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Horror is an ancient art form. We have tried to terrify each other with tales which trigger the less logical parts of our imaginations for as long as we've told stories. From the ballads of the ancient world to modern urban myths, audiences willingly offer themselves up to sadistic storytellers to be scared witless, and they are happy to pay for the privilege.

Theories abound as to why this is so – do we derive basic thrills from triggering the rush of adrenalin which fear brings, or do horror stories serve a wider moral purpose, reinforcing the rules and taboos of our society as showing the miserable fate of those who transgress? Horror movies have long served both. They deliver thrills by the handful, as well as telling us stories of the dark, forbidden side of life (and death) – cautionary tales for grown ups. They also provide a revealing mirror image of the anxieties of their time. *Wodewalkers* (1926) is not simply a tale of vampirism, but offers heart-rending images of a town beleaguered by premature and random deaths, echoes of the great war and the great flu epidemic fatalities.

At the other end of the 20th century, *Blade* (1998) is not just a tale of vampirism either, but reflects a fear of the powerful yet irresponsible elements in society, echoes down the corridor indeed of the seemingly impulsive behaviour of those at the top. Welcome to the convoluted and ultimately multi-layered world of horror cinema.

The BFI is proud to present a selection of seminal horror films that have terrified and shocked audiences throughout the 20th century.



SILENCE OF THE LAMBS

SCREENING JAN 9 - 6PM

When FBI trainee Clarice Starling (Foster) is sent to conduct an interview with serial killer shrink Dr Hannibal Lecter (Hopkins) in his high-security cell, she little knows what she is in for. The feds want Lecter to help them in their search for homicidal maniac "Buffalo Bill", but in exchange for clues about Bill's behaviour, Lecter demands that Clarice answer questions about herself, so that he can penetrate the darkest recesses of her mind.

It's in their confrontations that both film and heroine come electrically alive. The laurels must go to Levine's killer, admirably devoid of camp overstatement, and to Foster, who evokes a valiantly but pragmatic intelligence bent on achieving independence through sheer strength of will.

Director: Jonathan Demme
Producer: Jonathan Demme
Screenwriter: Ted Tally
Stars: Jodie Foster, Anthony Hopkins, Scott Glenn, Ted Levin



ERASERHEAD

SCREENING JAN 2 - 6PM

The precise nature and identity of the monstrous infant at the centre of *Eraserhead* remains a mystery, but then the same could be said of the film itself, which appeared, as if out of nowhere, in 1977, shunting easy definition or comfortable reception. By turns beautiful, annoying, funny, exasperating and repellent, but always bristling with a nervous energy, *Eraserhead* is a film that has few obvious cinematic precedents in the world of apart from the early surrealist collaborations of Bunuel and Dalí, which Lynch claims at the time not to have seen.

Director: David Lynch
Producer: David Lynch
Screenwriter: David Lynch
Stars: Jack Nance, Charlotte Stewart, Jeanne Bates, Joseph Allen



THE EXORCIST

SCREENING JAN 4 - 6PM

Extremely controversial at the time of its release, the exorcist kicked off intense debate among critics, community leaders, and even religious leaders – spurring the public, of course, to make it one of the most financially successful horror films ever made. Based on William Peter Blatty's runaway best seller it shrewdly exploits the fears and frustrations of parents while disturbing religious implications merely provide potentios window dressing. The film is an intense rollercoaster ride, a marvel of audience manipulation, with director William Friedkin pushing all the right buttons to make this a genre landmark. The movie balances its then-state-of-the-art special effects with good old-fashioned atmospheric horror to produce an excruciating – though shallow – two hours of dread and unease.

Director: William Friedkin
Producer: William Peter Blatty
Screenwriter: William Peter Blatty
Stars: Ellen Burstyn, Max Von Sydow, Jason Miller, Lee J. Cobb



REPULSION

SCREENING JAN 8 - 6PM

Roman Polanski's first film in English (1965) is still his scariest and most disturbing – not only for its evocations of sexual panic, but also because his masterful employment of sound puts the audience's imagination to work in numerous ways.

Catherine Deneuve gives an impressive performance as a quiet and quietly mad beautician living with her older sister in London and terrified of men. When the sister and her boyfriend take off on a holiday, her fears and her isolation in the apartment are allowed to fester along with the uncooked food, with increasingly violent and macabre results. As narrative this works only part of the time, and as case study it may occasionally seem too real, but as subjective nightmare it's a stunning piece of filmmaking.

Director: Roman Polanski
Producer: Roman Polanski
Screenwriter: Roman Polanski
Stars: Catherine Deneuve, Ian Hendry, Yvonne Furneaux, Patrick Wymark



THE OMEN

SCREENING JAN 6 - 6PM

Written by David Seltzer and directed by Richard Donner, this effectively entertaining horror film takes William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* one step further by concentrating not on a girl possessed by the devil, but on a boy who's evil incarnate, the antichrist. Robert Thorn (Gregory Peck) is a highly respected American ambassador to England whose wife Katherine (Lee Remick) gives birth to a stillborn child. Thorn is then encouraged by a priest to switch his dead child with the living baby of a mother who had died during childbirth. Five years later, strange things begin happening in the Thorn household, all of which can be traced to their boy, Damien (Harvey Seward), who unbeknownst to his surrogate parents, is the antichrist.

