

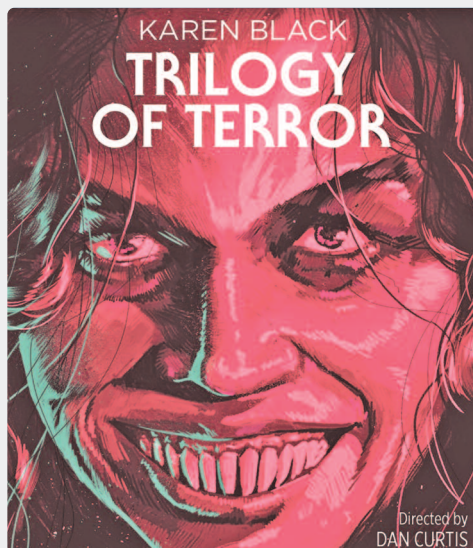


THIS ISN'T GOING TO END WELL

You can tell that zombies are becoming passé when iconic indie directors take a stab at them. I also want to take a stab at them because I'm weary of the undead endlessly cavorting across our screens. That being said, acclaimed film director Jim Jarmusch brings his quirky sensibilities to *The Dead Don't Die* (2019), in which a small-town is overrun by a zombie plague infecting the world due to the shifting of the Earth's axis due to polar fracking. (Thanks, Corporate America.) Bill Murray, Adam Driver, and Chloe Sevigny play the local cops baffled by the town's gradual descent into cannibalistic chaos. There is certainly a colorful contingent of characters here: the doomsaying but pragmatic lawman (Driver), the Scottish, sword-wielding mortician (Tilda Swinton), the nerdy convenience store owner (Caleb Landry Jones), and the misanthropic woodsman hermit who watches it all go down (Tom Waits). Jarmusch brings his signature elements to the fold: offbeat individuals, droll jokes, languid pacing, and whimsical observations. I've read a lot of criticism about the film as being underwhelming and disappointing. It has a good sense of humor, but it doesn't revel in its comic side. Given the wild plot twists and meta-dialogue that punctuate the climax, Jarmusch could have taken the funny farther. *The Dead Don't Die* is actually a pretty decent movie, although it isn't going to turn the zombie genre on its head considering it riffs off of George Romero's oeuvre. However, beheaded zombies spewing out dust rather than blood or guts is a novel concept.

