any cuts, almost every death in *Sleepaway Camp III* was butchered by the MPAA in

America. Thankfully, these deaths are all reinstated on the DVD version by Anchor Bay, though sadly they're only available to watch as a bonus feature rather than integrated back into the film.

It's a shame, because there are some fairly inventive slaughterings in there. One victim is hit by a truck and stuffed into a trash compactor, another is run over by a lawnmower, while another is handcuffed then tied to a tree which then drives off, ripping their arms out of their sockets.

Then there's the infamous scene where a girl is hoisted up on a flagpole then dropped, landing on her head. All grim, but all censored.

It's clear a fun time was had coming up with the various deaths and executing them (pun very much intended) with the limited budget available, so it's disappointing that most of the 'money shots' were removed.

To some though, the dialogue may actually be more shocking than the deaths. There's a lot of casual racism in the script, uttered by both rich and poor characters.

One of the gang kids tells another, a hispanic, to "suck my dick, spic". Meanwhile, when one of the rich girls tells her friend she's attracted to one of the down-and-outs, she sneers and replies "ew, but he's Mexican". It may be realistic, and it may be trying to get the message across that racism is ugly no matter what your social status is, but it's still awkward to watch.

This aside, *Sleepaway Camp III* is entertaining enough, even though it's all but a carbon copy of the second film. Someone does something morally dubious that pisses off Angela, she kills them in a gruesome way with a snarky one-liner, repeat to fade until one person's left.

Inevitably, this means my advice is fairly dull. Watch *Sleepaway Camp II* first. If you enjoyed it and you want more of the same, then you know what to do. If it wasn't your mug of joe, stay away from the third film because there's nothing new here (other than the odd racist jibe) that will change your mind.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

See the 'how to see it' section for *Sleepaway Camp II* because it's exactly the same situation.

Bits and pieces

- A total of twelve scenes were trimmed by the MPAA in order to prevent the film from getting an X rating. The DVD from Anchor Bay has a special feature showing them all: they're all essentially gorier versions of the existing kills in the final cut.
- Since they were both filmed back to back, *Sleepaway Camp II* and *III* re-used a lot of the same shooting locations. Although they're meant to be completely different camps, the girl's cabin in each film was actually the same one, just laid out in two different ways.

Snakes On A Train (2006)

Director: Peter Mervis

Starring: AJ Castro, Julia Ruiz, Giovanni Bejarano, Al Galvez

JULIO – "I respect the old ways and the power of your spells but she needs to see a doctor. Someone who can take an x-ray or a blood test. It could save her life."

BRUJO – "She has snakes. There is no doctor who will see this."

This is another film from The Asylum, the shameless film 'studio' who quickly writes, casts and shoots a cash-in film every time a 'proper' popular film is released.

They then stick their shoddy alternative in video shops up and down the country, making their money off dopey sods who think it's either the actual big-budget film it's aping or some kind of official spin-off or sequel. And people like me, of course, who watch them because we know they're rip-offs and are likely to be tremendously bad. Safe to say, *Snakes On A Train* didn't disappoint.

I'm going to attempt to relay the plot to you, but forgive me if a few things are lost along the way because it's truly a bizarre story. Some guy and his girlfriend sneak their way onto a train and hide out in the cargo hold. His girlfriend is extremely ill, because a curse has been put on her, a curse that somehow led to a load of snakes hatching inside her stomach.

Once they get on the train her boyfriend starts the ritual to cure her but things go a bit tits-up and the snakes get loose on the train, meaning its cast of irritating passengers has to start working (mostly) together to sort the situation out.

For the most part *Snakes On A Train* is silly fun but the performances are generally weak. Some scenes also feel a little out of place, such as the disturbing scene in which a creepy older chap acting as a drug cop blackmails a young teenager into getting her baps out in return for not reporting her drug-smuggling. Considering the silly tone of the film throughout this scene sticks out like a sore thumb and really shouldn't have been in there.

Other moments are just glorious silliness. The bright red gore is ridiculous and plentiful, with plenty of hilarious snake-related deaths. You've also got to applaud The Asylum for breaking a horror taboo and not necessarily ensuring the safety of the only young child on the train.

By far the most memorable moment of *Snakes On A Train* however is the film's ending. To give anything away would be scandalous but the CGI here is fantastically bad and everything get so over the top that you'll just sit there pissing yourself.

I wouldn't necessarily recommend you run out there and buy *Snakes On A Train* as soon as you can but if you ever see it listed on TV you should at least give it a watch, safe in the

knowledge that despite the name's clear cash-in intentions this is actually an entertaining enough film.

Two and a half out of five

How to see it

Steady on. Still, if you're adamant, *Snakes On A Train* is only available on DVD in the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Here's an odd one. For six years lead actor AJ Castro lent his voice to the WWE series of video games. Whereas most of the WWE wrestlers recorded their real voices for the series, a handful weren't available to do so. As a result, Castro was the voice of none other than John Cena from *WWE Smackdown vs Raw 2007* all the way up to *WWE 12*.
- The end credits include the admittedly funny message: " No snakes were hurt during the production of this screenplay. Only a small child was, but it's cool."

Spirit Trap (2005)

Director: David Smith

Starring: Billie Piper, Luke Mably, Sam Troughton, Emma Catherwood, Alsou

JENNY – "It's a spirit clock. My mum had one."

ADELE – "So what does it do? Horoscopes or something?"

JENNY – "It's supposed to be a bridge between our world and the next. It's a load of crap, really."

True story: as Billie Piper was flying to Romania to film *Spirit Trap*, she received a call from her agent telling her she'd just landed the part of Rose Tyler, the assistant in BBC's reboot of *Doctor Who*.

Excited, Billie turned to her *Spirit Trap* co-star Sam Troughton to share her good news. "That's a coincidence," Sam replied. "Back in the '60s, my grandfather, Patrick Troughton, played the second Doctor."

Interesting stuff eh? Shame they didn't make a film out of that story instead, because *Spirit Trap* is a bucket of gash.

Four strangers each receive a phone call from their school's accommodation office telling them they can all move into a massive, creepy house in London. There they meet Tina, the house's resident who has a similar air of dodginess about her.

Conveniently, each student fits perfectly into the Generic Horror Movie Character Personality Chart™. Jenny (Piper) is the wholesome lead female with a hidden secret (she's psychic), while Nick (Troughton) is the nicey-nicey chap who becomes the inevitable love interest.

Then there's Tom and Adele, an unrealistically aggressive drug dealer and his overtly sex-mad girlfriend, both of whom are such a massive pain in the arse that you'll be praying for haemorrhoids by the end.

Finally there's the aforementioned Tina, the barely memorable 'mysterious' one who's seemingly only in there because she's played by Russian pop star Alsou whose dad is the 100th richest man in Russia (not a joke).

This wouldn't be a shit horror film without a tired cliché for a plot device, and in this case it's a haunted clock, one that can make ghosts appear. Good job it's broken then, eh?

Inevitably, it doesn't stay broken for long. The clock is fixed when the ever-helpful Nick finds a small diary trapped inside its mechanism and removes it (of course, he doesn't think to actually read the diary right away: that would spoil the plot too early).

Once the clock is up and running again, weird things start to happen. Anyone with a horror cliché bingo card is all but guaranteed to be shouting "house" at some point, as one by one the same tired tropes trot out.

One character sees what they think is a ghostly reflection in a mirror, but when they turn round it isn't there. Another wakes to find spooky footsteps on their floor.

