



Grave Matters

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CONTENTS

Obsession	REVIEW
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Lee Cronin's The Mummy	REVIEW
------------------------	--------

Train to Busan	RETROSPECTIVE
----------------	---------------

Meat Days	LIST
-----------	------

Backrooms	REVIEW
-----------	--------

The Conjuring 2	RETROSPECTIVE
-----------------	---------------

The Wailing	RETROSPECTIVE
-------------	---------------

The Hills Have Eyes	RETROSPECTIVE
---------------------	---------------

Scary Movie	REVIEW
-------------	--------

Silent Hill	RETROSPECTIVE
-------------	---------------



REVIEW

Obsession

Grave Matters · 2026

Horror has always relied on the idea that you shouldn't tamper with nature, a hoary old chestnut as old as *The Wicker Man*. It's a premise that usually demands atmosphere, dread, and perhaps a bit of neckerchiefs and pagan rituals. However, when Jason Blum's production banner gets involved, the result tends to lean more toward accessible, PG-13 dread than gritty, archaeological horror. Enter *Obsession*, a film that sounds like it should be a thriller about stalking a lover, but is actually a low-budget fable about a guy who breaks a tree to get a girlfriend.

The premise, courtesy of writer-director Curry Barker, follows a hopeless romantic—played by Michael Johnston, who is basically just playing himself—named Baron “Bear” Bailey. Bear has a crush on Nikki Freeman (Inde Navarrette). To win her heart, he does the thing that every sensible person knows to avoid: he finds an

ancient, mystical tree known as the “One Wish Willow” and breaks a branch off it. Classic move. It turns out the tree has a warranty; when you break a branch, you get what you asked for, but you also have to pay a toll. The toll in this case is something sinister, moving the film firmly into the “be careful what you wish for” subgenre that borders on *The Monkey’s Paw* territory.

The film clocks in at a modest 108 minutes, a runtime that Barker utilizes well enough to keep the pacing snappy. There is no time to get bogged down in the sort of aimless meandering that often plagues modern folk horror. Instead, the movie treats the curse as a ticking clock, a supernatural deadline that forces Bear to scramble while the stakes for his relationship—and his life—climb. It's a classic structure, adapted for a modern, younger audience, and it

works well enough to sustain interest through the first act.

Visually, *Obsession* operates on a budget of \$750,000. You can tell. The production design is sparse, utilizing a lot of green screen or backlot work to sell the environment. It lacks the organic, muddy grit of a classic British countryside horror, opting instead for a slightly more sanitized, TV-movie aesthetic. The cinematography by Taylor Clemons attempts to make the Willow look imposing, framing the tree as a looming, arboreal entity, but the visual effects aren't quite there to sell the supernatural threat convincingly. The creature design or the manifestation of the curse remains mostly vague, relying on sound design and quick cuts rather than practical effects to create scares. This isn't a criticism of the ambition, but rather a recognition of the limitations; Blumhouse productions have gotten good at hiding a little money behind a lot of smoke and mirrors.

The cast is populated by actors who are currently finding their footing in genre cinema. Johnston brings a likable, generic lead energy that fits the role of the plucky underdog perfectly. Navarrette plays the love interest, Nikki, with a mix of sweetness and mystery that grounds the supernatural elements in human emotion. We actually care that she's in danger, which is rare for Blumhouse leads who often exist solely to be murdered. Andy Richter shows up as Carter, and while he usually brings the funny, here he serves as a bit of an exposition dump, providing the necessary lore about the Willow that the audience needs to understand the rules of the game.

The "Obsession" of the title is best understood not as a romantic fixation, but as the compulsion

of the protagonist to force an outcome. The film explores the toxicity of entitlement. Bear wants Nikki, so he steals from a deity (or the earth spirits, depending on how you interpret the metaphysics). It's a very millennial/Gen Z take on the curse: instant gratification with zero consequences. Barker handles this theme with a dry wit that suits the film's tone, never letting the horror get too bogged down in melodrama. The scares are largely jump-scare heavy, which is standard for the Blumhouse factory, but they are effective in the vacuum of a theater.

As the film progresses, the price of the wish becomes clear, and the film shifts from a teen rom-com into a straight-up survival thriller. The pacing accelerates, but because the runtime is strictly limited to 108 minutes, the payoff feels earned rather than dragged out. It avoids the mistake of stretching a simple idea into a drawn-out endurance test. If you're looking for deep philosophical dread or a subversion of the genre, you might be disappointed. *Obsession* wears its influences on its sleeve, aping the structure of *The Wicker Man* but stripping away the atmosphere for something more commercial.

Ultimately, *Obsession* is a solid, if derivative, entry in the modern horror landscape. It benefits from a charming lead and a concise script that respects the audience's intelligence enough not to explain the curse repeatedly. It's a movie that knows it's just a fun ride about a guy who wanted a girlfriend and ended up with a headache—or worse. It's not going to be remembered as a classic of the genre, but it's a diverting way to spend an evening, provided you don't have a sudden urge to break a branch off a willow.

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REVIEW

Lee Cronin's *The Mummy*

Grave Matters · 2026

We live in an era where cinematic universes are as common as bad remakes, and the *Mummy* brand has been trampled by everything from Tom Cruise running on sand to animated cartoons that target toddlers. When Lee Cronin, the man behind the effectively grim and atmospheric *The Hole* and the more recent *The Evil Within*, was announced as the helmsman for a new entry, the immediate reaction was confusion. Who is the target audience for a *Mummy* movie that isn't about ancient curses raising armies of the undead or crashing airplanes into the Pyramids?