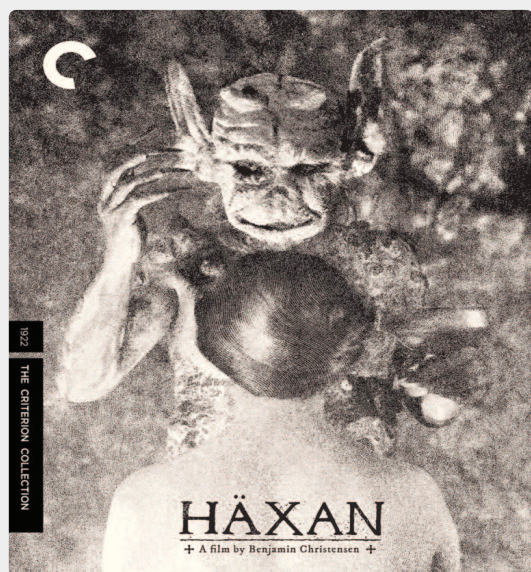
BACK IN BLACK

Emmy Award-winning director/producer Dan Curtis was an acknowledged master of late '60s and '70s television horror, and Karen Black was the diverse, Oscar-nominated actress who appeared in some chillers and thrillers, including *Burnt Offerings* and *House Of 1000 Corpses*. First broadcast in 1975, *Trilogy of Terror* stars Black as four different women plagued by problems: a buttoned up college professor who is seduced by a sinister student; feuding twin sisters with opposite personalities; and a single woman who's controlled by her manipulative mother but enamored with a new love and a strange gift she bought him. All three of these pieces were inspired by short stories by acclaimed science fiction/horror author Richard Matheson, who actually adapted the third story for this anthology himself. The first two are decent horror tales but it's the finale, inspired by Matheson's "Prey," that shines. Black's character purchases a Zuni fetish doll for her professor boyfriend and finds herself under attack because it is possessed by the spirit of a vicious warrior. Yeah, it's politically incorrect and walks the line between comical and creepy, but that razor-toothed statuette psychically scarred many kids back in the day and is still fun to watch now. *Trilogy of Terror* is a mixed bag capped by a great third act, so fans of Black and Curtis' work will definitely want to check it out. If you're a physical product person, Kino Lorber's Blu-Ray comes from a 4K transfer, and it includes new and past bonus featurettes and new liner notes from film critic Simon Abrams who examines the movie's nuances and how it holds up today. This creepy collection spawned a 1996 sequel which Kino just released, so I should finally sit down and watch that.



ROAD TO HELL

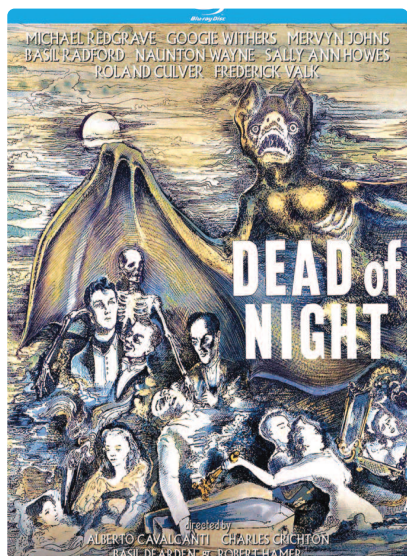
And Soon The Darkness (1970) is one of those long-lost gems that has received a Hollywood remake (the 2010 version with Amber Heard and Karl Urban) with most new viewers not knowing about the original source material. Much of the creative team behind this rural psychological thriller were fresh off of working on the beloved BBC spy series *The Avengers*, and it shows. Writers Brian Clemens and Terry Nation and director Robert Fuest make maximum use of basic elements that include a small cast and country locations. Two attractive young British nurses on a bicycling holiday through the French countryside separate after arguing over their plans. One of them (Michele Dotrice) disappears, while the other (Pamela Franklin) tries to ascertain what happened. There are few other people that enter into the drama, but each of them is a potential suspect. Fuest deftly ratchets up the tension as the suspense gradually builds over the course of the day, and he deserves props for pulling this off in daytime, with shadowy rooms and wooded areas providing contrast. Well shot and acted, *And Soon The Darkness* cleverly refrains from using subtitles whenever one of the women, neither of whom are well-versed in French, speak to a local. Although its climax derives from a flawed plot line, this thriller will still grip you until the end. Star Pamela Franklin would go on to appear in the fantastic horror film *The Legend of Hell House* three years later. Kino Lorber's reissue includes an audio commentary from film historian Troy Howarth as well as a lively chat between director Fuest, co-writer Clemens, and journalist Jonathan Sothcott about the making of the movie.



WITCH HUNTING 101

The Dutch film *Haxan* (1922) is both a documentary and fictional recreation of European witch hysteria from the Middle Ages, and that is something that certainly resonates in America (think of Salem). While a majority of us now view such persecution as pure misogyny and religious propaganda, it is likely far more people still needed educating about the matter a century ago. Director Benjamin Christensen, who plays Satan in the film, conjures up grotesque and sometimes amusing examples of how evil and devilishness were perceived, and how mental illness was misperceived, both in the early 20th century and harkening back hundreds of year. The film ruffled the feathers of religious zealots and was banned in

the U.S. back in the day. *Haxan* toes the line between scholarly dissertation and myth busting while also exploiting the horror imagery that makes for a fun movie. At 105 minutes, this black and white silent film, although enlivened by a 2001 recording of the original score that accompanied its premiere, runs a bit long, but there is a shorter cut included. Many horror and history buffs will appreciate its value, including its inventive special effects and augmented with the Criterion Collection's strong supplements. These include an isolated score, audio commentary from film scholar Casper Tybjerg, the director's 1941 intro to the film's re-release, very in-depth liner notes about the film, its score, and cinematic representations of witchcraft, and a 76-minute version of the film from 1968 with narration from Beat Generation author William S. Burroughs and a dark, jazzy score featuring violin virtuoso Jean-Luc Ponty.