A third has spooky dreams about walking through an abandoned college, while Billie Piper constantly clings to a special necklace which, predictably, lets her do weird shit. In this case, it's speaking to her dead mum.

And, of course, there's a ouija board scene – a couple, in fact – which ultimately leads to the revelation that the house is hiding a terrible secret and its past is coming back to haunt its residents (literally).

There's very little in *Spirit Trap* you won't have seen before, and seen much better at that. Piper aside, the acting is of high school drama class quality, and the occasional 'boo' scares are about as shocking as a knee-length skirt.

There is the odd glimmer of hope in there. Director 'David Smith' certainly has an eye for a good shot, and rumour has it he's gone on to direct bigger and better things, ditching his generic alias and going by his real name instead... whatever that may be. Indeed, the fact that IMDb lists this as his single credit is telling.

The last ten minutes are also relatively interesting, and even though the old 'this house has a dark secret' pish has been done umpteen times before, adding a racial element to things does at least make for a slightly different take on things.

In general though, there's really no point wasting your time with this, other than for the novelty of seeing Billie Piper in her first lead role in the brief period before *Doctor Who* gave her a far bigger stage.

One and a half out of five

How to see it

I really wouldn't bother but if you have some sort of odd Billie Piper shrine in your basement then you can get it on DVD in the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Russian pop star Alsou, who stars in the film, also hosted the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest in Moscow. Starring in a shit film and presenting a weird music show: is there anything she can't do? (Spoilers: yes)

- Sam Troughton, the aforementioned grandson of second Doctor Patrick Troughton, was also in *Alien vs Predator*. Whoever the complete opposite of King Midas is, that's our Sam.

Suspiria (1997)

Director: Dario Argento

Starring: Jessica Harper, Stefania Casini, Flavio Bucci, Barbara Magnolfi, Miguale Bose

"We must get rid of that bitch of an American girl. Vanish! She must vanish! Make her disappear! Understand? Vanish, she must vanish. She must die! Die! Die! Helena, give me power. Sickness! Sickness! Away with her! Away with trouble. Death, death, death!"

I firmly believe that you can take any random single frame from *Suspiria*'s entire 98-minute runtime and hang it on your wall as a piece of art.

It's easily one of the most beautiful films I've ever seen, and one of my favourite horror films without a shadow of a doubt, because it's just so artistically and stylistically breathtaking.

The film follows Suzy Bannion (Jessica Harper, who had previously starred in *Phantom Of The Paradise*), an American dance student who's travelled to a prestigious ballet school in Germany.

The day after she arrives at the school, Suzy is informed by the staff that one of her fellow pupils was brutally murdered the previous night and the police are investigating the incident.

It slowly becomes clear that not all is as it seems at the school, not least of all because the dorm room is infested with a plague of maggots dripping from the ceiling.

Rumours persist among the students that the school is actually run by a coven of witches, partly because it was founded by a suspected witch called Helena Markos.

But could those seemingly daft rumours actually be true? Well, let's face it, it wouldn't be much of a horror film if it turned out they weren't.

I'm not going to focus too much on *Suspiria*'s plot because, like many of Dario Argento's films, it's mostly nonsensical. If you're looking for a brilliant story that will chill your bones with its startling twists and revelations, this isn't it.

Nor is it a brilliant acting showcase, with performances that range from average to downright comical, along with the token dubbed dialogue that accompanied most low-budget Italian cinema at the time.

Instead, you should watch *Suspiria* because it's visually unlike anything you've ever seen before and ever will. Argento is an artist, drowning his shots in gorgeous, surreal colours that are as bold and deep as anything you'll see in any film.

One of the reasons for this is the film's development process. Although it was shot on standard Eastmancolor Kodak film, Argento then tracked down one of the few remaining three-strip Technicolor printing machines and printed the film using the old Technicolor process from the 1930s and 1940s.

The result is a dreamlike fusion of 70s production values and the over-saturated, vibrant colours of earlier cinema before the industry got realistic colour 'right'.

It isn't just the colour, it's the set design too. The dance academy looks incredible and its various rooms all have their own stylised look with the walls in particular impressing. When was the last time you read a film review that complimented the walls? That's how perfect *Suspiria* looks.

It extends to the kills too. This being an Argento film, *Suspiria's* deaths are unflinchingly brutal yet beautiful to look at. Take the first major murder, which sounds grotesque on paper.

A young woman has her face pressed against a window until it smashes, is then dragged up to the roof of the building and is stabbed numerous times (including a graphic shot of the knife penetrating her heart, which then gushes with blood).

A rope is then tied around her neck and she's dropped through the roof's massive stained glass window, hanging her in the middle of the grand hall. As if that wasn't enough, the massive shards of glass falling from the ceiling also impale another student.

It sounds horrific (and it is) and yet – and I'm sorry if this makes me sound like a serial killer – Argento makes it look breathtaking. The stained glass window, the hall, the bright red blood that couldn't possibly be realistic... it's amazing that something so horrendous can be made to look so artistically stunning.

Then there's the equally unique soundtrack by Goblin, the Italian prog rock band that composed music for many of Argento's works. The clip above also demonstrates how effective Goblin's music is in creating a sense of unease, and it's probably the best of the band's numerous film scores.

I could go on all day about how incredible *Suspiria* is, but you should really track it down and watch it yourself, preferably in HD if you can. The plot is ridiculous, the acting is hokey, but I guarantee it's one of the most beautiful and visually spectacular films you will ever see in your life.

Five out of five

How to see it

Suspiria is currently available on DVD and Blu-ray in the UK courtesy of Cine Excess. Sadly, the Blu-ray is a bit pricey but it's really the best way to watch this stunning film. In the US it's only available on DVD.

Bits and pieces

- Originally Argento wanted to make it so all the students at the ballet school were 12 years old or younger. However, his dad Salvatore Argento, who was the film's producer, told him this was a terrible idea because a horror film in which 12-year-old girls were killed would almost definitely be banned. Argento changed the story so that the students were 20 instead, but kept their child-like dialogue.
- The 'actress' who plays Helena Markos isn't credited in the film. That's because she was a random hooker Argento picked up off the streets of Rome.

Super 8 (2011)

Director: JJ Abrams

Starring: Joel Courtney, Riley Griffiths, Elle Fanning, Kyle Chandler, Ryan Lee, Zach Mills, Gabriel Basso

"Stop talking about production value, the Air Force is going to kill us."

I've complained a few times on *That Was A Bit Mental* that they don't make films like *The Goonies* or *The Monster Squad* any more: films where children act realistically, talk over each other, swear from time to time and are in genuine danger throughout their adventure. *Super 8* is proof that, though rare, these films can still exist in modern cinema.

Set in 1979, *Super 8* tells the story of a group of 13-year-olds who meet up on occasion to shoot a low-budget zombie film using their Super 8 movie camera. While filming a scene near a railway line they manage to catch film of a train speeding past them, colliding with a truck on the line and causing the mother of all train crashes. Running over to the truck they find their biology teacher behind the wheel, who cryptically tells them that they and their families are all going to die if they tell anyone what happened. Little do they know that the train contained a huge alien life form: one who's now free, not too chuffed at the way it's been treated, and well up for a shitstorm.

Put bluntly, this film is superb. The first half-hour is charming as you instantly fall in love with all the kids in the group (not in that way you maniac). Their dialogue is believable and you completely buy into the idea that they're a bunch of close friends, in particular the main character Joe and his chunky chum Charles (the director of the kids' film). The introduction of Alice (the wonderful Elle Fanning) makes things even more entertaining as you see this group of young teenage boys swooning over her but still trying to act cool. It's all just so genuine.