The answer, it seems, is "people who like slow-burn domestic dread." Based on the provided details, Cronin's *Lee Cronin's The Mummy* (a title so long it practically functions as a legal disclaimer) is a deliberate departure from the blockbuster formula. It's a 133-minute endurance

test that trades action for atmosphere, and frankly, it's the smarter choice for a franchise looking to reclaim some dignity.

The premise sounds deceptively simple. A young journalist's daughter vanishes into the desert. Eight years pass. The family is left broken. Suddenly, the girl returns. What should be a tearful reunion turns into a nightmare. This is the kind of setup that usually lives on a Lifetime network melodrama, but the presence of Blumhouse and New Line Cinema ensures that the stakes are raised beyond soap opera levels. It's a "mystery" and "horror" hybrid, which suggests we aren't getting the creature feature of the 90s, but a psychological puzzle box involving grief, possession, and likely some very sticky desert sand.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this reboot is the directorial approach. Lee Cronin has a knack for building tension in confined spaces, but expanding that to a desert setting suggests a focus on isolation. When the desert is involved in horror—particularly with a plot about a missing child—there is an inherent assumption that nature itself has turned hostile. The tagline, "What happened to Katie?", is ominous not because it implies a supernatural entity, but because it implies a breach of the natural order.

The cast list offers a hint at the tone. We have Jack Reynor and Laia Costa in the lead roles as the parents dealing with the fallout of their daughter's disappearance. Reynor, usually a reliable presence in genre fare, plays the journalist father, Charlie Cannon. In a genre where parents often serve as either screaming idiots or sacrificial lambs, it's good to see actors with gravitas leading the charge. However, the real hook might be Natalie Grace as the returned Katie. Is she the monster, or is she a vessel? . The inclusion of May Calamawy as Detective Dalia Zaki suggests an investigation angle, likely probing whether the daughter is truly her old self or something that crawled out of the dunes.

The runtime of 133 minutes is a bold move for a supernatural thriller. In the modern era, if you aren't hitting the audience with a jump scare every fifteen minutes, you risk losing them. Cronin, however, seems content with letting the dread fester. This is "slow burn" horror territory, leaning into the folk horror tradition where the threat isn't a slasher in a hockey mask, but a violation of family secrets and past mistakes.

We have the Magician in the cast (played by Hayat Kamille), a figure who suggests that the horror might have roots in ritual or trickery

rather than simple curses. This adds a layer of intellectual engagement to the film. It's not just about running away from something; it's about understanding *why* the something is happening. The presence of Veronica Falcón as Carmen Santiago further suggests a community element, perhaps hinting at local legends or a cover-up involving the authorities.

Visually, one can anticipate the Blumhouse stamp. With a budget of \$22 million, there likely won't be billion-dollar set pieces. Instead, the money is probably being spent on practical effects for the "nightmare" elements and a stark, realistic aesthetic that grounds the supernatural. The cinematography by Dave Garbett will be crucial here; if the desert looks oppressive rather than picturesque, the movie succeeds.

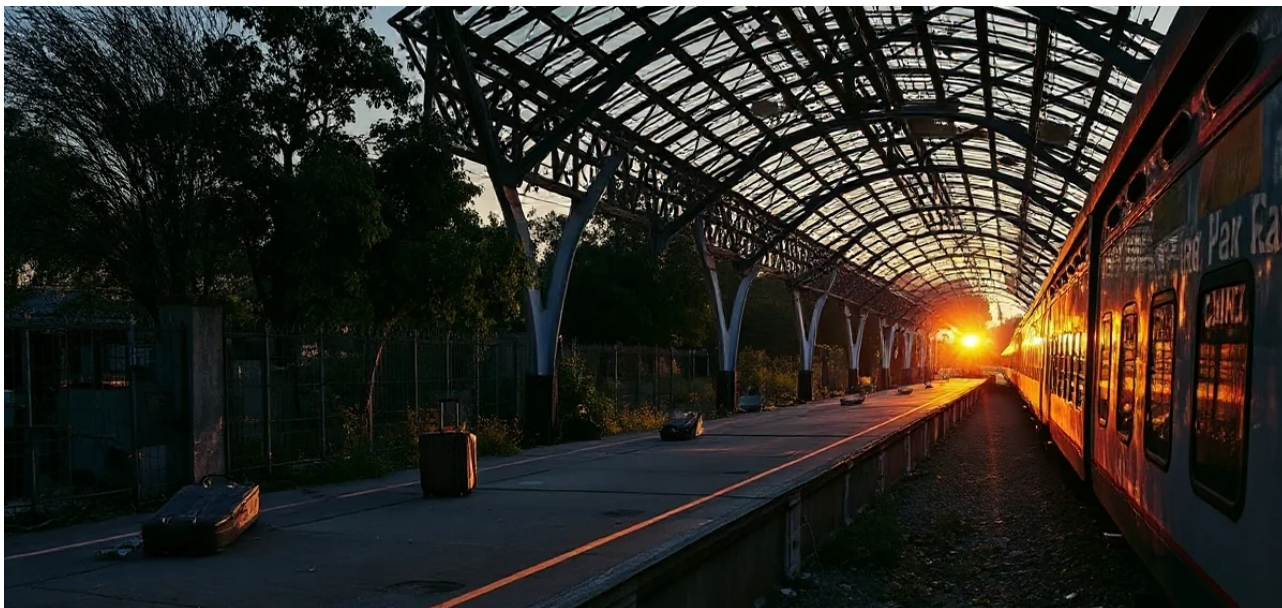
The production companies involved—Atomic Monster, Blumhouse, New Line—usually imply a certain level of competence. They know how to package genre material. The question is whether Cronin can deliver a story that feels like a *Mummy* movie while eschewing the franchise's usual tropes. It feels like a gamble, shifting the focus from the undead monster in a bandage to the living, breathing trauma of a broken family.

