

Art in Horror

Forbidden Treasure

“Listen to them, the children of the night. What music they make!”

– Bram Stoker

Art and the horrific have been intertwined at least since the former was born and the latter had entrenched itself as fundamental to the human experience. From the first cave painting to capture the brutality of a hunt, to the visions of Bosch and Geiger; in the hands of a master even the most horrendous subjects are elevated not just to the level of fine art but to that of sophisticated social commentary, forcing us to confront the darkest sides of ourselves and the consequences of our actions.

Picasso's *Guernica*, for example, turned the aftermath of unfathomably brutal combat into not only a masterpiece and object of great beauty, but a subject and a cause for ethical and political discourse.



Picasso, Pablo (1937). *Guernica* [Painting].

The same holds true for all the arts, but especially so in film where horror has made itself so very much at home. Even more so than depictions in literature – which famously gave horror its first spark of life and has always done the heaviest lifting for all of its many variants – the nature of art in horror movies is a much more profound experience. It is in fact a vast and little-recognized sub-genre characterized by a simple idea: that evil is not born of the divine, the demonic, or even our own bodies... *But our own character and flawed nature.*

And so, the mechanisms that we will soon see destroy our protagonists and villains alike are much more than possessed individuals or cursed objects. They are entirely our own creations, more often than not born of our own ambitions, pride and greed.

Literature

There can be no better place to begin our dive than an examination of literature as a device in horror films. Not only are writers (and the act of writing) often their own favorite subjects, but few know better the sacrifices an artist needs to make to get their work published or even seen. The pain of failure. And the depths to which that will drive you.



Shelley Duvall in *The Shining* (1980, Stanley Kubrick).

The use of books and writing as the driving force behind everything from murder to madness are far older than film itself. But among both writers and filmmakers,

The Shining stands out as one of the most artful depictions of the horror ever realized; a veritable case study in the horrendous nature and consequences of child and spousal abuse. And at its core, silently lurking, is every writer's nightmare: writer's block and an unfinished book. And it is Jack's failure at the act itself, his failure as an artist and as a parent that drive him over the edge as much as the Overlook itself. Jack Torrance's insane manuscript is merely a symptom of his overall decline.

One very potent but subtle clue is Jack's typewriter. The machine itself changes color over the course of the film, becoming darker as its user descends further into darkness. And it is very clearly the writer poisoning the machine, not the other way around. Evil very clearly emanates from the man, not the tool of his trade.

Books take on even greater significance in King's original work: it is a scrapbook of news clippings from events at the Overlook Hotel, an item that is featured only briefly and in passing in Kubrick's version, that both inspire Jack's novel and begins his mental decline. It is the process, driven by the hotel, that precipitates his violence.



Christian Slater and Sean Connery in *The Name of the Rose* (1986, Jean-Jacques Annaud).

Not so in other tales. Often it is forbidden knowledge and books that generate both atmosphere and atrocity. In both Dario Argento's *Inferno* (1980) and Jean-Jacques Annard's palimpsest of Umberto Eco's magnificent novel *The Name of the Rose* (1986) we see knowledge and the books that contain them as engines of

evil. In the case of the latter, it is a lost treatise by Aristotle on the subject of laughter, a text forbidden by the medieval church, that drives the monks to murder. In the former, it is ownership of a book itself that drives our killer. In yet another Argento film, *Tenebrae* (1982), it is the act of reading – one's personal interpretation of an author's words – that drive a madman to eliminate what he views as perverse.

Why stop there? John Carpenter's 1994 joy-ride *In the Mouth of Madness* is a marvelously Lovecraftian nightmare about what would actually happen if a horror author (loosely based on fan-favorite Stephen King) could actually write his ideas to life. He reshapes the world in his own insane image, bringing it all to life from his own mind through the printed page. Needless to say, it doesn't work out well for those involved.



Gabriel Byrne and Julian Sands in *Gothic* (1987, Ken Russell).

But if we are to focus on literature at all, why not that most famous of literary monsters, his father Victor Frankenstein, not to mention his ground-breaking creator Mary Shelley? But not the monster and scientist of the original Universal Pictures. Instead turn your attention to Ken Russell's tour de force *Gothic* (1987). Like the aforementioned Carpenter film, it is very much about writing, *willing* a creation to life, even if it is damned from the outset. Frankenstein fans will no doubt be greatly disappointed – *Gothic* is a story not about the rampaging of such creatures, but the act of their creation in our own minds... And the perils, from madness to addiction to self-harm, inherent in doing so.