Then the action begins, and for the most part it's sensational, particularly the train crash. It may only last around 60 seconds but it's an incredible piece of filmmaking (and the Blu-ray version knows it, offering a huge sub-menu on the disc filled with sketches, animatics, interviews and footage from the dailies of that single sequence). It's relentlessly energetic and is truly the highlight of the film, which sadly means nothing else in the following 80 minutes or so can top it.

Still, there's still plenty to love about *Super 8*. The subplot about the death of Joe's mum just a few months before the events of the film adds some much-needed emotion to proceedings, especially when it ties into his relationship with Alice and her father. While it does get a little much at times (the final scene in the whole film is schmaltz overload) it's worth remembering this is a family sci-fi movie – it's essentially a modern day ET – and as such these scenes are to be expected.

My only real concern is the alien itself, which is disappointing. Director JJ Abrams goes down the *Jaws* and *Alien* route by not showing much of it until near the end of the film, but when you finally see it you sort of understand why: it's a fairly underwhelming, generic creation and despite its size it never seems truly terrifying (even after it smashes a cop's face into a bloody pulp).

Rubbish alien design aside, *Super 8* is brilliant. It's got an '80s Spielberg vibe running through it (Spielberg was one of the producers) and it's got an affable cast of brilliant child actors who entertain in every single scene. See it.

Four out of five

How to see it

Super 8 is available on DVD and Blu-ray in the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Stick around after the credits roll in this one: you'll get to see the kids' completed zombie movie.
- It should come as no surprise that the enormous train crash scene in the film was mostly CG, but it's perhaps more surprising that it was all more or less improvised with no set storyboards ready when filming began.

Taken (2008)

Director: Pierre Morel

Starring: Liam Neeson, Leland Orser, Famke Janssen, Maggie Grace

"I don't know who you are. I don't know what you want. If you are looking for ransom, I can tell you I don't have money. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills, skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you. If you let my daughter go now, that'll be the end of it. I will not look for you, I will not pursue you. But if you don't, I will look for you, I will find you, and I will kill you."

Taken is one of those films that chooses to be completely ridiculous from start to finish, has absurd levels of action, packs plenty of unrealistic coincidences throughout its plot, leaves umpteen gaping plot holes in its wake, then flicks you a folded piece of paper and tells you that it contains information on the number of fucks it gives. Then, when it drives off on its flaming motorbike, you unfold the paper and look inside. It's blank.

Liam Neeson plays Bryan Mills, a retired CIA agent who's given up everything he had to move near his daughter Kim, who lives with his ex-partner (played by Famke Janssen). Since he cares for his daughter so much, he's overly protective of her and as such is concerned when she asks him if she can go on holiday with her friend. Mind you, it's understandable, as she's only 17 (even though she looks older... mainly because she's played by a 25-year-old).

It turns out his suspicions were spot on when, during a phone call to him, Kim is abducted from her French rental apartment by a bunch of Albanians who have dodgy plans for her. I won't get into the specifics but needless to say they're probably fortunate she's actually 25.

It's here where things start to get ever-so-slightly unrealistic, as Bryan sends the recording of the phone call to his CIA buddies and finds out the exact region the kidnappers come from. He then heads to Paris to find them, and despite the city having a population of over two million people he finds a lead almost instantly.

The rest of the film consists of Mr Neeson working through the speediest investigation in film history, effortlessly kicking lumps of shite out of countless bad guys and ne'er-do-wells along the way, racking up a higher body count than a mannequin factory in the process.

There's also a rubbish sub-plot with a wet blanket of a French detective (played by Leland Orser) who looks like a third-rate Kevin Spacey and keeps trying to catch Bryan, even though he knew him back in the day and knows what he's capable of. But that's really just been added to extend the running time a little: all this film is clearly about is Liam Neeson tearing shit up.

Taken is a mindless action movie, but it doesn't promise to be anything else. Sometimes all you want to do is switch your brain off and watch an Irishman plough his way through a

bunch of Albanians in France, and *Taken* scratches that oddly specific itch perfectly. The baddies are so nasty that every broken neck, shot chest and electrocuted pair of thighs (yes, really) is justified, so it's actually quite the feel-good romp. And naturally, it all ends well... at least, until *Taken 2*.

Four out of five

How to see it

Taken is available on both DVD and Blu-ray in the US, and DVD and Blu-ray in the UK too, which is nice. The UK also has a DVD double pack with *Taken* and *Taken 2*.

Bits and pieces

- Talk about really getting into your role: after starring in *Taken*, Famke Janssen decided she wanted to do her bit in the real-life fight against corruption. As a result she is now the Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Office against Drugs and Crime.
- You may think Liam Neeson's character is quite the hero, doing whatever he can to rescue his daughter. However, throughout the course of *Taken* he kills a total of 35 people. That's 35 people who probably had families. Speaking of which...

Taken 2 (2012)

Director: Olivier Megaton

Starring: Liam Neeson, Maggie Grace, Famke Janssen, Rade Serbedzija

BRYAN – "If I kill you, your other sons will come and seek revenge?"

MURAD – "They will."

BRYAN – "And I will kill them too."

When the hero in an action movie ploughs his way through countless baddies, butchering and slaughtering them in the name of our entertainment (as well as whatever cockamamie reason the plot's given him, of course), we never spare a thought for the families of the recently deceased.

After all, for every nameless terrorist, anonymous criminal and nondescript thug there's a mother, a father and maybe even a wife and children somewhere mourning the death of a man who may have been a bit of a prick in real life but was always good to them at least. We're usually never shown these devoted family members in films though, because it humanises the enemies and makes you feel sorry for them, when all you're supposed to be thinking is "YES, chuck that fanny over the cliff".

This is the thinking behind *Taken 2*, which takes place a few months after the events of the first film. Naturally, in order for me to describe the plot you're going to have to accept that there are a couple of very minor spoilers from the first film ahead (nothing that you couldn't reasonably predict yourself though).

After Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) killed a load of Albanians on the way to his kidnapped daughter in the first *Taken*, the families of the deceased receive the bodies and vow to get revenge on the man that, in their eyes, butchered a village's worth of young men. Through the traditional *Taken* plot methods (i.e. absurdly unlikely coincidences) they find Bryan on holiday in Turkey with his ex-wife (Famke Janssen) and daughter Kim (Maggie Grace).

Kidnapping the daughter wouldn't be very original – and after all, the last time someone tried that it resulted in a busload's worth of bodies – so this time the families of the previous villains decide to go straight to the source and kidnap Bryan instead. Oh, and his ex-wife too, seeing as she's in the area at the time.

It's an interesting decision because it flips the tables around: instead of playing the helpless kidnapped daughter, this time Kim is the reluctant heroine, forced to find and rescue her parents in a country where she doesn't speak the language and doesn't understand the customs (all while wearing a conveniently skimpy bikini, jean shorts and open shirt combo, of course).

Mind you, she seems to adapt well, and before long she's on the phone to her imprisoned dad, getting instructions on how to find him and wreck the bloody joint in the process. I lost count of how many grenades she throws and car crashes she causes while trying to find her old man, and before long my sympathies were split between Kim, her parents and the innocent people of Istanbul as their city is subject to countless explosions and road accidents.

Whereas the villains in the first film are undoubtedly pure evil and there's no trace of conscience as you whoop at Liam Neeson while he stabs, shoots and electrocutes the nasty buggers, *Taken 2*'s lead baddie (played well by Rade Serbedzija) does actually turn things around a little because you can at least understand his plight a little.