CLASSIC CREEPSHOW

Horror anthologies are a dime a dozen, but when a good one makes its way onto your screen, it's well worth having waded through

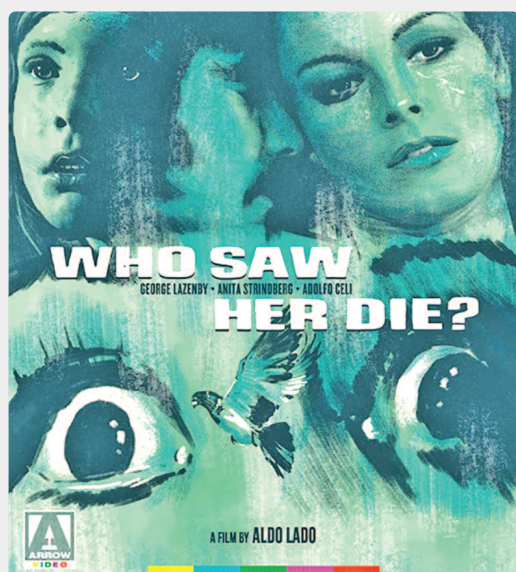
mediocre fare to get there. *Dead of Night*, a British omnibus from 1945, remains very effective today because it doesn't pander to clichés or cheap thrills. A group of friends meet at an English countryside cottage to trade supernatural stories, which include an eerie ghost tale, an experience of déjà vu, a possessed mirror, a fateful game of golf, and a lifelike ventriloquist's dummy that exerts a sinister hold over its owner. Keep in mind, this came out two to three decades before various Amicus horror compendiums and the Anthony Hopkins thriller *Magic*. Shot in black-and-white and featuring many notable actors from back in the day, *Dead of Night* works well because its creepy ideas are timeless and translate across the decades. Kino Lorber's Blu-Ray release includes a commentary by noted cult film historian Tim Lucas and a 75-minute documentary featuring a lot of animated talking heads, including cult film aficionado Kim Newman and famed director John Landis, all waxing enthusiastic about this pormanteau and making the case for how it was not only the first very successful British horror anthology but also how it influenced so many that came after. Kino have taken this new Blu-ray from a 4K master.

CHUCKY REBORN

Does the world need a *Child's Play* (2019) reboot? Especially given that there have been seven films and now a TV series from original creator Don Mancini in the works? The answer would be no. However, writer Tyler Burton Smith and director Lars Klevberg deliver a fresh take on the pint-sized homicidal maniac. This time he's not possessed by the spirit of a serial killer who uses Vodou magic to jump into an adult body. Instead, Chucky represents modern AI gone amok, his programming neutered by a disgruntled company worker retaliating against the man who fired him. This new iteration of *Child's Play* echoes a recent episode of *Black Mirror* as lonely kid Andy Barclay (Gabriel Bateman) bonds with a sophisticated, lifelike doll that learns to interact with him and helps him gain friends. The twist here is that while Chucky's built-in directive is to become friends with his owner, his lack of filters means he is willing to kill to keep Andy safe. With the pressures of social isolation, his mother's financial stress, and her bullying boyfriend shaking his soul, Andy struggles with Chucky's terrible actions like the dark thoughts swirling in his head. Mark Hamill provides the effectively eerie voice



of Chucky who turns into a semi-tragic figure as the story progresses. There's the usual crazy finale that everyone expects, and while we certainly didn't need another version of *Child's Play*, I'll give props to this creative team for tapping into our modern concerns about AI's usefulness and pitfalls. Note to the suits: A sequel is unnecessary.



