

Halloween Special Scary Movie Blog

My picks for the scariest movies of all time.

October 28, 2009

Don't mess with the demon Pazuzu, who makes little Regan do naughty things in *The Exorcist*.

This is pretty much my expression whenever I watch *The Haunting* alone and with the lights out.

I know you come here for insight into the world of reptiles – and may even get it once in a while -- but on rare occasions I might write about something other than reptiles. I don't know about you, but I think the most interesting blogs are those that touch on a wide variety of topics, whether they're newsworthy events, pop culture, literary topics or whatever. Granted, reptiles can often be discussed in regard to all these categories and more, but I may go off topic -- again, only rarely -- and have a "reptile-free" blog. This is one of those times. Actually, I think it's the first time.

As regular "Random Neural Firing" readers may know, I'm a movie fan. Always have been, and I've written about them in the past, including reviews for a local newspaper. A few months ago, I wrote a series of 11 Herpetological Horrors blogs that featured horror movies in which reptiles played a role (and have you seen *Frogs* or *Stanley* yet?). So in honor of Halloween, I thought I'd write about some movies that I consider the scariest.

As for current movies this Halloween season, though they're not on my most-scary list, I wholeheartedly recommend *Zombieland* and *Paranormal Activity*. *Zombieland* is a fun horror comedy. *Paranormal Activity* is a quieter but much creepier movie. It's been compared to *The Blair Witch Project*, but I think *Blair Witch* is scarier.

For me, the number one scariest movie remains *The Exorcist*. Back in 1974, before the whiz-bang special effects we enjoy today (or perhaps hate, depending on your opinion), it took nothing more than a mannequin sitting on a bed and turning its head 360 degrees to raise goosebumps. *The Exorcist* took the subject of demon possession and plopped it right into an American bedroom, and a little girl's bedroom at that. What we were seeing onscreen was shocking enough, but the soundtrack to the movie played a huge role in the scare quotient. I once read how the sounds of angry hornets, pigs being slaughtered and other unsettling sounds were mixed into *The Exorcist* soundtrack. They were not inserted to be recognized for what they were, but in order to create a feeling of unease in viewers. It worked on me, and this story of possessed Regan McNeil remains my pick for scariest movie ever.

I've always enjoyed a good monster romp, but I think the scariest movies rely heavily on the unseen. This is often far more terrifying than any creature that may lurch from the darkness. Another movie that relied heavily on sound and unseen things to stir fear was *The Haunting*. I don't mean the hugely disappointing 1999 remake; I mean the original 1963 black and white version.

I probably just lost a bunch of younger readers when I wrote "black and white." I remember when my nephews, Evan and Nathan, were young teenagers I recommended some old movies to them. When they found out they were in black and white, they acted with the same revulsion as if I had suggested they eat raw sea slugs. To all you younger readers out there: Don't write off older movies because they're in black and white! They're not automatically boring.

The Haunting, based on the Shirley Jackson novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, is about a team of psychic researchers investigating a reputed haunted house in New England. I will admit that parts of it may be a bit draggy to some viewers, especially younger ones. But I guarantee that if you watch this at night with all the lights turned off, you'll be turning your head to look over your shoulder at every little house-settling noise. I showed it to a friend once whose husband was out of town. Afterward she begged me to go home with her and spend the night.

Remember all the hoopla that accompanied the release of *The Blair Witch Project* back in 1999? It was a huge blockbuster, made on a shoestring budget that went on to reap in millions of moviegoer bucks. The story involves three film students who enter the New Jersey Pine Barrens to research a local myth: the Blair Witch. Things then get weird and creepy. Hey, they were in the Pine Barrens...I wonder if they saw any *Pituophis melanoleucus* while they were there. (See how I just cleverly worked reptiles into this non-reptile blog?)

Thanks to intensive marketing efforts prior to the release of *The Blair Witch Project*, this eyeball is probably one of the most famous in movie history.

Little girls can be pretty creepy, such as this one from The Ring. But you ain't seen nothin' yet.

The hand-held camera work in The Blair Witch Project turned some people off, but not me. I was riveted. I may sound like a broken record, but here again it's not what you see with your eyes, but what you hear with your ears and then see in your mind's eye that makes this one scary. I remember when I went to see it. I went on opening night, standing in a huge line at a sold-out show. At one intense point during the movie, during a night scene when everyone's ears are straining to make out some distant, creepy, barely discernible sounds, an audience member's cell phone rang suddenly. A huge groan from the crowd greeted it, but that was nothing compared to the uproar that resulted when the owner of the phone answered it.

"Hello?" said a girl's voice in the darkness.

If weapons were allowed in that theater I am certain that girl would have been murdered. Everyone shouted at her to shut up. I distinctly remember a guy in front of me yelling, "Kill yourself!"

After the audience blew up at her, there was a whisper: "I'll call you back."

Audience antics aside, I thought The Blair Witch Project lived up to its hype and delivered plenty of chilling moments.

I consider myself a pretty jaded moviegoer, especially when it comes to horror movies. I'm 48 and have been interested in the film world, especially horror movies, for most of my life. Three early movies that scared the heck out of me when I was little were the original Invaders From Mars, The Crawling Eye and The Monster of Piedras Blancas. The latter two I remember watching with my brother, Rob, while clutching and peering from behind a pillow. I've sat through so many of these movies, that if I really think about it I'll probably depress myself.

Because of this, whenever a scary movie comes along that succeeds in creeping me out I'm very happy. The Ring did just that. It was an oppressive movie, and filled me with dread. It's about a videotape that, if watched, just may kill you. I don't want to give anything else away, especially the ending, but suffice it to say that the ending to The Ring got the single biggest audience reaction in recent memory (except maybe for the audience reaction to the girl's cell phone ringing during Blair Witch).

For the record, The Ring is a rare instance in which I preferred the remake to the original. The original was a Japanese horror movie called Ringu. It was fairly creepy, too, but I thought the U.S. version was scarier. For awhile there, and still occasionally, Asian horror films were ripe for the remaking. Although I wouldn't rank it with my all-time scariest, there was one called Gin gwai (The Eye) which was pretty darn eerie in parts. There was also an inferior U.S. remake.

These four movies are my personal choices for scariest ever. To me, scares such as these are more visceral than "jump out and scare you" scenes, zombies chasing people, etc. That's not to say I don't like those, too. One of my all-time favorite movies is Aliens. For intense action and rollercoaster thrills I don't think it can be beat, but for creepy spine tingles, The Exorcist, The Haunting, The Blair Witch Project and The Ring are four superstars (hmmm, perhaps the key to their success is including the word "the" in their titles). Watch any of these for Halloween and I'm sure you, too, will suddenly become aware of all the sounds your house can make at night...in the dark...when no one is around to help you.

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