Director: Richard Donner
Producer: Harvey Bernhard
Screenwriter: David Seltzer
Stars: Gregory Peck, Lee Remick, David Warner, Billie Whitelaw, Leo McKern



THE WICKER MAN

SCREENING JAN 7 - 6PM

The *Wicker Man* is a classic cult 1973 British film filmed in Scotland, combining thriller, existential horror and musical genres.

The story follows a Scottish police officer, Sergeant Neil Howe, visiting the isolated island of Summerisle, in the search for a missing girl whom the locals claim never existed. The inhabitants of Summerisle all follow a reconstructed form of Celtic paganism, which shocks and appalls the devoutly Christian Sergeant.

Director: Robin Hardy
Producer: Peter Smith
Screenwriter: Anthony Shaffer
Stars: Edward Woodward, Christopher Lee, Britt Ekland, Diane Cilento



THE LOST BOYS

SCREENING JAN 7 - 6PM

You might think that Joel Schumacher's movie, made long before he sold his soul to direct *Batman & Robin*, is dull. In fact, few feature films are as downright entertaining as this teen movie with a twist. (*The Lost Boys* plays like a hybrid of the *Goonies* and *Near Dark*). Jason Patric and Corey Haim play Michael and Sam, the brothers brought to a coastal Californian town by their mother Lucy (Weist, as annoying and loveable as ever), who discover that the town is infested with vampires, ostensibly lead by the charismatic Michael (Sutherland). The race is on to prevent the elder sibling from falling under the spell of the undead, and to drive the bloodsuckers out of town.

Director: Joel Schumacher
Producer: Joel Schumacher
Screenwriter: Joel Schumacher
Stars: Corey Feldman, Jami Gertz, Corey Haim, Jason Patric



AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON

SCREENING JAN 1 - 6PM

An American backpacker is mauled by a werewolf on the Yorkshire moors, turning into a beast himself while he convalesces in London with Jenny Agutter's friendly nurse. A marvelous, pop tragic, serio-comic monster movie, with David Naughton haunted by the chewed-up ghost of Griffin Dunne as he tries to cope with the curse of the werewolf. The pre-*cgi* set-piece metamorphoses-as Naughton elongates and distorts into lupine form, sprouting hair, teeth and claws-are still amazing. Writer/director John Landis also throws in American observations on British strangeness (from the unfriendly patrons in the slaughtered lamb pub to the dreariness of channel-hopping with three choices), nightmares made, pointed bars at the expense of horror film conventions.

Director: Stanley Kubrick
Producer: Stanley Kubrick
Screenwriter: Arthur Clarke
Stars: Kurt Dullea, Gary Lockwood, William Sylvester, Daniel Richter, Leonard Rossiter, Margaret Tyzack, Robert Beatty



ROSEMARY'S BABY

SCREENING JAN 5 - 6PM

This is a serious effort that gradually and carefully constructs a mounting sense of paranoia that climaxes in a horrible final scene revelation. The setting and performances are completely credible, even the basic plot line (a woman undergoing a difficult first pregnancy) has an everyday believability that invites audience identification.

In short, *Rosemary's Baby* transcends its genre trappings: viewers are not allowed to sit back and enjoy a pleasant roller-coaster thrill-ride. They are lured into the plot and set them up to be terrified and disturbed by the unfolding events of a horror film for people who want to be scared – but not too much.

Director: Roman Polanski
Producer: William Castle
Screenwriter: Roman Polanski
Stars: Mia Farrow, John Cassavetes, Ruth Gordon, Ralph Bellamy, Sidney Blackmer



THE CAT PEOPLE

SCREENING JAN 8 - 6PM

The classiest of 6 movie horrors, featuring Simone Simon as a young newlywed afraid that arousal will transform her into a panther Irena Dubrovna (Simone) is haunted by the fear that she has been cursed. She is convinced that whenever she is emotionally aroused she will turn into a murderous panther. Her husband Oliver Reed (Smith) understandably becomes frustrated when denied his conjugal rights and tries to dismiss her fears as superstition. Has the transformation happened? This magical genre-bending masterpiece still manages to dazzle you with its audacity. Famously making a virtue of its limitations, the film features no actors in cat-suits, no explicit special effects, just terror in the shadows.

Its techniques would be adopted by noir, its themes are aped by horror films and thrillers today.

Director: Jacques Tourneur
Producer: Val Lewton
Screenwriter: Jacques Tourneur
Stars: Simone Simon, Kent Smith, Tom Conway, Jane Randolph



THE WONDERFUL
WORLD OF
HORROR