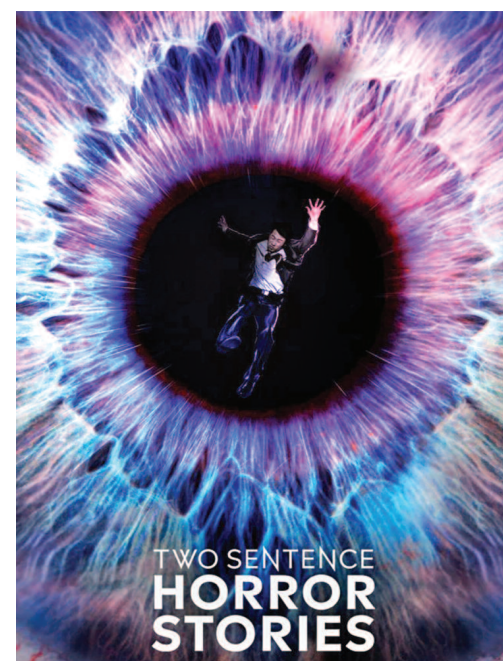
BONDED BY BLOOD

The Italian giallo genre has always been dicey but produced some classics. It has given us many great and chilling soundtracks, and some lesser entries have original moments even within an inconsistent framework. The suspense-fueled genre fascinates because of its odd mash-up of elements and the unusual quality of the dubbing. Pretty much every Italian film in the '70s and '80s was dubbed in postproduction, which created an odd sonic vacuum free of environmental ambience that just added to a giallo's surreal nature. In *Who Saw Her Die?* (1972), George Lazenby plays a sculptor residing in Venice who seeks his young daughter's anonymous killer, which leads to investigating unsavory characters in the area and also drawing attention from the killer. While this isn't the most amazing giallo ever made, the inclusion of George Lazenby (who had recently played 007 in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*) and Adolfo Celi (Emilio Largo in *Thunderball*) lends credibility to the movie and will entice classic film buffs. It's occasionally overacted but generally well directed by Aldo Lado, and the weird children's chorus (from composer Ennio Morricone) that heralds each arrival of the killer is memorable. For its deluxe reissue, Arrow Video has provided 2 1/2 hours of bonus interviews with the director, co-star Nicoletta Elmi, co-writer Francesco Barilli, and film critic Michael Mackenzie that are enlightening and entertaining, as well as seriously in-depth liner notes from Rachael Nisbet and Troy Howarth (who also provides a commentary track).

NETFLIX FIX:

AURORA (2018)

A struggling seaside inn finds their fortunes diminished after a giant luxury liner partially capsizes along a nearby rock formation. With the creaking steel behemoth scaring off new customers, the struggling inn owner Leana (Anne Curtis), who is raising her young sister alone, decides to do the unthinkable and work with a local fishermen to recover dead bodies for grieving families behind the backs of the dismissive Coast Guard. What begins as a grave, gruesome task worsens when ghosts of the unfound survivors begin coming ashore and latching onto her daughter. *Aurora* maintains a spooky aura by keeping most of its scares low key. This Filipino chiller unsettles us with a humanist story that, while grounded in Asian horror tropes, resonates with authenticity and compassion. There's a touch of *Titanic* in this tale of a doomed passenger ship and its less prosperous ticket holders, and I was engaged by the dark ride it took me on.



TWO SENTENCE HORROR STORIES (2019)

Inspired by viral threads on Reddit and other web forums, the second season of this CW series features eight 20-minute episodes inspired by only two sentences. The results are usually quite good, with creator/producer/co-director and writer Vera Miao and her compatriots serving up spooky stories spanning the multicultural spectrum that both play off of and usurp genre expectations and societal stereotypes. The series balances real-world horror with the realm of the supernatural and often provides food for thought. Two of the most chilling involve a Latin American nanny to a rich family who must protect their autistic daughter from a home invasion, and a woman haunted by the ghost of her abusive, alcoholic spouse. While many of the scenarios are familiar, their resolutions often are not, which keeps things fresh. Even if they lack thematic subtlety, the episodes are well-directed and shot, and I found myself sucked into each one. I look forward to a second season.