

# Halloween

By Murray Leeder

“Halloween” is a franchise of sequels and remakes, and sequels to remakes, and novels and comic books and masks and memorabilia, plus a legendarily terrible 1983 video game. It spawned countless imitators, triggering the cycle of low budget slasher movies aimed at replicating its success. But before all that, there was a single film: bold, frightening and intense, but with a sense of restraint and subtlety. It brims with the youthful energy of its creators, displaying obvious love for the craft of filmmaking, but it also contains an ineffable elegance and grace that few of its successors could equal.

Its origins were humble. “Halloween” was made for around \$320 000 and shot in 21 days in 1978. California subbed for Illinois, March subbed for October, in neither case seamlessly. Producer Irwin Yablans conceived it as “The Babysitter Murders,” an inexpensive horror film with teen appeal, featuring events unfolding over a single night. Partnering with Moustapha Akkad, Yablans approached John Carpenter, attracted by the low-budget innovations demonstrated in “Assault on Precinct 13” (1976). Shortly afterwards, Yablans had perhaps the key insight: why not set the film at “Halloween”? The holiday provided a logical release date and a set of recognizable iconographies to mine.

A savvy young graduate of USC’s Cinema program, Carpenter agreed to the job with several conditions: that he would have near-complete creative control, could use his own cast and crew, would earn a share of the film’s profits, and could compose the score. The only familiar name in the cast would be Donald Pleasence as the gun-toting psychiatrist Dr. Loomis and the lead role of Laurie Strode went to Jamie Lee Curtis; the fact that she was the daughter of “Psycho” (1960) star Janet Leigh made for free publicity. Important collaborators included co-screenwriter and producer Debra Hill, production designer/editor Tommy Lee Wallace and cinematographer Dean Cundey. The key design element was the mask worn by Michael Myers, modified from a Wil-



*Jamie Lee Curtis as Laurie fights off the be-masked Michael Myers (Tony Moran). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

liam Shatner mask purchased for two dollars. Expectations were low, but word of mouth, a striking publicity campaign and some strong reviews (notably from Tom Allen, Dave Kehr and Roger Ebert) made “Halloween” an unexpected hit, earning more than \$70 million on its initial worldwide release.

“Halloween” is distinguished by a number of technical innovations. It was the first film to make extensive use of Panaglide, the chest-strapped Steadicam that facilitated the film’s numerous long takes. The gliding camerawork approximates the movement of the human body but with an unearthly, ghostly smoothness. From the first scene, Panaglide is associated with Michael Myers’s perspective, so its use throughout the film, even in scenes where Michael is physically absent, helps construct him as an omnipresent, unseen, haunting force. Carpenter’s careful widescreen compositions, using an Anamorphic 2.25:1 aspect ratio, allow the intrusion of unexpected figures into the frame. Few films have been as damaged by being cropped for television and home video screenings. Furthermore, “Halloween” is unthinkable without Carpenter’s primitivist, minimalist score, fit to jangle the nerves of even the most jaded viewer. Carpenter, whose father was a music professor and who has fronted several bands, has scored most of his films, developing a more coherent sound than many “professional” composers have managed. The iconic main theme from “Halloween” is in 5/4 time, its unevenness in the repetition of certain

phrases; it is dominated by a rhythmic ostinato that continually sequences through a number of minor chords, destabilizing any sense of tonal certainty. Like Panaglides, the score functions to imply Michael's presence even in the absence of his image. Its restless quality infuses tension into the most incidental scenes.

"Halloween" owes much of its success to effective casting and characterizations. The unforced, believable banter between Curtis's Laurie and her two friends, Lynda (P.J. Soles) and Annie (Nancy Loomis) makes them more than mere forgettable victims. Donald Pleasence plays Dr. Loomis as a driven man who has looked into the face of evil too long; Loomis seems himself to be skirting the edges of madness, but Pleasence remains restrained, even playing down rather than up as he intones about "pure evil." And Curtis embodies Laurie marvelously: sensible, resourceful and capable but with an underlying sadness as she watches her more outgoing friends live a freer life than she can allow herself. The "Final Girl" character type that she embodies is often criticized, perhaps justly, for making a survivor of the most conservative and virginal girl, there is no denying Curtis's accomplishment in making Laurie a vivid and memorable protagonist.

Michael Myers, on the other hand, is memorable precisely because of a lack of characterization. Who or what is this being who murdered his sister as a child: a disturbed man, or a supernatural monster? What does he want? What has brought him back to Haddonfield? Why does he stalk babysitters? Why does he kill sexually active women (and why then would he want to kill Laurie)? His blank white mask yields no answers, and when it is stripped off, his face reveals no more. He stands still as a statue and

stares constantly (like the ghosts in "The Innocents"). The script calls him "the Shape," children prefer "the boogeyman," and Loomis likes just "it." But nobody ever, ever calls him "Michael Myers" ("Michael" is only said in the introductory sequence and "Myers" is only used with reference to his sister and the house). The name seems inadequate. The lack of the explanation or motivation is one of the film's best decisions –

Michael is frightening precisely because he is unmotivated, inexplicable, and unstoppable. The lame explanations the sequels provide is evidence of how wise Carpenter was to leave his motivation unclear.

Like Michael himself, the "Halloween" franchise collapses occasionally but never stays down. The brand has threatened to swallow up the original work. Yet "Halloween" the film retains a stature apart from "Halloween" the franchise and the empire, and its presence in the National Film Registry is a testament to its singular and continuing power.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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