His son was a bad bastard, of that there can be no doubt, but as he puts it he was always kind and loving to his family, and as such in his eyes, his innocent child was taken away from him and he wants Neeson to pay for it. He's mistaken, of course, and his subsequent actions throughout the film are the perfect example of two wrongs not making a right, but you can at least understand his motivation for wanting to kill Neeson: he's not simply being a prick for no apparent reason.

Taken 2 has a different feel to its predecessor and while it's still a decent enough action film it's not quite as compelling or exciting as the first film (though the final confrontation ends nicely). That said, I still look forward to the inevitable third *Taken*, where no doubt the thing being taken this time will be Kim's driver's licence and travel Visa after the people of Istanbul complain to the US embassy that she was chucking grenades around and smashing up their cars.

Three out of five

How to see it

Brits can get *Taken 2* on DVD, Blu-ray, a snazzy Blu-ray Steelbook or as part of a DVD box set or Blu-ray boxset along with the first film. Phew. It's easier if you're American because it's DVD or Blu-ray only and that's your lot.

Bits and pieces

- Neeson's slightly less ruthless in *Taken 2*, 'only' killing 30 people compared to the 35 he offed in the first movie. Still, 65 murders is quite the rap sheet.
- At the time of writing *Taken 3* is indeed production and set for release in a few weeks. My prediction wasn't quite accurate, though: this time Neeson's out to protect his daughter from whoever's murdered his ex-wife. What an unlucky bastard.

Troll Hunter (2010)

Director: Andre Ovredal

Starring: Otto Jespersen, Glenn Tosterud, Johanna Morck, Tomas Larsen

"People always want natural explanations for things. But if you know what to look for, you'll see what's been caused by trolls."

The billboards currently advertising *Troll Hunter* claim it's "the best monster movie since *Jurassic Park*." This claim is, to put it as kindly as possible, a load of old arse. That's not to say it isn't an impressive film – it certainly is – but if you're going into it expecting a modern masterpiece then, rather fittingly, you've been trolled. Instead, if I'd been in charge of the ad campaign, I'd have gone with something a little more accurate: "A bit like *The Blair Witch Project*, only you actually see something."

Indeed, *Troll Hunter*'s handheld amateur footage looks just like an HD version of *Blair Witch* or *Cloverfield*, as it follows a trio of Norwegian college students as they film a documentary investigating a bunch of mysterious bear killings. Eventually they come across Hans, a mysterious chap who it soon emerges is a troll hunter. He agrees to let the filmmakers tag along on his hunt, as long as they follow his instructions. But are trolls real, or is he just a delusional old dick?

Well, thankfully, the trolls do eventually turn up and they're pretty bloody impressive. I'm not usually an ambassador of CGI in films but at times here it's very convincing (especially given the extra difficulties placed on the animators with the unsteady and often grainy camera), and when the final troll turns up it just kicks things up another notch.

The faux-documentary gimmick also works pretty well in *Troll Hunter*. Often this sort of film is ruined by the actors failing to give realistic performances, but here it's all very convincing: at times the actors will stumble over words and talk over each other's lines, and you'd swear the various interviewees encountered throughout the course of the film were just normal people taking part in a documentary.

It's not a perfect film, mind you. The pace is a little slow throughout the film's first hour, and there are some annoyingly unresolved plot points. One character is bitten by a troll fairly early on, and near the end the film appears to be building to a twist ending involving the result of that bite, but it ultimately never comes to anything. Indeed, the ending in general is deeply disappointing, as it's so abrupt and weakly handled they might as well have shown a message saying "we don't actually know how to end this so we'll just stop there".

Negative points aside, *Troll Hunter* is one of the better 'uncovered handheld footage' films out there, with the superb CGI effects really having a positive impact (check the trailer below for great examples of this). It's not perhaps as action-packed as the ads would have you believe, but it's a nifty little effort that does Norway proud.

Three out of five

How to see it

Troll Hunter is available on DVD and Blu-ray in the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- Don't be too surprised if you see a US remake of *Troll Hunter* sometime in the future. Twilight studio Summit Entertainment bought the rights to make an American version of the film before the Norwegian one was even released.
- Four of the actors in the film, including the titular troll hunter himself, are played by Norwegian comedians. For comparative purposes, imagine a UK version in which the troll hunter is Jimmy Carr. In fact, don't.

The Tunnel (2011)

Director: Carlo Ledesma

Starring: Bel Delia, Andy Rodoreda, Steve Davis, Luke Arnold

"We came down here to get a story, and now we've got an important one and you're running scared?"

Filmmaking can be an expensive business, even if you're making a low-budget 'found footage' effort in the style of *The Blair Witch Project*. Rather than wining and dining investors to get them to fund their movie, the Australian chaps behind *The Tunnel* decided to try something different with their '135k Project'.

They worked out that at 24 frames a second their 90-minute movie would contain around 135,000 individual frames, so after setting up a teaser trailer on their site they asked film fans to buy frames for \$1 each, meaning everyone who donated could say they "owned" a piece of the movie. Have a look at the film poster and you'll see that it's made of the names of some of the early contributors. It's a clever idea, and one that got them the funding they needed (I bought five frames myself, and while the film's out now there are still some left). It's a good job they got their funding, too, because *The Tunnel* is a brilliant little film.

Sydney's water supplies are running low so the government reveals plans to recover and recycle a shitload of water that's been lying in a network of abandoned train tunnels since the war. Suddenly though they decide to scrap the idea, raising the curiosity of Natasha, a TV journalist. The rumoured reason is that lots of homeless live in these tunnels and could create a problem, but Natasha isn't convinced.

After interviewing a recently-surfaced homeless man who goes mental when the tunnel is mentioned, Natasha decides there's more to this than meets the eye and gathers three more fellow journalists. The four of them head into the tunnels unauthorised to see if they can find out more, but they probably shouldn't have bothered because there's something in the tunnels, and it sure as shite isn't a bunch of old homeless chaps.

The Tunnel is essentially a documentary in which the survivors recap the events through talking head interviews, which appear every now and then to break up the *Blair Witch*-style shaky 'found' footage (even though it isn't technically 'found' this time, having been offered up by the survivors). Despite being fake these interviews are very convincing, thanks to the cast's natural delivery. This realism continues throughout the found footage too – the lead actor had been a real cameraman for 25 years and spent a day teaching the others in the group how to speak the jargon of TV journalism so everything would come across as believable – a success, in my opinion.

The tension is handled just right for the most part, with the footage alternating between a camera mounted with a light for exploration and dialogue scenes, and a night vision cam for

the tenser, creepier moments. Imagine if you watched *The Blair Witch Project* and something did actually appear a few times: that's the sort of thing you're dealing with here.

There are only two real negatives about *The Tunnel*, and unfortunately they're big ones. The first is that so much is left unexplained it can be a bit frustrating, because having invested an hour and a half into such a well-made, tense film it's not unreasonable to expect things to be explained somewhat.

At least *The Blair Witch Project* took the time to establish a Blair Witch legend at the start of the film so that when the weird shit started happening you were able to put together a somewhat logical conclusion in your mind as to what had happened. Here weird shit just happens and you're just left there thinking "what the fuck was that all about?". Maybe the planned sequel *The Tunnel: Dead End* will explain things a little better.

The other big let-down is the ending. The use of talking head sections throughout essentially gives away who survived, so with the outcome already known it's up to the film to make sure that the route to that outcome is an inventive one. As it is, it's a complete cop-out, with the heroes in grave danger and seemingly about to be killed one minute, and then the film just giving them up and having them escape fairly easily with no proper explanation as to how they managed it.