Ultimately, *Lee Cronin's The Mummy* appears to be an exercise in subverting expectations. It takes a title synonymous with adventure and adventure films and replaces it with a family drama that happens to feature ancient Egyptian mythology as a flavoring. If you are looking for a popcorn flick where a monster punches a mummy, you will be disappointed. If you are looking for a slow, suffocating thriller about a family trying to put their lives back together only to find that some things, and some people, simply cannot be retrieved, this might be right up your alley. It is a

grim, atmospheric, and intellectually engaging piece of genre cinema, provided you have the patience to endure a 133-minute sit-down with a grieving family.

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RETROSPECTIVE

Train to Busan

Grave Matters · 2016

July 20, 2016. The release date of *Train to Busan* marks a specific point in cinema history where the zombie apocalypse genre officially entered its mid-life crisis. We had gone through the campy fun of *Zombieland*, the emotional soap opera of *World War Z*, and the gritty, gritty, gritty grimdark of *The Walking Dead*. By the time Yeon Sang-ho's film hit South Korean screens, the subgenre was practically begging for a fresh coat of paint. What it got was a competent, often thrilling, albeit slightly cynical rehash that managed to distinguish itself through pure kinetic energy and a surprisingly sharp social commentary.

For a film with a production budget of only \$8.5 million, *Train to Busan* looks like it cost ten times that. Director Yeon Sang-ho, who previously made the animated hit *The Heaven & Earth*, proved he could translate that narrative

focus into live-action thrills. The premise is as familiar as a stale donut: a mysterious virus spreads, the authorities freak out, and a group of passengers on a KTX express train to Busan must survive. The tagline—"Life-or-death survival begins"—promises exactly that, and mostly delivers.

The film's setting is the primary character here. The train is a claustrophobic microcosm of society. You can't run away, because the doors lock; you can't hide, because there are no basements. This creates a constant state of anxiety that the film utilizes effectively. The pacing is brisk, clocking in at a tight 118 minutes, so the audience doesn't have time to overthink the logic holes that usually plague zombie movies.

Enter Gong Yoo as Seok-woo, a corporate finance manager with the personality of a wet cardboard. He is divorced, estranged from his daughter, So-ahn (played with terrifying precociousness by Kim Su-an), and generally just a jerk. Seok-woo represents the modern, selfish individual who is only motivated by his own comfort or convenience. Watching him is often uncomfortable because he is so thoroughly unlikable. It takes about an hour before he actually starts acting like a parent rather than a reluctant passenger. This slow burn of character development is where Yeon Sang-ho shines; he doesn't give you a hero. He gives you a guy who has to be dragged kicking and screaming into heroism.

Of course, any competent horror movie needs a hero, and *Train to Busan* gives us Don Lee (Ma Dong-seok) as Sang-hwa. If you know Asian cinema, you know Don Lee brings the muscle. He plays a salaryman who is just trying to get home to his wife. When the virus hits, Sang-hwa is the moral compass of the train, the one who steps up when the others are paralyzed by panic. The action sequences involving him are visceral and well-choreographed. There is a specific scene where he is fighting off a horde of the infected that feels like a masterclass in practical effects and stunt work. It's a shame that his character is often overshadowed by the narrative focus on Seok-woo, because Sang-hwa is the one who actually deserves to be on a poster.

Then there is the supporting cast, which functions as a survey of human nature. There's the high school baseball team (Choi Woo-shik and An So-hee) who are annoying brats until they realize they are cannon fodder. There's the homeless man, played with a weary, sympathetic

grit by Choi Gwi-hwa. There are the elderly passengers and the young couple. The film doesn't just want you to be scared of the zombies; it wants you to be scared of *people*. The zombies themselves are not portrayed as monsters, but as victims of a plague who are driven by a desperate, animalistic hunger. It's a classic subversion that separates the film from the mindless slaughterhouses of Hollywood.

The social allegory is the film's real ace in the hole. The film cleverly uses the train car seating arrangements to highlight class warfare. The business class passengers are insulated, wealthy, and seemingly untouchable—until the situation forces them to confront their privilege. Meanwhile, the economy class passengers, who have to scrounge for resources, are the first to face the brutality of the situation. It paints a picture of a society where the rich hole up in the back while the poor get eaten first. It's a sharp observation that elevates the film from a slasher flick to a commentary on societal decay.

Visually, the film is impressive. The cinematography captures the sterile, high-tech interiors of the train against the decaying, frantic exterior. The zombie design is practical and gory, avoiding the CGI "wobbly" look that plagues so many modern blockbusters. The sound design is also top-notch, using the train's announcements and the screech of metal to create a constant sense of unease.

However, the film is not without its flaws. The dialogue is occasionally stilted, and the motivations of some characters feel a bit contrived to move the plot along. At times, the film sacrifices internal logic for external tension. For example, the way the virus spreads is handled with a sort of narrative convenience that

sci-fi fans might groan at. But who are we to complain about plot holes when the film is this much fun? It grabs you by the lapels and doesn't let go until the very last shot.

The climax on the platform at Busan Station is a masterclass in set piece design. It's loud, chaotic, and surprisingly emotional. It leaves the fate of the characters ambiguous, which is a bold choice that works in the film's favor. It doesn't offer a neat Hollywood ending; it offers a grim reality.