Music

If ever there was a form of artistic expression to play second fiddle to literature when it comes to horror (pun fully intended), it would be music. Shockingly so, to some extent – sound and score play such dramatic roles in setting pace and mood. But for music, or the act of its creation, to be the driving force as a source of evil is as little for the faint of heart as it is for the filmmaker inexperienced with that world.

One film that bridges the gap between literature and music quite elegantly is Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014). Our two protagonists, both vampires, have built eternities around the appreciation and occasional creation of literature and music. Art is not merely the driving force in their lives. It is the entire reason for their endless existence – not to mention their need to take human life.



Robert De Niro in *Angel Heart* (1987, Alan Parker).

And then of course there's the timeless tale of the musician at the crossroads, who sold his soul for talent and fame. Told time and again in both life and art, from the legend of the great bluesman Robert Johnson to perhaps its most elegant and disturbing telling: Alan Parker's *Angel Heart* (1987).

It tells the tale of a private investigator hired to find a 1930's singer named Johnny Favorite who – you guessed it – made a pact with the Devil for fame and fortune. One of the most disturbing and controversial films of its time, at its core

is one artist's arrogance and greed. And Parker manages to tell his story while pulling off a pitch-perfect 1950's period piece, and the scariest performance of De Niro's career.

Similarly, the joint Blumhouse/Amazon production *Nocturne* (2020) paints an ugly portrait of ambition, competition and the pressure to "do better"... Even if that pressure is entirely self-imposed. Sydney Sweeney's pursuit of artistic excellence in the shadow of her sister's piano mastery takes on a truly disturbing character, to the point that she is willing to sacrifice her own family for a shot at success.



Simon Abkarian and Freya Tingley in *The Sonata* (2018, Andrew Desmond).

But it is Andrew Desmond's *The Sonata* (2018) that perhaps most elegantly and completely captures the danger of unfettered artistic expression and ambition at every level, from creation to performance. In this film it is the *entire* creative process that is perilous, from the mysteriously encrypted violin suite left behind by Rutger Hauer's mad composer to its final performance by his blindly ambitious daughter.

But unlike *The Shining*, *Angel Heart* and *Nocturne*; in a most unusual and unfortunate turn, for once it is not the over-reaching artists who pay the ultimate price for the evil they create... Unlike Johnny Favorite, it is the artist's own audience that must now pay the bill.

Fine Art

Film history is rife with paintings that move, change, talk – it's become a very tired old trope. Unless the act of creation or the creator actually become the focus of evil in the stories they inhabit...

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1945) is often the first to come to mind. Oscar Wilde's fantastic tale actually turns a painting into a monstrous sort of confessional: Instead of Dorian's dissolute, abusive nature wearing him down physically, it is his own portrait that shows the monstrous effects. It is his vanity that enables the portrait, and the portrait in turn enables his dissolute life... Until it doesn't.

Sculpture too, is not immune from a good horror treatment. Again, the object itself is often the locus of evil, particularly with regard to ancient art: the recurring artifact of Satan that Max Von Sydow first uncovers in the Middle East in William Friedkin's classic *The Exorcist* (1973), for example.



Mary Mitchel and William Campbell in *Dementia 13* (1963, Francis Ford Coppola).

But every now and then you come across a treatment like Francis Coppola's in his very first feature film, *Dementia 13* (1963). Coppola uses modern sculpture – both the shape of art and the act of its creation – as a sophisticated and subtle cue to direct (and misdirect) his viewers' attention. From the ability to sculpt to the nature of the sculptor's work and medium, they become psychological cues

as much as physical ones. It is very much the artist, not the art, that is both a focus and vent for the family's evil.

Dance

It's fairly safe to say that dance, in all its varied and beautiful forms, is hardly the first or most horrific subject that comes to mind when thinking of horror as a genre. Not without good reason: the grace and skill required to perform at the highest levels of ballet and modern dance creates an experience that is invariably magical, even when focused on painful subjects. But it is exactly this magic that has powered some of the most terrifying films ever made.

Dario Argento's classic Giallo *Suspiria* (1977) is just such a film. The oppressive intensity and pressure of the dance academy combines with the hypnotic and spiritual nature of dance itself to produce a literal bubbling cauldron and one very believable coven.



Jessica Harper in *Suspiria* (1977, Dario Argento).

The connection between dance and the occult is further deepened in Luca Gudagnino's 2018 remake of the same story. Both versions are set in Germany, just across the Iron Curtain at the height of the Cold War. By adding both political nuance and an explicit connection between dance and the occult he is able to spread the greed, violence and horror of the Tanz Akademie's coven far beyond its original boundaries, infecting all of Europe.