The Tunnel is 80 fantastic minutes of tension followed by a severe case of what's known in Glasgow as 'the arse collapsing', with an imagination-free final ten minutes bottling what could have been a spectacular conclusion. The build-up and tension created throughout are incredible, but the overall feel of the film is soured a little by a hugely disappointing ending. That aside, everything leading up to the end still leaves something of a lasting impression and as such it's still definitely one of the better 'found footage' films of recent times.

Three and a half out of five

How to see it

The Tunnel is DVD-only and is available in both the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- If you don't fancy buying *The Tunnel*, you can just torrent it. Hang on, put the pitchforks down, I'm being serious: the filmmakers have officially released a torrent file allowing you to download it for free.
- Rumblings on *The Tunnel*'s official Facebook page suggest a sequel is on the way. Hopefully it'll follow directly on from the end of the first film so that terrible ending can evolve into something worthwhile.

Urban Explorers (2011)

Director: Andy Fetscher

Starring: Nathalie Kelley, Nick Eversman, Klaus Stiglmeier, Max Riemelt

Also known as: The Depraved, Urbex: Urban Explorer

"Now, boy, let's make you a genuine Mujahideen bride!"

I know That Was A Bit Mental is a film review site rather than a travel blog but take my advice anyway: if you ever go to Berlin, don't pay a local €300 to take you on a tour of Germany's forgotten complex of underground bunkers. This might be hard to believe but it turns out it's actually not that safe.

Despite this, that's exactly what four young tourists decide to do in *Urban Explorers*. Together with their tour guide Kris, they begin a tour of the abandoned labyrinthine passageways and tunnels lying in decay underneath modern Berlin. As you'd expect, this being a horror a film and all, things don't go too well.

The odd thing about this film is it throws a lot of red herrings your way throughout. Be prepared to forget about a lot of things that occur in the first half of the film because, ultimately, they're never seen or heard of again.

Take the scene early on in which the group encounter a trio of nasty chaps with a vicious dog. After a tense encounter they leave, never to reappear. Same goes with the impressive story Kris tells the group about Hitler's obsession with UFOs, and his desire to build an army of super soldiers, ideas that are given a lengthy monologue as if to suggest that's what'll be turning up later, but never do. And then there's a pointless lesbian relationship that begins to form between two characters, shortly before they leave to get help after an 'incident' and don't return.

That's not to say *Urban Explorers* is a bad film, though. Thankfully, after this initial 40 minutes or so of random ideas, encounters and plot points, the proper conflict really take shape and things start to get interesting.

A word of warning: though it doesn't seem like it at first, *Urban Explorers* does eventually become a fairly gory film. It never quite manages to reach the notorious depths of *Hostel* or the like and the majority of the more gruesome actions happen off-camera but one scene in particular near the end, in which (without going into too much detail) a shirtless man has his 'other shirt' removed and pulled over his head in the goriest wedgie imaginable, will have anyone but the most bloodthirsty gorehound wincing.

Parts of it still fall into typical annoying horror clichés. When the eventual bad guy is revealed, he doesn't seem to ever die despite being attacked in ways that would surely kill

anyone. There's also a lot of annoying screaming which, while understandable given the circumstances, becomes intensely irritating over a fifteen-minute period.

That said, *Urban Explorers* is still a good deal better than many of the *Hostel* and *The Descent* clones out there. Don't be fooled by its struggle to find an identity early on (and while we're at it, don't be fooled by the prominent Nazi logo during the opening titles), because once it finally gets going it's a serviceable enough horror with a couple of original little ideas.

Three out of five

How to see it

Urban Explorers is available on DVD and Blu-ray in the UK. In America it's DVD-only and is available under its alternative title, *The Depraved*.

Bits and pieces

- I'd love to try urban exploration one day, maybe to see some of the abandoned London Underground tube stations that were closed many years ago. As long as it's safe and there aren't any dodgy bastards living in there as in *Urban Explorers*, I'd be well up for it.
- If you're also interested in the exploration of abandoned and unseen locations, check out the documentary *Urbex* on Vimeo. It's an interesting little film in which the filmmaker, having reached his lowest ebb in life, finds salvation and inspiration in America's decaying and forgotten past.

The Wasp Woman (1959)

Director: Roger Corman

Starring: Susan Cabot, Michael Mark, Anthony Eisley

"Something's happening to me. I can't control it."

If I had a penny for every '50s movie that copied the whole 'scientific progress goes boink' set-up of *The Fly*, I'd probably have around 20-25p to my name. What can I say, I'm realistic. Either way, *The Wasp Woman* is one such movie, and while its setting and plot begin differently to that of *The Fly*, things soon start to get very familiar.

After neglecting his job as a beekeeper by instead catching wasps and performing experiments on them in his office, the eccentric and elderly Eric Zinthrop is told to piss off and take his wanky little wasps with him (well, he's fired, but I like my wording better). As far as Zinthrop sees it, it's their loss, because he's close to a major breakthrough on a new anti-aging formula that uses a queen wasps' royal jelly instead of that of a queen bee.

Zinthrop pays an unannounced visit to Starlin, a cosmetic firm in New York, and asks for an audience with their owner Janice Starlin. He shows her what he's got: a serum that when injected into an animal doesn't just stop it from aging, but actually reverses the process and makes it look younger. Stunned, Janice gives him an immediate contract and promises to pay him anything he wants to develop and perfect the formula exclusively for her company.

Naturally, this being a horror film there's usually a 'but' in these situations, and here it's a pretty big 'but'. Since the formula isn't ready yet there are certain complications with it: namely, if a human uses it they look a lot younger at first but once it wears off they turn into a huge, murderous wasp monster. Better cancel your order for now, Boots.

Janice isn't aware of this and one night, impatient at Zinthrop's slow progress, she breaks into his lab and starts injecting the serum on a nightly basis. Everyone's stunned by her youthful looks but at night it wears off and she transforms, killing anyone who happens to get in her way. She needs Zinthrop's help but there's just one problem: he's been run over and is in hospital. Meanwhile, the serum is running low, meaning Janice will soon transform for good. She should've stuck to the Oil of Olay, in hindsight.

The Wasp Woman is, as Charles Dickens once (probably) put it, "daft as fuck". While the acting's of a fairly decent standard throughout the music is horrendous and the special effects are more or less non-existent. Don't be fooled by the terrifying beast on the movie poster, the wasp costume in the actual movie is just that: a stupid furry mask with two furry gloves. On some scenes, when we see the waspified Janice from behind, we can see where her wasp mask ends and her very human neck begins.

Since it's only around 75 minutes long, this is worth a watch if you come across it on TV for some reason. You probably shouldn't go out of your way to hunt it down though, unless

you're an executive with a beauty firm and you want to take notes on how not to do it. In fact, you could probably say that if you were to go out and pay full price to see this just for the hell of it you'd be getting stung. I wouldn't say that though. Only a dick would say that.

Two out of five

How to see it

The Wasp Woman is DVD-only and is available in the UK and US.

Bits and pieces

- *The Wasp Woman* was remade as a made-for-TV movie in 1995, with Jennifer Rubin from *A Nightmare On Elm Street Part 3* playing the role of Janice Starlin and Daniel J Travanti (Captain Furillo from *Hill Street Blues*) as Zinthrop. It followed the plot of the 1959 original to the letter.
- The film was originally about 20 minutes shorter and featured in a double-bill with another creature feature, *Beast From Haunted Cave*. When it was released to television a couple of years later, director Roger Corman shot the prologue sequence in which Zinthrop is fired from his beekeeper job.