In the grand scheme of horror history, *Train to Busan* might not be the genre-defining masterpiece some claim it is. It borrows heavily from films like *28 Days Later* and *Dawn of the Dead*. But it executes those borrowings with a level of professionalism and energy that is rare in the modern era. It's a film that understands the mechanics of a survival thriller and plays them

better than almost anything else released around that time.

The legacy of the film is undeniable. It revitalized the zombie craze for a generation and proved that a foreign-language film could dominate the global box office on its own terms, without needing a Hollywood remake. It spawned a sequel (*Peninsula*) that tried to expand the universe but ultimately lacked the tight focus and heart of the original. But the first film remains a solid piece of entertainment.

Ultimately, *Train to Busan* is a film about connection. It starts with a father and daughter who can barely stand to be in the same room and ends with a family forged in fire. It's a redemption arc wrapped in gore and suspense. For 118 minutes, it's a hell of a ride.

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LIST

Meat Days

Grave Matters · 2006

If you've spent any significant amount of time scrolling through obscure horror catalogues, you've likely encountered the term "student film" and immediately rolled your eyes. We've all seen the low-budget, shaky-cam nightmares that look like a fever dream filmed on a phone. However, every now and then, a student film slips through the cracks and manages to disturb you in a way that glossy Hollywood blockbusters never could. Enter *Meat Days*, a 2006 Taiwanese animated feature that clocks in at a baffling twelve minutes. Produced by the Tainan National University of the Arts, this is not a movie you sit down to enjoy; it's a movie you sit down to witness, a grim experiment in micro-narrative directed by Joe Hsieh. With a TMDb rating of 5.5 and a runtime that barely covers the cost of catering for a bigger production, it is the definition of a horror curio.

To understand *Meat Days*, you have to accept that it defies traditional genre expectations. It isn't a sprawling epic; it is a concentrated dose of visceral imagery. The premise is simple, almost laughably so on paper: "In a chaotic time of men eating men, A-e gets some human meat by selling her body..." . It sounds like a sketch from a late-night comedy show, but in the hands of Hsieh, it becomes a grim, expressionistic nightmare. Because the runtime is so short, there is no time for subplots, romance, or moralizing. You are dropped straight into the chaos.

Here are five reasons why *Meat Days* deserves a spot on your watchlist, even if it is the kind of film you immediately regret watching right before bed.

1. The Runtime is a Feature, Not a Bug

Let's talk about the 12-minute runtime. It's

shorter than most elevator rides. In the world of cinema, usually, the longer a film drags on without purpose, the more obnoxious it becomes. But in the case of *Meat Days*, the brevity is essential to its atmosphere. This isn't a movie that tries to build tension slowly; it's a barrage. It attacks you with its visuals and themes with the rapidity of a panic attack. It creates a sense of urgency and hopelessness that feels more authentic than a three-hour torture-porn marathon. You watch it, you digest it, and you're left trying to process the sheer density of the content compressed into a fraction of an hour. It forces you to confront the depravity of the premise without giving you time to look away.

2. The "No Language" Approach One of the most fascinating details regarding *Meat Days* is that the spoken languages are listed as "No Language." This means the film relies entirely on visual storytelling. In an era where every indie horror movie feels the need to over-explain itself with dialogue, subtitles, and expository flashbacks, *Meat Days* strips away the comfort of language. You cannot read the horror; you have to see it. The absence of dialogue removes the filter of human understanding. It feels more primal, like watching a nature documentary of a predator hunt, but with the added, sickening layer of humanity. The chaos of the "men eating men" scenario is conveyed entirely through expressionist animation, leaving the interpretation of intent open to your own worst imagination.

3. It Hits the Body Horror Sweet Spot Body horror is a crowded genre, filled with filmmakers trying to out-gross one another with exploding viscera and practical gore effects. *Meat Days* approaches this subgenre from a unique, almost

anthropological angle. The concept of "selling one's body for meat" isn't just about gore; it's about commodification and survival in a dystopian nightmare. It taps into the primal fear of being used and consumed. The animation style, likely influenced by the raw, punk ethos of early 2000s internet animation, gives the gore a tactile, clay-like texture that feels unsettlingly real. It doesn't look like CGI; it looks like a nightmare drawn by a hand that was forced to draw it. It's the kind of body horror that sticks with you because it questions the very value of the human body when society collapses.

4. The DIY Aesthetic as an Art Form

Produced by Tainan National University of the Arts, *Meat Days* carries the distinct DNA of a project created in a laboratory rather than a studio. There is a lo-fi, experimental quality to the animation that grounds the film in a specific era of Taiwanese indie cinema. It doesn't have the slick polish of a Disney movie or even a modern studio production; it has the grit of an underground movement. This aesthetic choice actually enhances the horror. When a film looks like it was made on a shoestring budget with passion rather than profit, the content feels more dangerous. You get the sense that the filmmakers were experimenting with the medium, using animation not just as a tool for storytelling, but as a vehicle for pure psychological distress.

5. The Isolation of the Narrative While it's easy to dismiss *Meat Days* as a one-off weirdo flick, it captures a very specific feeling of isolation. The "chaotic time" mentioned in the synopsis suggests a collapse of societal norms. When you remove the context of a normal society, you are left with pure survival instinct. The film is a snapshot of a world where the social

contract has been shredded. Watching A-e navigate this hell is less about a specific plot point and more about the existential dread of being alone in a hostile environment. It's a microcosm of cosmic horror—small, personal, and inevitable. It serves as a reminder that in the face of true chaos, humanity is fragile, easily broken, and frequently delicious.

