Hollyweird: Old Oddities & New Nightmares of La La Land

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Week 6

1970S: WEIRD CUTS

During the final throws of the Vietnam war and its aftermath American cinema began to reflect a brutalised and dispossessed nation. Released in 1974, towards end of the Watergate scandal, Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* was released. A relentless horror, it became a definitive piece of work during the decade. Weird? For sure. But steeped in more reality than some would care to accept; literally revealing the bowels of the US and the remnants of those left to rot in the past. A true American gothic tale. Littered amongst such extreme horror is a spattering of the 'Acid Westerns' and one of the most bizarre entries of the decade: John Boorman's *Zardoz*.

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

High Plains Drifter (1973)
Director(s): Clint Eastwood
Studio(s): The Malpaso Company

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)
Director(s): Tobe Hooper
Studio(s): Vortex

Zardoz (1974)
Director(s): John Boorman
Studio(s): 20th Century Fox

Reference to:

El Topo (1970)
Director(s): Alejandro Jodorowsky
Studio(s): Producciones Panicas

Greaser's Palace (1972)
Director(s): Robert Downey Sr.
Studio(s): Greaser's Palace Ltd.

The Hills Have Eyes (1977)
Director(s): Wes Craven
Studio(s): Blood Relations Company

Eraserhead (1977)
Director(s): David Lynch
Studio(s): American Film Institute (AFI) / Libra Films

Notes:

"The influences in my life were all kind of politically, socially implanted. And then there was Watergate." — Tobe Hooper

As mentioned across the majority of Hollywood courses so far – predominantly NEW HOLLYWOOD – the Vietnam War had a major impact on the psyche of America.

During the 1970s, in the final years of the war, the nation was broken and dispossessed; desensitised by the real horrors. Brutality was on both sides but from the a capitalist nation fighting communism in the fallout of WWII it often resulted in a power hungry nation showing off its power.

Some of the imagery here only hints at what was seen in the papers and on TV screens, the media unfiltered.

And innocent bystanders including children. The Pulitzer Prize winning photograph known as "The Terror of War" taken by photojournalist Nick Ut features a young girl who went on to be labelled the 'Napalm Girl'. Naked and burnt from the heat of the Napalm, there are more images(and footage) showing her injuries at the time that really hit home on the atrocities of war.

The media pushed the name Napalm Girl, diluting the photograph and document further, almost dehumaising the young girl. Phan Thi Kim Phuc was later photographed in 2016 showing her scars. Now at peace she was full of hatred for a decade after the events before converting to Christianity.

Richard Nixon, who had failed at the presidency during JFK's run had become president on 20th January 1969. 'Tricky Dicky' – a man who would not only gain a reputation as a war hawk but become involved in one of the worst prsidential scandals that also contributed to shaping attitudes within and reflecting on America.

The Watergate scandal refers to the burglary and illegal wiretapping of the headquarters of the Nixon's opposition the Democrats in the Watergate complex. It was committed by members of Nixon's re-election campaign and was subsequently covered up, eventually resulting in Nixon's resignation on August 9, 1974. American citizens, on top of their dispondency with war, assassinations, and civil rights riots now had to deal with lies from the top.

Once exposed, British television host and journalist, the legendary David Frost interviewed Nixon in which he not only admitted to his lies but broke down.

It signalled a major turning point in US history…

… although more than enough echoes during the Trump administration. A character who still lingers in the background no matter how much evidence is brought to light.

Remnants of America

From these monstrous realities to the remnants of the homeland; broken and forgotten societies that house twisted and broken minds.

"My family's always been in meat." — Hitchhiker

One of the most potent (and disturbing) films ever made could be considered a 'New Hollywood Horror'. It not only came at a time during this new wave of filmmaking but perfectly reflects these Vietnam and Watergate anxieties.

The character of Leatherface goes way beyond the classic Universal monsters, tapping into something far more disturbing. He is part of a cannibalistic family who are a dark reflection of a class left to ruin… left to the past and their own laws. They are part of the frontier that seems further enough away from society that they are stuck in another time with no one to police them.

All of this is emphasized by the idea of usually taking city folk and placing them out of their comfort zone and, as an early slasher, places a group of young people front and centre. Sally, the final girl, doesn't come into her own until the final terrifying act; actress Marilyn Burns sheer terror not acted at all after being put through the ringer during the scene tied to a chair in the blazing heat, surrounded by melting special effects and real bones.

There are a number of moments designed to show the contrast between classes, especially when you see the references to how people make a living and impact of capitalist America on slaughter houses.

What makes the film so frightening is its 16mm grain and realism; the events inspired by the murderer Ed Gein. His face traumatising a nation when the story was one the first to be filmed, his ghoulish features often placed next to the kid's breakfast serial when parents across America caught up on their news. Ah… the nuclear family and TV nation. Gein's home was a 'House of Horrors' with all manner of items found in his shrine from belts made from women's nipples to chairs made of human skeletons.

Looking at such morbid influences, America has remained fascinated with true crime. They seem to feed off one another.

Gein's activities and mother fixation also inspired Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960) and Buffalo Bill in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Yep… Gein made an entire 'woman suit'.

Wes Craven explored similar fringe societies in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), both films (along with John Boorman's *Deliverance* from 1972) defining the term 'Hillbilly horror'.