Zombie Strippers (2008)

Director: Jay Lee

Starring: Jenna Jameson, Robert Englund, Roxy Saint, Penny Drake

“Let’s see if I got this straight. Our best stripper is a reanimated corpse who is feeding off the living flesh of our customers, who in turn reanimate, even if they’re just a fucking head? You don’t see this as a problem?”

Usually when a film has such a blatant and exploitative title as this it’s using that title to draw people to a film that in reality can’t live up to the name (hang your head, *Alien Terminator*). *Zombie Strippers*, however, not only successfully does what it says on the tin, but crams so much of both aspects into said tin that you’d need some sort of special spatula device to be able to scoop out the tightly packed contents. What I’m basically saying in a needlessly elaborate way is there’s a lot of zombies in here, and a lot of stripping.

It begins, as so many zombie films do, with a secret government research facility making an arse of things. They were trying to create a bunch of super soliders that could come back to life after being killed, but naturally what they made instead was a bunch of zombies. After a failed attempt to destroy them, one escapes and makes his way to a strip club where he attacks Kat – a stripper (Jenna Jameson) – and bites her neck out. And if you think I’m going to stoop to the obvious 'deep throat' joke there, then I’m frankly stunned.

In most movies when a zombie victim then turns into a zombie and comes to life (well, unlife) they’re a slow, shambling wreck of a thing. Here though that only happens to the male zombies (since the government’s virus is tied to X chromosomes or some such bollocks) so when Kat comes to life she instead becomes a better erotic dancer. As you do. Feeling the urge to dance again, her freaky-deaky undead strip has the crowd of pervs at the strip club LOVING her (despite the ripped-out neck and her blood-soaked baps) and chucking money at her like confetti.

There are a couple of problems, though. Since she’s a zombie, Kat still has a craving for human flesh. So each night she picks a 'lucky' chap to take to a private room for a lapdance, which ultimately ends with a different kind of climax than he expected. One scene in particular has enough bite to make any male viewer wince, if you catch my drift.

The other issue is the other strippers, who aren’t impressed that Kat is getting all the attention and, crucially, all the punters’ money. So one by one they decide to become zombies too, turning the stripclub into an ungodly concoction of fannies and flesh-eating.

Zombie Strippers knows it’s a ridiculous idea and it relishes it. It’s mainly a bunch of daft set-pieces interspersed with slightly overlong strip sequences. Maybe I’m just a prude in my old age or maybe it’s because Playboy models don’t do it for me though, because in fairness you’ve got to imagine most people buying a film called *Zombie Strippers* will be expecting some stripping and in that respect it does at least deliver.

Still, the aforementioned set-pieces make it worth sitting patiently through the nudity. There are some real crowd-pleasingly silly moments here, whether it's two zombie ladies tearing each other's limbs off, a poor lad having the top of his head ripped open (leaving a neck with a comedy flapping tongue inside) or the grim experience of one hapless individual receiving a 'face dance' from one of the rotting ladies: a face dance being, as the movie so eloquently puts it, "one of our lovely ladies sitting on your face and giving birth to your head".

Meanwhile, Robert Englund puts in a wonderfully campy performance as Ian, the club's owner, chewing the scenery in ways that feel at times like his classic Freddy Krueger roles of old, and the rest of the cast put in a decent shift too (even Jameson, believe it or not).

If you can find someone willing to watch a film that mainly consists of corpses pole dancing in the buff without thinking you're a bit wrong in the nut, *Zombie Strippers* is a remarkably fun and genuinely hilarious film and one that deserves a larger cult following. If the subject matter doesn't make you uncomfortable go for it.

Four out of five

How to see it

It's the typical DVD and Blu-ray options for both UK and US readers with this one.

Bits and pieces

- The first soldier who gets infected in *Zombie Strippers* is called Byrdflough, a not-too-subtle play on the bird flu epidemic that was doing the round as the time the film was shot.
- MMA fans will recognise the club's bouncer as fighter Tito Ortiz. He stars in the film because he was dating Jenna Jameson at the time.

Twilight (2008) – The Alternative Script

Director: Catherine Hardwicke

Starring: Kristen Stewart, Robert Pattinson, Taylor Lautner

“I hate you for making me want you so much.”

I’ve spoken of my dislike of a *Twilight* film before when my girlfriend dragged me to see *Breaking Dawn Volume 1*, but since then said girlfriend has become a wife and as such the values of compromise, sharing and such bollocks are reinforced more than ever. It’s for this reason then that I was eventually sat down in front of *Twilight*, the first film in the interminable saga and the only one I hadn’t had the 'pleasure' of seeing yet. Needless to say, my thoughts on the series hadn't changed after watching this 110-minute prologue.

Not everyone has nearly two hours to watch a bunch of fannies jumping about and pretending to be vampires, so I’ve decided to present you with a slightly rewritten version of the *Twilight* script. I’ve basically taken out all the needless romance stuff and left you with the core story. In short, I've made it a good film. You're welcome.

BELLA

I used to live in the city with my mum but she’s off shagging a baseball star so I’m moving back to Bumfuck, Washington to stay with my dad. Hi dad.

BELLA’S DAD

Hi Bella. I’m glad to see you back because you haven’t stayed here since you were four years old and I, and many of this tiny little backwards town, are going to consistently remind you of this to ensure the audience realises there’s no possible way you could know the town’s secrets.

BELLA

No worries. Hey, I need a car or something.

BELLA’S DAD

That’s alright, because here’s the seemingly native American family from across town, and it would appear that their son Jacob, who is your age and incredibly attractive but has hair like a woman, is a mechanic or something and he’s managed to get this big piece of shit truck working for you.

BELLA

I love it. I’m being completely genuine. In no way am I embarrassed by this truck.

BELLA goes to school

RANDOM TEENS

Nice truck, sleepy-faced new kid.

BELLA

I am immediately embarrassed by this truck.

BELLA goes to the school cafeteria

FEMALE NERDS

You can be our friend because you're new and we're the nerdy kids, even though the white one of us could actually be pretty attractive if she tried a bit more.

MALE NERDS

And we'll be your friends too, even though at times we'll be really creepy by fighting each other to be nice to you and even committing minor sexual assaults on you by kissing you on the cheek before we even introduce ourselves to you. But don't worry, because later on we'll suddenly start to fancy the other female nerds without warning because, if we're being honest, we're just stereotypically desperate nerds and we're happy to just get our knobs wet.

BELLA

Cool.

Some pale people walk into the cafeteria

BELLA

Who are those pale people?

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

Those are the Cullens. They were all adopted by Doctor Cullen, and even though they're not related to him in any way yet they all have the same weird eyes and inhumanly pale skin as him we're not suspicious in the slightest.

BELLA

Okay. How about that one who just walked in a little later so he could come through the door in slow motion while I stare at him?

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

That's Edward. He's all moody and stuff, I definitely wouldn't try to get with him because you definitely won't. There's no way in hell that would ever happen, and even if it were to happen, say 40 minutes later in the movie, I definitely won't suddenly be incredibly cool with it and be really delighted that you're dating a weird albino guy with a shit American accent.

BELLA

I'll bear that in mind.

BELLA goes to class and sees EDWARD there. EDWARD looks up and sees BELLA walk past a fan in slow motion so her hair blows around in a sexy manner. The fact that the classroom has a large fan switched on in the middle of fucking winter doesn't seem to matter much

BELLA sits next to EDWARD but he acts all weird and looks in physical pain as if he's wearing a vest made of cactus. He runs out of class as soon as it's finished

BELLA

I wonder what his problem is. I hope I don't find out for fucking ages so this film can get pushed nearer the two-hour mark.