Ultimately, *Meat Days* is not a film for everyone. It's short, it's silent, and it's undeniably weird. It has a TMDB vote count of only two, suggesting that the number of people willing to sit through a 12-minute movie about cannibalism is

exceedingly small. But that is the beauty of it. It exists in the margins, a bizarre footnote in the history of Taiwanese animation. It refuses to play by the rules of genre, trading character development for atmosphere and dialogue for dread. If you can find a copy, or if you stumble across it while doom-scrolling, give it twelve minutes. Just make sure you aren't hungry beforehand.

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REVIEW

Backrooms

Grave Matters · 2026

If you were a teenager scrolling through YouTube in the mid-2010s, you know what the Backrooms are. You know the yellow wallpaper, the buzzing hum of fluorescent lights, and the suffocating realization that you aren't alone. If you were an adult in the early 2020s, you probably just rolled your eyes and assumed the cinematic adaptation was going to be a disposable cash grab. We've seen this cycle before: a terrifying concept spawns a million fan edits, and Hollywood inevitably tries to turn it into a blockbuster franchise.

However, the 2026 adaptation of *Backrooms*, directed by Kane Parsons and produced by the James Wan-led Atomic Monster, surprisingly avoids the urge to turn the liminal spaces into a slasher flick. Instead, it offers a slow-burn psychological horror experience that tries to respect the original source material's atmosphere

rather than just cashing in on the thumbnail views. The result is a film that is less "Final Destination in a maze" and more "Eraserhead in a furniture showroom," a distinction that will likely please purists and frustrate action-hungry genre fans.

The film opens with a concept that sounds deceptively simple: a strange doorway appears in the basement of a furniture showroom. This premise, outlined in the film's description, immediately grounds the cosmic horror in a very terrestrial, corporate setting. The juxtaposition of consumer goods—couches, carpets, lamps—with the unknown void behind the door suggests a critique of modern isolation. The tagline, "Everything must go," feels less like a sales pitch and more like a grim prophecy.

Director Kane Parsons, who previously made waves with his original animated short of the same name, brings a tactile quality to the live-action adaptation. The film runs for 110 minutes, a runtime that is generous for a genre piece, but Parsons utilizes every second to build dread. The production design by Danny Vermette is meticulous, recreating that specific, unsettling texture of old office carpets and peeling paint. It is a testament to the crew's ability to make the mundane terrifying.

Where the film could have easily tipped into camp, the casting decisions keep it grounded in realism. The ensemble features Renate Reinsve as Mary, an actress known for the arthouse film *The Worst Person in the World*, and Chiwetel Ejiofor as Clark. Having such established dramatic actors inhabit a setting that is essentially a "creepy viral video" is a bold move. It suggests that the characters aren't just victims, but perhaps part of a larger, unknown narrative. Mark Duplass and Finn Bennett round out the cast as Phil and Bobby, respectively, providing a grounding element that hints at domestic tensions before the reality of the Backrooms collapses in upon them.

The horror here isn't jump scares; it is the horror of the uncanny. The film leans heavily into the "cosmic horror" subgenre, specifically the feeling of insignificance. You are small, the space is vast, and the rules change when you blink. The sound design, handled by Eugenio Battaglia, is the film's greatest asset. The low-frequency hum of the ventilation system is used as a primary antagonist, a constant, vibrating reminder of the environment's artificiality. It makes you feel exposed, even when the characters are alone in a room.

There is a pervasive sense of "stuckness" throughout the runtime. The film captures the specific ennui of the internet meme: the knowledge that you are in the wrong place, and there is no going back. However, the film struggles slightly when it tries to explain the mechanics of the doorway. As the plot thickens and the characters attempt to escape, the "Mystery" genre element takes over, and the film gets bogged down in exposition that tries to rationalize the impossible. It's a classic genre trap—once you start asking too many "why" questions, the atmosphere dies.

The A24 production banner attached to this project implies a certain artistic ambition, and that ambition is most visible in the cinematography. The use of wide angles and low lighting emphasizes the claustrophobia of the infinite corridors. Yet, the film never quite commits to a definitive genre identity. It has the budget of a studio thriller, the grit of a found footage experiment, and the surrealism of a nightmare. This hybridity can be disorienting, but it mirrors the feeling of the Backrooms themselves.

Ultimately, *Backrooms* is a successful atmospheric exercise, though perhaps not a definitive narrative journey. It relies on the viewer's familiarity with the concept to carry it forward, which is a risky strategy for a theatrical release. If you enter the theater expecting a high-octane chase scene involving "Entity 68," you will be disappointed. But if you are looking for a slow-burn exploration of psychological dread within a beautifully rendered nightmare landscape, this 110-minute trip might just stick with you. It proves that even an internet meme

can be elevated to art if the crew is willing to respect the source material's silences.

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RETROSPECTIVE

The Conjuring 2

Grave Matters · 2016

2016 was a weird year for horror. We had *The Witch* trying to reinvent arthouse frights, and *Split* breaking the box office with James McAvoy screaming, but *The Conjuring 2* arrived with the subtlety of a sledgehammer. It's the sequel that felt less like a spiritual follow-up and more like a business decision: "Hey, that ghost story you liked the first time? We'll give you a different ghost story in a different country. Same money, different accents."

Directed by James Wan, who presumably was too busy making *Aquaman* to direct the whole thing (though he's listed as director on TMDB), *The Conjuring 2* picks up the Warrens and heads to London. No, not *that* London, but the North London housing estate of Enfield in 1977. The tagline promises "the next true story from the case files," a phrase that serves as the cinematic equivalent of a "based on a true story" disclaimer

—a blanket guarantee that while the supernatural elements might be shaky, the ticket sales will be solid.

