

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Films to spook, thrill: From 'The Shining' to 'A Haunting in Venice'

By T. Rob Brown

As the autumn air begins to slightly cool and the leaves begin to change, the haunting season returns. This year's cinematic offerings are less than I'd hoped for, but I have a couple new films and one classic film for us to examine.

Recently, I went to see a couple of the newer releases: *A Haunting in Venice* (2023) and *The Creator* (2023). Yes, I realize *The Creator* isn't exactly a horror film, but it has some thriller aspects and I really thought it was going to have the dark feel of artificial intelligence taking over the world like in *The Terminator* (1984) film franchise. After viewing it, I realized that wasn't the case. Luckily, a showing of the Stephen King and Stanley Kubrick classic *The Shining* (1980) at Alamo Drafthouse helped put me back in the horror mood.

Let's begin with *A Haunting in Venice*, the third film by director Kenneth Branagh and based on Agatha Christie's famous novels. This one is loosely based on her 1969 novel, *Hallowe'en Party*: a perfect

October film theme. Branagh previously directed and starred in *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017) and *Death on the Nile* (2022).

This post-World War II period piece shows us a retired Inspector Hercule Poirot, played by Branagh, living alone and avoiding most people except his pastry delivery service.

Reluctantly, he goes on yet another mystery that turns to murder. His meticulous mind calculates all the variables as always. The outcome isn't always what you expect. This whole series is entertaining and interesting. Branagh isn't afraid to stray some from the books and to update the storytelling for the modern audience.

There are many great detectives in novels, but Poirot is one of the most famous, outside of Sherlock Holmes. Speaking of detectives, here's a little bit of trivia: detectives use two types of reasoning to resolve crimes. The first is called inductive reasoning, a method of drawing conclusions based on quite specific little details—also called a bottom-up approach. This is a technique Holmes is quite famous for and Poirot follows suit. Unfortunately, that means the term “deduce” used by Holmes isn't accurate—he induces most of the time. The second is deductive reasoning, when you look at the big picture and can then figure out small details based on that information—also called a top-down approach.

A Haunting in Venice (2023), directed by Branagh, Rated PG-13, stars Branagh, Tina Fey, Michelle Yeoh, Jamie Dornan, Camille Cottin, Riccardo Scamarcio, and Kelly Reilly. At 1 hour and 43 minutes, it received a certified fresh 76% on the Tomatometer at Rotten Tomatoes and a 77% audience score, plus a 6.8/10 on the International Movie Database. I give it one thumb up.

From the mind of one of the best Star Wars film directors since George Lucas, writer-director Gareth Edwards (*Rogue One* (2016)) brings us a sci-fi epic action thriller that asks us to re-evaluate what we know and think about A.I. This is a big topic in the public discourse right now, in the wake of generative programs like ChatGPT, DALL-E2, NightCafe, Midjourney, and so many more.

It's a common reoccurring theme in science fiction films such as *The Terminator*, *Ex Machina* (2014), *Chappie* (2015), *I, Robot* (2004), and of course Steven Spielberg's film of the same title *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). The number of A.I.-related sci-fi films continues to grow in recent years due to the real-life popularity of the software.

Most of the time, A.I. is pictured as the central opposition character or force in the film. *The Creator* takes a fresh look at A.I. lifeforms and goes in a different path.

The main character, Joshua played by John David Washington (*Tenet* (2020)), encounters moral dilemmas throughout the film and must come to terms between the beliefs of his government, his own beliefs, and the residuals of his lost love. He plays a complicated character, drawn in multiple directions by the people and events that surround him. Can this ex-special forces agent make the moral decision or will he be a government pawn in an ongoing battle?

I thought Washington's performance was just as strong here as it was in *Tenet*, maybe even more so since his role included more emotions.

This film included a strong and exciting story, interesting characters with excellent performances, and some phenomenal special effects. I'm eager to see what future sci-fi films emerge from Edwards's mind.

The Creator (2023), directed by Edwards, Rated PG-13, stars Washington, Gemma Chan, Ken Watanabe, Sturgill Simpson, and Allison Janney. At 2 hours and 13 minutes, it received a 68% on the Tomatometer and a 77% audience score, plus a 7.2/10 on IMDb. I give it one thumb up.

At more than 40 years old now, *The Shining* still holds up as a great horror film—even if some of the critics disagreed. Based on the 1977 King book of the same name, it stars Jack Nicholson as Jack Torrance in one of his career-defining roles, as directed by cinema legend Kubrick.

Critics and fans of the King novel pointed out that the film was less terrifying than the book. They also tended to note that the pacing of the film wasn't as good, nor were the characters. Some went so far as to say it fails as a horror film. Since I haven't read the novel, I can't comment on those differences; what I can do, is look at the film on its own merits. I believe it's an excellent horror film—maybe not in the highest tier, but certainly a classic that deserves respect.

Even King went on the record to say he believed Torrance was a decent person “bent one way and then the other” by various evil forces. Instead, Kubrick blurred that concept by turning Torrance into a psychopath.

The fictional story's setting was based on the reported hauntings at Colorado's Stanley Hotel, which coincidentally shares a name with the film's director. The film's exterior shots took place at the Timberline Lodge—though most of the film was shot in the Elstree Studios in Hertfordshire, England. Another interesting tidbit is that Kubrick shot Jack's typewriter pages in different languages for release in different countries. The DVD releases from 2001 and 2007 only show the English text on the pages.

Another fun fact, which I teach my photography students each semester, is that Kubrick based his images of the twin girls on a famous photograph titled “Identical Twins, Roselle, N.J.” (1966-1967) by Diane Arbus. The photograph could be seen at the National Gallery of Art in 2022. With the initial release of *The Shining*, millions of moviegoers unknowingly experienced Arbus's work second-hand.

Film historian Nick Chen reportedly said, “[Crew member Leon Vitali] was also responsible for discovering the creepy twin sisters on the final day of auditions. The pair, in fact, weren't twins in Kubrick's script, and it was Vitali who immediately suggested Diane Arbus's infamous photo of two identical twin sisters as a point of reference.”

The clarification that they weren't twins in Kubrick's script makes perfect sense. One of the managers of the hotel refers to the girls briefly but says they are around ages 8 and 10, which sounded like sisters of slightly different ages. I thought that was odd when I noticed they ended up being twins, on my initial viewing of the film.

At nearly 40 years later, its sequel *Doctor Sleep* (2019) picks up the story's continuity. Danny from the first film, who also went by the nickname Doc, is all grown up now—going by Dan—and played by the talented Ewan McGregor. Director Mike Flanagan worked with Stephen King on writing the screenplay for this sequel. It offers plenty of flashbacks and throwbacks to the original film, while expanding what we know and understand about people who have that special fictional gift referred to as “the shining.”

The Shining (1980), directed by Kubrick, Rated R, stars Nicholson, Shelley Duvall, and Danny Lloyd. At 2 hours and 26 minutes, it received a certified fresh 83% on the Tomatometer and a 93% audience score, plus an 8.4/10 on IMDb. I give it two thumbs up.

Doctor Sleep (2019), directed by Flanagan, Rated R, stars McGregor, Rebecca Ferguson, Kyliegh Curran, and Cliff Curtis. At 2 hours and 32 minutes, it received a certified fresh 79% on the Tomatometer and an 89% audience score, plus a 7.3/10 on IMDb. I give it one thumb up.

“The show must go on.”