BELLA sees EDWARD at the school reception trying to change his class, but he's told he can't. He goes off in a huff and isn't seen for weeks.

BELLA

I wonder where Edward went.

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

Meh, the Cullens often just take long periods off school. Doctor Cullen takes them skiing a lot.

BELLA

Well all the other ones are sitting over there.

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

Let's talk about the prom again because it's been at least five minutes.

BELLA goes to class one day and sees EDWARD sitting at his desk

EDWARD

Hello there, you must be Bella.

BELLA

Yes I am. I'm not going to ask you why you were acting like I was the human embodiment of the ebola virus before, instead I'm going to be suspicious of you but in a slightly flirty way.

EDWARD

Alright. We should hang out, by the way.

BELLA

Okay.

EDWARD

I've suddenly decided we shouldn't hang out any more.

BELLA

Why not?

EDWARD

I have a secret but I won't tell you what it is.

BELLA

Fuck you then.

BELLA is in the school car park when BLACK NERDY GUY speeds in, loses control of his car and heads straight for her. EDWARD, who is at the other end of the parking lot, manages to zoom over in a split second and puts his hand out, stopping the car in its tracks and putting a huge dent in it. BELLA is taken to the hospital to be checked out

DR CULLEN

You seem fine to me.

BELLA

I know, Edward saved me. I'm going to go talk to him.

BELLA finds EDWARD

BELLA

How did you get across the car park so quickly?

EDWARD

I was standing right next to you.

BELLA

You clearly weren't, and what's more, the car park was full of people who were all watching because the speeding car caught their attention. There must have been at least 100 people who saw you dash across the parking lot at light speed and stop that car with your arm.

EDWARD

Well, for some reason, nobody actually saw it, so it's your word against mine.

BELLA

Are you serious?

EDWARD

It's called a pothole, just go with it.

BELLA

Right. How did you do it then?

EDWARD

I'm still not telling.

BELLA

Well it's been about 45 minutes now so I hope I find out soon.

EDWARD

Well I'm not telling. And don't go and talk to the Native American guy with the woman's hair, because he might actually tell you and advance this bastard of a plot.

BELLA goes to the beach and talks to JACOB

BELLA

What's the deal with Edward then?

JACOB

Well, you know how my people were descended from wolves?

BELLA

Wolves? Like... wolves, as in wolves? (actual dialogue)

JACOB

Yes, which is why I said wolves. Well, Edward's family were descended from something else.

BELLA

From what?

JACOB

Well, I could tell you, but I'd rather you went to the really dangerous part of town and bought a book about it from a really obscure Native American bookshop. You know, the one right next to the dark alleyway.

BELLA

Okay, I'll do that.

BELLA goes to school

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

Bella, we're going to go buy prom dresses. I'm going to get one that makes my tits look big, just in case anyone who didn't notice that I could potentially be attractive will finally get the message. This will also inspire young teenage girls not entirely happy with their appearance that if you wear a dress that makes your tits stick out you will be more confident or something.

BELLA

Doesn't sound like my sort of thing. Which shop are you going to?

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

The one in the dangerous part of town, near the obscure Native American bookshop.

BELLA

Okay, I'll come but I probably won't hang about for long. I'll probably leave the shop after a while and go missing for ages.

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

Like, cool beans dude.

BELLA goes to the bookshop and buys a book about wolves. As she leaves she's encountered by a GANG OF RAPISTS

GANG OF RAPISTS

Evening Bella. We're going to rape you now.

BELLA

I'd really rather you didn't.

GANG OF RAPISTS

We don't really negotiate about these things we're afraid.

BELLA

Well that's disappointing.

EDWARD suddenly turns up in a sports car, gets out and looks at the GANG OF RAPISTS who run away even though there's loads of them and it's not like he's a vampire or anything.

EDWARD and BELLA get in the car and drive off

EDWARD

I'm livid. I want to go back and kill them.

BELLA

Don't, that wouldn't be productive.

EDWARD

Then say something to take my mind off it.

BELLA

Put your seat belt on. (actual dialogue)

EDWARD

I don't need to put my seat belt on, I'm a vampire.

BELLA

What?

EDWARD

Nothing. Anyway, I'm still not going to tell you my secret. Let's go and find your friends so they know you're okay, even though they never called you or anything and it's pitch black now while it was daylight when you were at the shop.

EDWARD and BELLA find the NERDY GIRLS.

BELLA

Sorry I didn't come back, I met Edward and we got talking.

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

Well, it looks to me like you two are an item now. Despite what I said way back at the start of the film I'm surprisingly very cool with this even though the guy looks weird as fuck and doesn't talk to anyone and lives with an adopted family who all look like they were in a talcum powder fight even though they're not related.

BELLA

Great. We're going for dinner. Bye then!

POTENTIALLY ATTRACTIVE FEMALE NERD

Bye!

EDWARD

I'm not going to eat anything, because I never do. It's all part of my secret which I'm definitely still not going to tell you.

BELLA

Okay. Well, I'm off home to read my book.

BELLA reads the book. It's about werewolves and vampires. She goes online to find out more. She deduces from the book that since vampires move really fast, don't eat food and look weird then EDWARD must be one. She goes to school and takes EDWARD to the forest conveniently located right on the school grounds

BELLA

I think you're a vampire.

EDWARD

I'm not.

BELLA

Well I think you are.

EDWARD

Okay then, I am. Are you scared?

BELLA

No.

EDWARD

Right. Well, jump on my back and we'll leg it up the top of this hill because the CGI guys have been sitting on their arses waiting for something to do.

BELLA jumps on his back and they go up to the top of the hill at light speed

EDWARD

I want to show you what I look like in the light.

BELLA

Won't you turn into ash? I thought sunlight burned vampires?

EDWARD

Maybe in every other vampire tale ever known to man. But this is a vampire tale aimed at young teenage girls.

BELLA

What happens then?

EDWARD

My skin turns to diamonds. Also, my stomach turns into a DKNY handbag and I can piss Smirnoff Ice.

BELLA

So what about other vampire things? Are you scared of crosses?

EDWARD

No.

BELLA

Garlic or holy water?

EDWARD

No. In fact, my mum is going to make you Italian food later in the film, which probably has garlic in it.

BELLA

Do you die if you stand in running water?

EDWARD

No. The complete opposite, in fact: by the time we get to the fourth movie we're going to spend half the fucking film standing in the sea and the other half playing chess like a couple of dicks.

BELLA

Okay then. Finally, can people see your reflection in mirrors?

EDWARD

Absolutely. And just to prove it, the final fight in this film will take place in a room full of mirrors. Oh, and unlike other vampires, I can read minds. Except yours.

BELLA

Well I think that's covered everything then. I think we should go out.

EDWARD

And so the lion fell in love with the lamb. (actual dialogue)

BELLA

What a stupid lamb. (actual dialogue)

EDWARD

What a sick, masochistic lion. (actual dialogue)

BELLA

I'd like to meet your family.

EDWARD

Okay. For some reason they're completely cool with the fact that I'm over 100 years old and I'm dating a human teenager.

BELLA goes to EDWARD's house for dinner

EDWARD

This is my family. This is ALICE, who can see into the future, but sometimes it changes, which essentially means she's just guessing and can't really see into the future at all.

BELLA

How come she can see into the future but you can't? And why can't she read minds like you?