The plot is boilerplate: Lorraine (Vera Farmiga) and Ed Warren (Patrick Wilson) travel to help a single mother, Peggy Hodgson (Frances O'Connor), raising four kids alone in a drafty, damp house plagued by malicious spirits. The setup is familiar, but the subgenre shift here is crucial. The first *Conjuring* was a haunted house movie—quiet, atmospheric, relying on the slow build of dread. This one is a poltergeist movie, which means the furniture needs to start throwing itself across the room. It's less about subtle bumps in the night and more about kinetic, loud, and violent chaos.

The film attempts to blend the domestic horror of the first entry with a broader sense of "British

folklore." This manifests most effectively in the sequence involving "The Crooked Man." It is, without a doubt, the film's highlight—a masterclass in subverting childhood tropes. Set inside the house, the scene utilizes a nursery rhyme to create a creeping sense of folk horror, moving away from the "jump scare" template into something more atmospheric and disturbing. The visual effects supervisor, Colin Strause, actually delivered some gritty practical work here, working with actor Javier Botet to create the titular Crooked Man. Botet, a creature performer who specializes in body horror, moves with a sickening slither that makes the creature feel less like a monster suit and more like a biological error in the fabric of reality. It is genuinely creepy, anchored by a performance that uses the body to convey ancient malice rather than just rubber suit antics.

If the Crooked Man is the soul of the film, Valak (Bonnie Aarons) is the wallet. Valak is a demonic entity that takes the form of a nun. The decision to introduce this character—initially only a shadow in the background—was a stroke of genius marketing. It gave the audience a physical, iconographic villain to latch onto. The reveal of the "Demon Nun" is a classic Wan moment: a mix of religious iconography and pure horror, culminating in a sequence in a creepy hotel room that is essentially a jump-scare sandwich. It works because it's loud, it's colorful, and it plays directly into the audience's desire for a designated villain to beat up.

The film attempts to balance the cosmic horror of Valak with the gritty, psychological realism of the Enfield Poltergeist. We get the creepy nun, sure, but we also get the very real, very exhausted reality of raising four children in a council estate

while a ghost pushes them around. Frances O'Connor deserves a lot of credit here. She plays Peggy not as a hysterical victim, but as a worn-out, practical mother trying to keep her kids alive. Her performance anchors the film, reminding you that while you might be afraid of a demon, you are terrified of losing your job or not being able to buy food. The children—played by Madison Wolfe as the possessed Janet, and the young cast as the siblings—are utilized effectively. Janet is the vessel, the "demon child" trope that horror loves to exploit, and Wolfe sells the deterioration of her character's sanity with a frantic energy that distracts from the film's occasional tonal whiplash.

The structure of the film feels like a checklist of horror subgenres. It has a haunting. It has a demonic entity. It has a creepy backstory involving a former occupant (Bill Wilkins, voiced by Robin Atkin Downes). It even has a subplot involving a paranormal investigator, Anita Gregory (Franka Potente), who is skeptical of the Warrens. This subplot drags a bit, serving as a necessary counterpoint to the Warrens' faith but ultimately feeling like a separate movie stapled onto the main event.

There is a specific, unfortunate tendency in modern horror sequels to treat the first film as a prequel. While this film stands on its own, it does spend a fair amount of time checking in on the first movie's cast and mythology, specifically the presence of the Annabelle doll (which was spun off into its own franchise that same year). It feels like a universe-building exercise, a cinematic universe where every creepy doll gets its own poster.

Technically, the film is competent. Director of Photography Don Burgess (a frequent

collaborator with Wan) utilizes a wide, sweeping lens to make the house feel cavernous and imposing. The sound design is aggressive, relying on low-frequency rumbles and sudden audio cues to keep the audience on edge. It is loud, but that's the point of a poltergeist.

Where *The Conjuring 2* stumbles is in its pacing. At 134 minutes, it drags in the middle. The film tries to do too much, trying to be a psychological drama, a supernatural thriller, and a creature feature all at once. It's an "everything but the kitchen sink" approach that results in a movie that feels less cohesive than its predecessor.

Despite the flaws, *The Conjuring 2* is a successful commercial product. It understands what horror

fans want: a mix of scares, lore, and a team of experts who save the day through the power of prayer and fudge-adorned cookies. It's not the scariest film of the year, and it certainly isn't the most nuanced, but it delivers the goods. It proves that if you dress up a ghost in a nun's habit, slap a British flag on the poster, and give Patrick Wilson enough screen time to scowl effectively, audiences will line up to buy their tickets. It's popcorn horror at its finest—fluffy, salty, and utterly forgettable, but fun while you're eating it.

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RETROSPECTIVE

The Wailing

Grave Matters · 2016

Horror fans love to throw around the word "masterpiece," but rarely is it warranted for a movie that feels like watching paint dry for two and a half hours. *The Wailing*, the 2016 South Korean folk horror directed by Na Hong-jin, is one of those films that earns the title through sheer, unadulterated endurance. At 156 minutes (TMDB), it demands patience, and for good reason: you are about to be smothered by atmosphere.

The setup is standard slasher fodder: a stranger arrives in a remote village, brings with him a curse, and people start dying. But Na Hong-jin, fresh off the success of *The Chaser*, doesn't care about the jump scares. He cares about the rain. The sound design is pivotal here. While Dalpalan provides the folk-music score that hums with unsettling intensity, it is Kim Dong-han's work as the Sound Designer that creates the oppressive

dread. The film is less a thriller and more a psychological stress test, where the silence is just as loud as the screaming.