And then, of course, there's Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* (2010). A timeless tale, Aronofsky brings a sense of emotional violence and psychological imbalance to the actual business and production of large-scale works of art that ring as true as the cutthroat competition among the prima ballerinas. And again we find that wickedness is born within us, from our own insecurities and ambitions run amok. So much so that there's hardly any difference here from the Jack Torrances of our little study.

Film

Between the history of photography and motion pictures, it makes quite a bit of sense that some of the most interesting and prolific examples of art in horror are found in this category. From the ectoplasmic photography that sprang up almost as soon as the medium itself, to the fact that the very first blockbuster films were horror movies; it was inevitable that the photographer's art would weave itself into the very fabric of visual storytelling itself.

Of course we're all familiar with the "found footage" genre, which has more than its fair share of gems. Brilliant and creative work like *Apollo 18* (2011) still push the bounds of what *Blair Witch* started so many years ago. But in most of these cases the camera is the vehicle for capturing and portraying some menace far more than the filmmakers and their tools are its source. Things start to get really interesting when it is the artists and their emotions who are the source of the problem... As they so often are in life.



Karlheinz Böhm in *Peeping Tom* (1960, Michael Powell).

Among the earliest and most controversial films of its kind is Michael Powell's brilliant *Peeping Tom* (1960). The story of a profoundly disturbed cinematographer and serial killer, the film was banned and lambasted at the time of its release. It has since become recognized as not only an exceptional work of art, but a very early and profound study of mental illness and serial criminal behavior. Even though the camera is quite literally the murderer's weapon of choice, it is not the camera but his desire to capture the terror of his victims *on film* that is the source of his sickness and, hence, his crimes.

There are of course many other treatments of photography and filmmaking. *Shutter* (2008) and *So Cold the River* (2022) are outstanding and deeply disturbing depictions of the dangers of completely immersing yourself in your art. The former about fashion photography and the latter about documentary filmmaking, wherein the pressure to succeed, competition, lust and greed – so often part and parcel to these and so many other creative endeavors – are clearly the source of evil. Not a haunted camera or location, but the motivation to use them.

And then along comes a film like *Sinister* (2012). As layered and textured as it is dark and disturbing, this is one film I wish I could watch over and again for the very first time. Not only do we have a tortured writer wracked by guilt and obsessed with fame and fortune, we also have a horror film that is about film itself. Shooting it, editing it, even digitizing it. But most especially being endangered by both film and process. It is the process of making a simple and seemingly innocent home movie that fuels evil in this profoundly disturbing film.



Ethan Hawke in *Sinister* (2012, Scott Derrickson).

In many ways it is the ultimate example of what we've been searching for: Art as Horror at every conceivable level. But it is the artist and the process of creation itself that prove most perilous here, both to himself and his family. It is the layer cake of his own sins that drives his artistic vision and work, eventually destroying him not just as a result of his greed, *but as a direct result of the creative process*.

It really is a creative's cautionary tale of the most epic proportions. Name your pitfall, *Sinister* has it covered. Neglecting your family because you've been consumed by your work? Creating art for fame and fortune at the expense of truth and justice? Willing to go to any lengths to tell a story that isn't worth the cost? Lying to your partner and betraying everything for just one more taste?

It is the writer's flaws that first invites horror into their home. It is these same flaws, along with countless others, that drive his creation. And it is the very act of creation alone that dooms his entire family. It makes for fantastic horror, and one of the scariest films ever made, right up there with Kubrick's *The Shining*. Which is all well and good while our butts are glued to our seats.

But what does all this really mean? More importantly, what does it say about ourselves as we each, inevitably and in our own ways, partake of the creative process?

Conclusion

Quite a lot, actually. Aside from the obviously cathartic release provided by a good scare, and despite their reminder that things can always be worse, Art