The Weird Western

"It's what people know about themselves inside that makes 'em afraid." — The Stranger

Not only Clint Eastwood's second film as a director but also his first Western as a director. You would have expected something perhaps a little more 'normal', yet *High Plains Drifter* pushes th genre into Weird Western territory as it takes on a supernatural and 'devilish' undertone as he (quite literally) paints the town red.

It's a fantastic Western, period – gritty, transgressive, yet never afraid to still show the audience what to expect from the outlaw characters Eastwood played.

Over the years he has defined (and redefined) the Western through his iconic characters.

His work on Westerns ha been there pretty much from the start of his acting career with the Western TV series *Rawhide* (1959-1965) and became a household name even before his film career took off. But, even Clint started off with the weird when he first appeared in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) sequel *Revenge of the Creature* in 1955.

The Western genre has often been a hard sell. Part of it is down to the genre being so masculine and it's us of archetypes (and stereotypes) from John Wayne and John Ford's Westerns with their use of the iconic landscape – Monument Valley the largest and closest natural setting.

However, Eastwood's rise through the revisionist era of the Western via Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns was instrumental in reshaping the genre, despite still falling into the aforementioned trappings. He only had to have the look and say very little. His outlaw never wasted time with a gunfight in the street – often seen as the more honourable square-off – but to John Wayne's dismay would just as well shoot a guy in the back.

There is always the classic drifter riding into town and saving the day… then riding back out. But with High Plains Drifter, the twist elevates this simple trope and convention of the genre all the more.

The film's off-kilter nature is reinforced by it's stage-like appearance. It is measured and self-contained with some elements spelling it out for you in terms of its 'devilish' slant.

Some imagery (although nowhere near as surreal) is reminiscent of Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo*, a film that defined what became known as the 'Acid Western' subgenre. Full of nightmarish and brutalist imagery, Jodorowsky's film shows of the Chilean-Ukrainian avant-garde filmmaker's style. It is self-indulgent but unforgettable, as with all of his work.

Other Acid Western's of the time include Robert Downey Sr.'s *Greaser's Palace* which sees a six-year old Robert Downey Jr. in a *very* early appearance.

Another acid trip…

"We seal ourselves herewith into this place of learning." — Old Scientist

Produced, and directed by John Boorman, this fantasy movie was a far cry from Boorman's previous films *Point Blank* (1967) and *Deliverance* (1972) but, in light of an abortive attempt at adapting *The Lord of the Rings*, makes complete sense. It is also a prime example of Sean Connery attempting to reinvent himself as a star after the huge success of the Bond ilms and distancing himself as much as possible from the role. I'm not even going to explain the plot – it really is something seen to be believed with its odd look at humanity; specifically sex and death.

As a psychedelic sci-fi satire that reflects the hippy (and trippy) views of the period, it still stands as one of the strangest films of the 1970s. Connery can be seen for most of the film wearing thigh-high boots, a red nappy, and adorning a ponytail. The film feels like a camp version of *Conan the Barbarian* having more in common with 1968's *Barbarella*.

There is certainly no doubting its visuals, Boorman a masterful director, despite some of his choices of films over the years.

There is, once again, a distinct Jodorowsky vibe. But also a strong use of the mise-en-scène; specifically symmetry. Hence, Kubrick's influence all over the film, but can certainly be seen in Jodorowsky's compositions too showing how much of an impact Kubrick was having on his contemporaries.

Quite different to other familiar fantasies of the decade.

There is no forgetting the epic scale of the opening as the Star Destroyer looms over us in pursuit of a much smaller cruiser, but, even though it is a space fantasy, there is something familiar enough for the audience to buy into it primed on space landings and Ziggy Stardust.

Obviously the film created iconic characters and the launching of three major stars in their own right. Mark Hamill, a superb voice actor and raconteur, the late Carrie Fisher (daughter of Golden Age star Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher) who also found acclaim as a writer, and Harrison Ford; one the biggest movie stars of the past 50 years.

But there was far more to it than that. Most of which can be attributed to George Lucas' world-building that mined the monomyth set out by Joseph Campbell and his exploration of the 'Hero's Journey in his books; most notably *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell's belief was that essentially humanity follows the same path and the same stories of self-discovery; parallels of which can be seen in archetypes such as the 'wise old man' prevalent in all these kinds of stories. For example, Obi-Wan Kenobi is no different to Gandalf or Dumbledore. Three separate fantasy stories but the same blueprint of characters and plot.

Again – more familiarity: The opening crawl, sans 'A New Hope' or episode reference which came later as the sequels were released and the Star Wars was reformatted as *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*.

A device which was a huge nod to the classic film serials George Lucas and his generation grew up on. The opening crawl, cliff hanger endings and space opera. In fact, Lucas originally wanted to remake Flash Gordon but could not acquire the rights, so he built his own universe instead. Amongst its 'used universe' aesthetic, designs paid homage to cinema itself from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) to the archetypal outlaws, warriors and wizards.

Yet, George Lucas' original *Star Wars* is full of odd and weird creatures that culminates in a key scene. The Cantina sequence still feels like (and highlights) the film's cult movie vibe before it obviously grew into the phenomenon it is today. A rare movie and franchise that manages to popularise the 'weird'.

Polarising to Davd Lynch's *Eraserhead* released the same year, which was full of suffocating, weird and claustrophobic imagery we will look at over the next two weeks.