Enter Jong-goo, played by Kwak Do-won. He's a cop who drinks too much and loves his daughter a little too much, making him the perfect tragic figure for a possession movie. His nemesis is Il-gwang (Hwang Jung-min), a local shopkeeper with a weird diet and a "shaman" friend, Moo-myeong (Chun Woo-hee). Jong-goo's investigation into the stranger's identity is less *Silence of the Lambs* and more *X-Files*, but without the aliens.

The film is a delicious stew of genres. You have your J-horror influence—the whispering, the creeping dread. You have your slasher elements—people getting killed in the woods. And you have your folk horror—mountain spirits, witch

doctors, and rituals. The problem is that Na Hong-jin cooks the stew too slowly. If you are expecting a creature feature, you will be disappointed. *The Wailing* is a slow burn that barely moves.

The ambiguity of the third act is what makes the film divisive. The villain, played by Jun Kuniura, is charismatic but inscrutable. Is he a demon? A shapeshifter? Just a misunderstood foreigner? Or is it all in Jong-goo's head? The film refuses to give you the answers you want. Instead, it dangles the "cosmic horror" angle in your face while smearing the screen with the grime of a gritty police procedural.

Visually, the film is a masterpiece of composition. The use of light and shadow—

specifically that sickly yellow hue that seems to cover everything—is masterful. However, that same yellow hue can make the viewing experience feel like watching old newsreels. It is a beautiful mess of a movie.

Ultimately, *The Wailing* is a technical achievement that suffers from its own ambition. It wants to be a puzzle box, but sometimes it just feels like a riddle with no solution. If you have the time to invest in a 2.6-hour drama about paranoia, it's worth watching. But if you just want a good scare, you might find yourself tempted to turn it off.

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RETROSPECTIVE

The Hills Have Eyes

Grave Matters · 2006

"The lucky ones die first." That is the tagline for Alexandre Aja's 2006 reboot of *The Hills Have Eyes*, and it is a promise that the movie keeps with the grim efficiency of a watchmaker. For a film that was essentially a high-budget remake of a Wes Craven classic, it manages to carve out a distinct identity, mostly by abandoning the campy excess of the original 1977 version in favor of a grittier, more realistic survival horror approach.

The premise is as boilerplate as it gets: a suburban family, the Carters, takes a cross-country road trip in their RV. They veer off the beaten path to save time, get stranded in a desolate wasteland, and quickly discover that the government atomic testing zone they are trespassing through is inhabited by a feral family of mutants. This isn't your typical Saturday night

slasher; it's a slow-burn siege movie that trades jump scares for sheer, suffocating tension.

What separates this iteration from the pack is the focus on the mutants not just as monsters, but as a dysfunctional family unit. While the 1977 film leaned heavily into the "freak show" aesthetic, Aja and co-writer Grégory Levasseur (who also serves as Second Unit Director) lean into the "folk horror" aspect. The antagonists, led by Papa Jupiter (Billy Drago) and his lieutenants like Lizard (Robert Joy) and Pluto (Michael Bailey Smith), aren't just mindless killing machines. They communicate, hunt in packs, and have a rigid hierarchy. It makes them more threatening because they possess a primitive, almost tribal intelligence that the civilized Carter family struggles to comprehend.

Visually, the film is a triumph of atmospheric discomfort. The desert isn't just a backdrop; it's a hostile environment that eats up resources and crushes hope. The cinematography utilizes the vast, arid landscapes to isolate the characters, making the RV feel less like a mobile home and more like a sinking lifeboat. When the family finally has to abandon the vehicle and trek on foot, the claustrophobia ramps up. You can practically feel the sand in your lungs and the heat radiating off the asphalt.

The character dynamics are where the film's weaknesses occasionally surface, despite the strong performances. The parents, Ethel (Kathleen Quinlan) and Big Bob (Ted Levine), provide the emotional anchor. Big Bob is the archetypal tough guy protector, a former soldier who believes he can handle anything. While this archetype is well-worn, Ted Levine imbues him with a weary, weary cynicism that grounds the proceedings. He isn't just screaming orders; he is a man trying to maintain order in chaos. His eventual fate serves as the catalyst for the family's psychological unraveling.

The teenagers, Doug (Aaron Stanford) and Brenda (Emilie de Ravin), serve a slightly different function. They are the bridge between the old world (the parents) and the new world (the mutants). Doug is the reluctant hero, capable but hesitant, while Brenda is the pragmatic survivor who realizes quickly that her humanity is a liability. Their relationship is functional, which is appropriate for a film that prioritizes survival over romance.

The violence is graphic and frequent, adhering to the standards of the early 2000s splatter renaissance. However, *Aja* treats the gore with a clinical detachment that makes it feel like part of

the environment rather than gratuitous for shock value alone. The mutant makeup, handled by Greg Nicotero (who is credited as "Cyst" in the cast list, though he is better known for his work on *The Walking Dead*), is grotesque but rooted in character. You understand *why* these people are mutated—they were exposed to radiation, yes, but they were also forced to evolve in isolation.

One of the film's most interesting elements is the subplot involving Ruby (Laura Ortiz), a mutant who has been adopted by the Carters. She acts as the catalyst for the most emotional conflict, forcing the family to confront the morality of their own survival instincts. It's a theme that adds a layer of psychological depth to the slasher elements, even if it is wrapped in explosions and severed limbs.

At a runtime of 107 minutes, the film maintains a brisk pace that avoids the sluggishness often found in desert-set thrillers. It doesn't overstay its welcome, knowing exactly when to pull the plug on the tension and cut to the next setpiece. It respects the audience enough to treat the scenario as a logical puzzle, even if the solution is often "run fast and shoot straight."

