



TERROR VISION

The Funhouse

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

If you want to understand Tobe Hooper's relationship to and impact on the horror genre, you could do worse than watching one of his very finest films, 1981's *The Funhouse*. After an opening credits overture of creepy, chattering midway animatronics, we move into a young horror buff's suburban bedroom, decorated with Halloween masks, posters celebrating the Universal Studios monsters, and rubber spiders. This is just the beginning of Hooper's piling on of horror clichés: there's a stalker POV that leads to a buxom young woman in the shower, à la *Psycho*, resolved as a harmless prank assassination with a rubber knife, and then a lot of business revolving around a visit to a fun fair and a carnival dark ride – all as if to say 'Can you believe anyone used to get spooked at this kids' stuff?'

But then one of the carnies loses his rubber Frankenstein mask to reveal a cleft-palated homicidal abomination beneath, and suddenly the movie loses the tired trappings of the classic horror and becomes a horror film in the Tobe Hooper mould, which is to say an excruciating ordeal, a predator-versus-prey fight for survival that is totally, terribly absorbed in the adrenaline-fuelled, propulsive panic of the moment.

Between *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Eaten Alive* and *The Funhouse*, certain Hooper signatures emerge. In each, the rule of the jungle is tantamount: it's either beat a retreat, or be eaten. His through-the-grinder style lent itself to condensed timelines, and the better part of each of the above films takes place through the course of a single harrowing night. (It should be noted, though, that before the carnage begins, *The Funhouse* carries itself nicely as a loose, amiable portrait of smalltown teenage time-wasting.)

Beginning with the gristly geegaws filling the Sawyer family home and abattoir in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Hooper showed himself a diligent do-it-yourself world-builder, particularly interested in the fetid, out-of-the-way spaces created and maintained by dysfunctional individuals or families with lots and lots of time on their hands – the claustrophobic purpose-built Starlight Hotel set in *Eaten Alive*, or the carnival attraction maintained by the father and son in *The Funhouse*, whose relationship dynamic is quite close to that between *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*'s hulking, tantrum-prone Leatherface and his abusive keepers. Hooper had a knack for envisaging environments as organic outgrowths of diseased minds, and Ridley Scott, less a natural-born filmmaker in every possible regard, credited *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as an inspiration on his own H.R. Giger-designed *Alien* (1979).

The Funhouse, for Universal, was Hooper's first studio feature film, made when his stock had been climbing steadily in the years since the immense profitability of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* had put the ol' Austin shit-kicker on Hollywood's radar. For Warner Bros Television and ABC he did commendable work on the two-part 1979 miniseries adaptation of *Salem's Lot*, based on a novel by Stephen King, then well on his way to household recognition, and followed *The Funhouse* with *Poltergeist* (1982), which would

be the second legitimate pop cultural phenomenon of his then still-young career.

The inconsistent quality of even Hooper's peak output has sometimes confounded his most ardent admirers, but this is concomitant to his volatile tone-mixing method, a dangerous technique which produced films that were awful or great, but rarely indifferent. And when Hooper did reach greatness, which he did more times than all but a few of us can hope for, there were very few better – his was one of the great creative acts of destruction.

Nick Pinkerton, *Sight & Sound*, bfi.org.uk, 6 September 2017

A contemporary review

The cinematic intelligence of Tobe Hooper, who radically made over the horror genre in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, is reasserted with *The Funhouse*. In *Chain Saw*, Hooper dealt with parallel families – one 'normal' and one 'abnormal' – and with how a displacement of dignity led to dementia. It also featured the Gothic idea of a terrible house in which human evil is objectified, centralised and visited on those who stray within – which is the explicit basis of *The Funhouse* as well. Here lighting and sets pay homage to all those low-budget screamies set in fairgrounds and carnivals, to the recent work of Dario Argento (*Suspria*, *Inferno*), and to *Alien* (the film's finale builds in the wind tunnels and machine-shop bowels of the Funhouse, and the mutant is an albino Alien). But the way in which the setting is exploited belongs to Hooper alone.

Again as in *Chain Saw*, the film's real focus is on the family and, through it, on the 'permissive' society. Over and over, we see how the 'monstrous' (and once more all-male) family – the source of the evil – is sustained and regenerated by exterminating (in *Chain Saw*, actually devouring) the threat of the outsider. The viewer is unable to disassociate himself from the mutant family, because the basic emotional ties between its father and son are made more recognisable and familiar than those between the 'normal' family – whose parents sit and quarrel over Mom's drinking while son and daughter run wild. The coherence of these parallel family portraits – which build towards a Dorian Gray-style scream of Freudian recognition as the permissive society confronts its true self – is due in part to Hooper's invention (cunning use of Dolby sound to convey telling snatches of conversation subtly and, inside the Funhouse, to use aural shock from every angle, just as every corner of the frame is exploited visually).

