

## James Beach

### “Collapsible Empire”

SEEKING insight into the human condition via Blockbusters struck Horace Munson as a sound way to discover something of merit. After all, millions of people went to see them in theaters, and rent them or buy them, every year. Paradoxically, he also liked to walk out on theaters of entranced strangers or flip off his DVD during the obligatory Dark Moment — always at the end of the second act — wherein hero and company receive the most devastating blow, and all seems lost. Until the next scene, that is, wherein the hero conjures enough movie-magic to defeat the villain.

The script, direction, action, all of it seemed predictably contrived from there on, what with the “surprise” or “forgotten” attribute for the hero, a tidying up of strategically-placed loose ends, the sudden soul shining within the about-to-be-slain villain. The other gunk annoyed him too: hokey special-effects subbing for depth of character, dead bodies flying every which way, mass destruction of autos/streets/buildings/nature, the booming sound-effects, decibels of over-the-top musical scoring...

According to Munson, exceptions to those sorts of mind-numbing final acts are few. Foreign films (excepting recent American-style efforts from Spain and Japan) work because they often fit no preconceived design; avoid gratuitous plot twisting, “quirky” character development or illogical romantic liaison; and are often shot with a small budget, with humanistic themes, sometimes covertly. Older independent films built in the States (before superstars and other rich scene-crashers changed the dynamic of the “indie” genre) often score big years or decades after release. And of course he enjoyed his “blue movies,” since they provides a basic f.ing purpose without pretension or decorative fluff, and can be played in a loop.

Yet the big-budget Poltergeist, directed by Tobe Hooper and written and produced by Steven Spielberg, quickly engulfed Horace Munson. (Rumors of a remake piqued his interest in watching the original.) He stayed rapt through all but the “lull” where everybody was whispering about ghosts and religion, at which point he checked his ‘fridge for leftovers. A moment later he was glad for empty hands! Munson deduced right then that the Poltergeist remake was in preproduction mostly because of the man who ripped off his own face. That was “the scene,” the talk of the industry, of movie-goers, at the time of its theatrical release in 1982. Casting\* Craig T. Nelson and JoBeth Williams as the scared-witless Steven and Diane Freeling helped too, since they were fairly respectable and attractive actors, and could convincingly shriek.

Also of note was the way young Carol Ann got sucked feet-first into her diabolical closet — soprano scream, long hair hovering, she clung to that bit torn from the wicker

headboard. This led fantastically to a later scene with an old psychic dwarf pitching tennis balls at that netherworld portal, which had a return-portal in the livingroom below, the gooey balls dropping there. Another gnarly element: storm-slick branches nabbing the sinewy, buck-toothed Robbie, a spontaneous Oz-like tornado spiriting off with the hungry oak only moments after he's yanked from the tree's slimy hollow.

The film's hyper-ordinary suburban setting, facile use of marijuana, and consequences-laden subtext gradually excited the sedentary Munson. He liked how the oily adolescent daughter Dana was a now-you-see-me, -now-you-don't type of foil for the playful poltergeist strikes and jabs. (She vanishes to a friend's place during the crises.) But when maggots wriggled out of raw meat, spiking that wonky parapsychologist with enough of the heebie-jeebies to excoriate his own cheeks with his fingernails, the movie made history. This, to Munson, was intensity on film.

What kept Munson from shutting off the DVD player at the Dark Moment of this Blockbuster was the crafty rescuing of Carol Ann from the spooks — he had no idea what to expect. A rope lassoing Diane as she strode into the closet portal assured that she wouldn't get lost in time-space while seeking her daughter in the netherworld. The scene, replete with strobes, flickering silhouettes, darting shadows, wind-machine gusts, and a giant roaring (papiér-maché?) head made in wry parody of Steven's horror-face, assured that the audience would remain with the Freelings for the duration of the quest.

That the director(s) believed this world Earth might exist merely as a womb for us thrilled Horace Munson. He mused over the "NDE Light" seen by people with near-death experiences — was The Light an entry, a portal back into this same planet? — the brilliance of hospital fluorescents as seen through a widening, tearing birth canal? — and if so: a pathway to this, or a discrete, existence?... The symbolism and metaphor of Poltergeist seemed attuned to this idea, especially Hooper's oozy red-slime special effects. The gobs of placenta-goo, gotten returning from "there" to "here"; plus the strength of a family's love, the power of faith, trust and honesty; and looking evil right in the eye; all these underpinnings congealed to make it a stand-out rental, in Munson's mind.

Then: The gore-ific resurrection, the surprise climax of plots! As the squeaky-clean Freelings packed up and prepared to move out of their ghost-free house, their demons regrouped. Diane has her jersey mostly down over her panties while gathering her brood to escape the house of suburbanite dreams gone renegade: Corpses float up out of the shallow-grave muck of the swimming pool-in-progress, caskets smash through the kitchen tiling, pop open, spill bones, rip up the lawn. An enormous mouth eats its way into the kids' bedroom closet portal. Electrical surges, zaps and freaky warps of dimension keep the audience poised on the edge of its seat.

The Revelation: A shady land developer built their home over a cemetery, moved the headstones, but not the bodies! Horace enjoyed this "skeleton out of the closet" theme almost as much as the metaphor about the birth canal. But although he agreed with the film's heavy-handed messages (soulless capitalism and the invasive evils of television), he felt confused over why "the other side" opted for retribution by compressing only the

Freeling house into a searing bright star. Was Mr. Freeling the only ignorant real estate agent in the development? Why was their home, out of an entire sector built on sacred ground, the sole empire collapsed? Surely the neighbors — who lived above their own assortment of skeletons — would encounter similar “disturbances”.

Yet fulfillment was there, attained. As the end credits and la-la-la lullaby played, a mostly content Horace Munson set down his notepad and wandered from his recliner to stare at the starry night sky. He supposed the vacuum of space paralleled the womb, its various solar systems providing nutrients, its seeming vastness merely uterine walls of time, but digging much deeper was moot. He preferred instead to keep a steady, albeit stone-cold, grip on the microcosmic reality at hand.

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\*The “Freelings”: Craig Nelson syndicated in “Coach,” starred in a few lesser films, was it The Skulls that came on cable recently? And JoBeth Williams in womyn’s network dramas, that nuclear holocaust mini-series, the big The Big Chill, etc. The son, Oliver Robins, soon gave up movie acting; during one scene he was nearly strangled by the machine that wrapped a toy clown’s candy-striped arms round his neck...

## THE POLTERGEIST CURSE

Legend in Hollywood. One death per film.

Toward the end of filming Part III (1988), Heather O’Rourke’s intestines shut down and she died, age 12. Oddly, she’s the only actor to return from the original film for the final installment. Some of her unfinished scenes employ body-doubles with fright-masks and life-size dolls. The talents of Tom Skerritt, Nancy Allen, Lara Flynn Boyle can’t save this rip-off, set in a haunted highrise.

Part II, The Other Side (1985), has a Native American desert sage, and some spiritual missives (undoubtedly massacred during rewrites). The Tall Man, in the brimmed hat, played with macabre control by Julian Beck, gave lots of women the creeps. He was the second victim of the Curse, dead of stomach cancer, pre-release.

Dominique Dunne, who played the lovely Dana in Part I, was the first victim of the Curse: Choked to death, by a boyfriend, on her front lawn. What a shocker, for the cast and crew... Did she watch the final cut? Verify with IMDb for DoD.