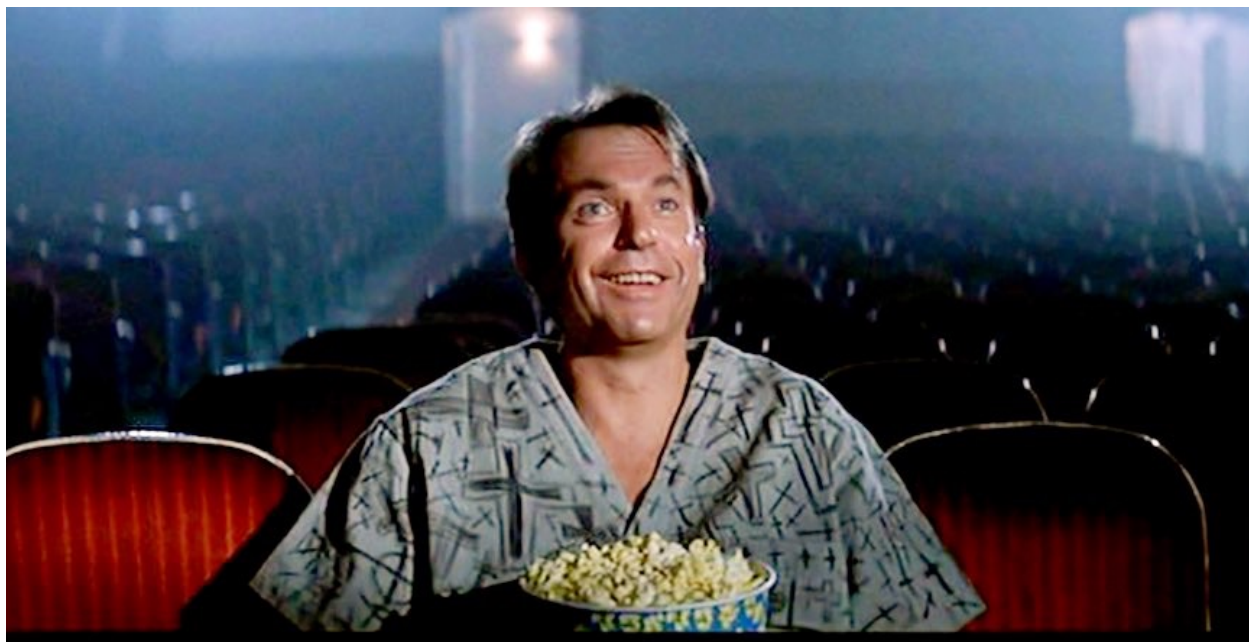


Hurd Hatfield in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945, Albert Lewin).

Horror insists on digging deeper. But not deeper into science or religion. More than any other sub-genre, it forces us to plumb our own depths, to face the darkest tendencies within ourselves and the evils we visit upon ourselves and our loved ones as a result.

From the madness of failed writer Jack Torrance to the drug-fueled self-destruction of Byron and Shelley, from the blind ambition of Ellison Oswald and Johnny Favorite to the pride of Dorian Gray, these impulses exist in all of us in one form or another. Even the best of humanity is in a constant struggle against its most base instincts. And that's what makes Art Horror so very real: it is, in a word, *relatable*.

Worse still, these are the most shapeless of horrors. From the filmmakers' perspective, how do you visualize the evil of excess ambition eating you alive with special effects alone? And from the the point of view of the viewer, these are not the demons or devils, totems or witches from the genre's many other branches. But while these forces of evil, our own sins and desires, are amorphous and untouchable, they are at the same time the most visceral engines of all, directly tied as they are to our own internal dialogue and not something more amorphous and fantastic.



Sam Neill in *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994, John Carpenter).

We don't even have to imagine them because we live with them every day. They are our own emotions, and they are what make us human. They drive beautiful artwork and terrible atrocity. Art Horror teaches us that we are all capable of

horrible ambitions, dangerous curiosity and vile creation. Anyone, given the right circumstances, is capable of feeding on their worst impulses to create that script, sketch, sculpture, score or manuscript.

But as John Carpenter reminds us in *In the Mouth of Madness*, even if you're one of the good ones who chooses not to read the monster's manuscript... Not to worry. They'll eventually make it into a movie.

References

Listed in chronological order.

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1945, Albert Lewin)
Peeping Tom (1960, Michael Powell)
Dementia 13 (1963, Francis Ford Coppola)
The Bird With the Crystal Plumage (1970, Dario Argento)
The Exorcist (1973, William Friedkin)
Suspiria (1977, Dario Argento)
The Shining (1980, Stanley Kubrick)
Inferno (1980, Dario Argento)
Tenebrae (1982, Dario Argento)
The Name of the Rose (1986, Jean-Jacques Annaud)
Angel Heart (1987, Alan Parker)
Gothic (1987, Ken Russell)
In the Mouth of Madness (1994, John Carpenter)
The Ninth Gate (2000, Roman Polanski)
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Shutter (2008, Masayuki Ochiai)
Black Swan (2010, Darren Aronofsky)
Sinister (2012, Scott Derrickson)
The Babadook (2014, Jennifer Kent)
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