But equally important is his traditional method of architecting each film as one long, relentless build of tension. Which sounds as puritanical as Hooper's equally relentless morality – except that *The Funhouse* is spiked with the same sort of irresistibly anarchic and black humour as *Chain Saw* and *Death Trap*, right up to a *tour de force* finale which literally transforms the monster at the moment of his death into an exhibit before our eyes – watched by a distraught but still fascinated Amy, a stand-in for our own voyeurism, just as all the mechanically laughing exhibits have been throughout the film. Far from being an exemplar of overwhelming nihilism, *The Funhouse* is an eminently satisfying piece of film work.

Cynthia Rose, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1981

THE FUNHOUSE

Director: Tobe Hooper
Production Companies: Mace Neufeld Productions, Universal Pictures Corporation
Executive Producers: Mace Neufeld, Mark L. Lester
Producers: Derek Power, Steven Bernhardt
Associate Producer: Brad Neufeld
Unit Production Manager: Norman Cohen
Production Co-ordinators: Dee Dee Winner, Cynthia E. Streit
Post-production Supervisor: John Orland
Production Assistants: Jeffrey W. Stacey, Melanie Grefé, Don Gilman, Arnold Leibowitz
Assistant Director: Adrienne Bourbeau
Screenplay: Larry Block
Director of Photography: Andrew Laszlo
Camera Operator: James Pergola
Special Effects: J.B. Jones
Animated Figures: Animated Display Creations
Editor: Jack Hofstra
Location Editor: Angelo Ross
Production Designer: Mort Rabinowitz
Art Director: José Duarte
Set Decorator: Tom Coll
Wardrobe: Linda Benedict, Andre Lavery, Harold Richter
Make-up: Marlana May
Special Make-up Design: Rick Baker
Special Make-up Execution: Craig Reardon
Titles and Optical: Consolidated Film Industries
Main Title Design: Murray Naidich
Music: John Beal
Music Supervisor: Tom Catalano
Sound Recording: Jack Dalton Sr.
Sound Re-recording: Robert L. Hoyt, Earl Madery, John Stephens
Sound Editors: Dale Johnston, David Whittaker

Cast

Elizabeth Berridge (*Amy Harper*)
Cooper Huckabee (*Buzz*)
Miles Chapin (*Richie*)
Largo Woodruff (*Liz*)
Shawn Carson (*Joey Harper*)
Jeanne Austin (*Mrs Harper*)
Jack McDermott (*Mr Harper*)
Sylvia Miles (*Madame Zena*)
Kevin Conway (*barker at freak show, strip show, funhouse*)
Wayne Doba (*the monster*)
William Finley (*Marco the Magnificent*)
David Carson (*geek*)
Sonia Zomina (*bag lady*)
Ralph Marino (*truck driver*)
Herb Robins (*carnival manager*)
Mona Agar (*strip show dancer*)
Susie Malnik (*Carmella*)
Sid Raymond (*strip show MC*)
Larry Ross (*girlie show heckler*)
Frank Grimes (*strip show voyeur*)
Frank Schuller (*1st poker player*)
Peter Conrad (*midget with tall lady*)
Mildred Hughes (*tall lady*)
Glen Lawrence, Mike Montalvo (*spectators*)
Shawn Mcallister (*1st garbage collector*)
Sandy Mielke (*2nd garbage collector*)

USA 1981©
96 mins

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BUG 62

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Dada and Surrealism + intro by BFI Curator Steven Foxon

Thu 5 May 18:10

African Odysseys: Raça + Q&A co-hosted by Victor Fraga, DMovies

Sat 7 May 14:00

Woman with a Movie Camera: To Die For

+ intro by Hannah Strong

Sat 14 May 14:50

Woman with a Movie Camera: The Bling Ring

+ intro by Hannah Strong

Sat 14 May 18:00

Silent Cinema: Modern Times + intro

Sun 15 May 15:30

Seniors' Free Matinee: Gregory's Girl + discussion

Mon 16 May 14:00

Experimenta: Lensing the Landscape: River Yar + discussion with artists William Raban and Chris Welsby

Wed 18 May 18:15

Terror Vision: Ms .45 (AKA Angel of Vengeance)

Fri 27 May 18:30

Relaxed Screening: Frequencies (AKA OXV: The Manual)

+ intro and discussion

Mon 30 May 18:10

Projecting the Archive: Idol of Paris

+ intro by Josephine Botting, BFI Curator

Tue 31 May 18:15

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