EDWARD

I'd have thought it was clear after the diamond skin thing that the author of these books was just pulling special abilities out of her arse and chucking them around like we were the fucking X-Men.

BELLA

Fair enough.

EDWARD

You should meet some of our extended family, who never made it into the books. My cousin in France can see through walls, and my uncle in Italy can instantly work out how many days old you are if you tell him your date of birth.

BELLA

Right. So introduce me to the rest of your family here.

EDWARD

I would but I actually can't remember their names because they're so shit. This is blonde girl, who I think is my sister. Either way, she hates you for no reason. And this is nervous-looking other man, who hangs about with Alice.

BELLA

He's looking really nervous.

ALICE

He's only a new vampire. We're vegetarians so we don't eat people, and he's really struggling to get used to it now because you're in here. He can smell you and he's hungry.

BELLA

Funny that, because he goes to school with you and is surrounded by humans, including me, for eight hours a day and seems to manage fine.

ALICE

Ah. Um... okay, I just saw into the future or something and Edward took you to his room to change the subject.

EDWARD

Let me show you my room.

BELLA and EDWARD go to EDWARD's room

EDWARD

You'll notice I have a lot of CDs of classical music, just to reinforce the fact that I'm old. In fact, I'll probably play the piano later because I'm a musician in real life and I want to use this film to make the predominantly female audience fall in love with me even more and maybe buy my album if I ever release one.

BELLA

I'd buy it.

EDWARD

Thanks. (looks to camera) And I'm sure all of you watching will too, right girls? (looks at Bella) Oh, and my room has a door that leads out into the forest but I always leave it completely open so I can quickly run out it and up a tree whenever the CGI guys need something to do.

BELLA

Nice room.

EDWARD

Thanks. Come with me.

BELLA and EDWARD run into the forest and up a tree

BELLA

Well, now I know you're a vampire and it's taken about 70 minutes, which means most films would be starting to wrap up around now. Is this really all that's going to happen?

EDWARD

No, there'll be a big fight at the end but not for a while yet.

BELLA

Okay. What shall we do until then?

EDWARD

Well, there's a Muse song on the soundtrack that hasn't been used yet so we should probably go and do something with a montage so we can get that in there.

BELLA

Of course. What should we do then?

EDWARD

Let's go and play vampire baseball because if there's a baseball bit then maybe girls will be able to convince their boyfriends to watch the film with them.

BELLA

Perfect.

BELLA, EDWARD and the rest of the Cullens go to a big field in the middle of nowhere and play baseball while Supermassive Black Hole by Muse plays in the background. They do lots of ridiculous things that humans can't do, just to show the teenage girls in the audience that if you're a vampire, even baseball can be cool. Suddenly, THREE BAD VAMPIRES show up

THREE BAD VAMPIRES

What's the haps, vampires we've never met before?

DR CULLEN

Not much, we're just playing baseball. We had a Muse song to use up.

THREE BAD VAMPIRES

Ah, right. Hate when that happens. Last week we had to go surfing to My Chemical Romance.

DR CULLEN

What are you doing here?

THREE BAD VAMPIRES

We're the ones who've been doing all the killings.

THE CULLENS stare blankly

THREE BAD VAMPIRES

You know, the killings that have been happening throughout the film. The ones that have been happening off-screen so nobody can actually see them.

DR CULLEN

Ah, right. I completely forgot about those.

WHITE MALE BAD VAMPIRE

Actually, because they were such dull scenes, so did we until you just asked us what we were doing. Anyway, we want to be your friends because you're all vampires like us. Every single one of you. Even that one who smells like a human. Actually, wait, she actually is a human. I should probably eat her or something.

EDWARD and BELLA escape by getting in the car and driving away

BELLA

Why are we driving away?

EDWARD

Don't you remember? One of those bad vampires really wanted to eat you.

BELLA

No, I mean why are we using the car to escape? Can't I just jump on your back again? Earlier in the film you ran much faster than this car's going.

EDWARD

Um, no, because... the scent. Or something.

BELLA

If their sense of smell is that good they'd still be able to smell me if I was sitting in a car.

EDWARD

I have a Magic Tree. Anyway, we should leave Bumfuck, Washington because it's not safe for you anymore.

BELLA

What about my dad? He'll be devastated.

EDWARD

Just tell him the cruelest thing you can possibly think of. He'll be fine.

BELLA goes home and packs her bags

BELLA

Dad, I'm leaving Bumfuck.

BELLA'S DAD

Why?

BELLA

I had a big fight with Edward, and I've decided that the best way to deal with it is to go back to where my mum stays, even though she's gone on the road and isn't there.

BELLA'S DAD

But I only just got you back. What reason could you have for leaving again?

BELLA

What was it mum said to you when she left that really hurt your feelings and properly crushed you?

BELLA'S DAD

Something about how if she didn't get out now she'd be stuck here.

BELLA

Well, that.

BELLA and EDWARD drive away

BELLA

He looked devastated.

EDWARD

He'll be fine by the end of the film, even though you were a proper cow and the teenage audience shouldn't like you any more, but they do.

BELLA

So what next?

EDWARD

You're going to go back to your hometown with Alice and someone else I can't remember just now, and I'll go with the other no-names to a different place to throw the evil vampire off the scent. He'll never figure it out.

The EVIL VAMPIRE figures it out and heads to BELLA's home town

ALICE

I'm getting a vision of the future. I see a lot of mirrors laid out across the wall.

BELLA

It's definitely my old ballet studio. It's the only place in the world that has mirrors on the wall.

The phone rings

BELLA
Hello?

EVIL VAMPIRE
Hi Bella, it's the evil vampire. I'm at your ballet studio, the one with the mirrors on the wall.
I've got your mum here.

BELLA
I thought she was on the road?

EVIL VAMPIRE
Um... no, she's here. Better come and get her.

BELLA
Okay.

BELLA goes to the ballet studio, the EVIL VAMPIRE kicks the shit out of her and bites her arm, EDWARD turns up and kicks the shit out of the EVIL VAMPIRE, then cures BELLA by sucking the venom out of her arm because it turns out vampires are basically snakes now. BELLA wakes up in hospital, thanks EDWARD and they go to the prom

BELLA
Look, it's my nerdy friends, they're all at the prom too.

NERDY FRIENDS
Hi Bella, we're really glad you're here even though you completely lied to us earlier in the film about not coming because you had a family engagement you definitely couldn't cancel.

BELLA
Thanks. Look, there's Jacob too. I had completely forgotten he was even in this film.

JACOB
Don't worry, I'll turn into a werewolf in the next one so the author can fuck up their legacy like she did with vampires. Plus I'll take my top off a lot so the audience can swoon and such. For now, I'll just say that my dad says Edward is a wanker and you shouldn't go out with him.

BELLA
Okay, but I will.

JACOB leaves

BELLA
Edward, I want you to turn me into a vampire so I can be with you forever.

EDWARD

No, I'm just going to kiss you instead. That way we can wait until the fourth story and I'll turn you into a vampire then, so we can make extra book and movie money.

BELLA

Sounds like a plan, chief.

THE END

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. Well, at the time of writing, at least. Established as a magazine in 1981, 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.

If you liked the 100 reviews on offer in this book, there's loads more where they came from. Visit thatwasabitmental.com for a regular helping of reviews, along with trailers for all 100 films reviewed here. Of course, as the name of this book suggests, there is also a Volume 1 ebook with 100 different reviews. Keep an eye out for the That Was A Bit Mental Vol 3 ebook too, due out sometime in 2015.

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