The production by Fox Searchlight Pictures (correcting the record: yes, this is indeed a Fox Searchlight release) managed to stretch a relatively modest budget of \$15 million into a box office haul of nearly \$70 million. It was the rare remake that didn't just ape its predecessor but instead tried to out-do it in terms of grit and scope. While it may not have the cultural resonance of the original 1977 film, it stands as a solid, modern entry in the survival horror subgenre.

Ultimately, *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) is a movie about the thin veneer of civilization. It suggests that when you strip away the suburbs and the laws of the state, you're left with a primal instinct to survive at all costs. It's not a subtle

film, but as a visceral experience, it works. It's loud, sweaty, and undeniably effective.

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REVIEW

Scary Movie

Grave Matters · 2026

Welcome back to the theater, or at least the imaginary one in your head. The year is 2026, and despite our collective desire to stay home and stream whatever streaming service currently owns the rights to a remastered version of *Scooby-Doo*, the Wayans clan has decided that horror movie franchises are not yet exhausted. *Scary Movie* is officially back in the oven, currently listed in "Post Production" status, and it's serving up a fresh batch of meta-horror satire for a new generation—or perhaps the same old generation that just can't let go.

It has been twenty-six years since the original Core Four dodged a "suspiciously familiar masked killer." That is a long time for a comedy franchise to incubate. Usually, by the two-decade mark, you are waiting for a remake or a gritty reboot that removes all the jokes. Instead, we get this. The 95-minute runtime suggests the

filmmakers have no intention of letting the audience overthink the plot. They just want you to laugh while things explode, a strategy that is as timeless as the slasher genre they are dismantling.

The cast list is a veritable Who's Who of the Wayans universe, reassembling the "Core Four" with a few new flavorings. Marlon Wayans is back as Shorty Meeks, and Shawn Wayans is reprising his role as Ray Wilkins. The dynamic is still clearly the same: dumb and dumber, but somehow the survivors this time around. Regina Hall is back as Brenda Meeks, bringing her uncanny ability to survive impossible situations through sheer, unadulterated stupidity. And then there is Cindy Campbell.

Here is where things get complicated. The credits list Anna Faris in the role that defined a

generation of stoner comedies. However, given the passage of time and the real-world context, any implication of her being "very much alive and active" in the production is, frankly, biologically incorrect. Instead, we have a film that attempts to bridge the gap between a beloved original cast and the demands of 2026. It is a casting choice that walks a fine line between nostalgic legacy casting and the kind of CGI resurrection that usually makes cosmic horror fans weep.

Joining the family are Anthony Anderson as Mahalik and Kenan Thompson as Jermaine Jackson, reprising their roles from earlier iterations. Cheri Oteri is also back as the tabloid reporter Gail Hailstorm, providing the news helicopter coverage for the impending apocalypse. There is a sense of a revolving door here; the Wayans family is like a ghost ship, constantly finding new ways to sail it even when the iceberg is in plain sight.

Behind the camera, the writing credits are an interesting collection of Wayans family members—Keenen Ivory, Marlon, Shawn, Craig, Rick Alvarez—and the duo of Jason Friedberg and Aaron Seltzer. While Friedberg and Seltzer are listed in the credits under "Writing" as "Characters" rather than "Writer", it is safe to say their fingerprints are all over the structure. They are the architects of the "dumb movie" genre, having previously dissected everything from *Epic Movie* to *Vampires Suck*. Expect the script to treat established horror tropes—jump scares, jump cuts, and jump cuts that aren't scares—as suggestions rather than rules.

The film's premise, per the overview, involves "no horror movie IP is safe." In 2026, that list is a mile long. From the ubiquitous survival horror of recent years to the high-concept sci-fi

frighteners, the script likely has a checklist of targets longer than the cast list. It is a game of "whack-a-mole" humor, where if a specific movie reference doesn't land, there are ten more coming in the next scene. The budget being listed as "0" on the production side suggests a lean, mean machine approach, prioritizing gross-out gags over expensive practical effects.

Director Michael Tiddes, who has been with the Wayans empire for years, is at the helm. His style is distinctively kinetic and visual, relying on the kind of slapstick choreography that requires a dedicated crew and a willingness to make actors look foolish. The film is produced by Ugly Baby Productions, ensuring that the content will likely remain vulgar, politically incorrect, and aggressively un-woke by modern standards. It is refreshing, in a way, to see a horror parody that hasn't been filtered through a sensitivity screen.

As the status remains "Post Production," we haven't seen the final cut. But the vibe is clear: *Scary Movie* is a relic of a bygone era of cinema, one where a masked killer in a boiler suit was the ultimate boogeyman. The fact that the killer is now a "suspiciously familiar" entity implies a meta-commentary on the endless sequels and remakes that plague the industry. The Wayans aren't just making fun of the movies; they are participating in the machine, repackaging the brand for a new fiscal quarter.

Whether this is a love letter to the genre or a cash grab for the Wayans brand is the million-dollar question. With Anna Faris effectively replaced by her digital likeness or a legacy character, and Friedberg and Seltzer handling the character beats, the film seems to be banking on name recognition and the comfort of familiarity. It is a

comfort that only true fans of the genre (and its subversion) will truly appreciate.

In the meantime, we wait. We wait for the 95-minute runtime to play out, we wait for the jump scares, and we wait to see exactly how much "line

crossing" they promised in the tagline. Until then, the movie is in the can—or at least, that's what they tell us. It is the horror of the unknown, and it is coming to a theater near you.

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RETROSPECTIVE

Silent Hill

Grave Matters · 2006

Video game adaptations have a notorious reputation for being soulless cash grabs, or worse, films that completely misunderstand the source material to the point of mockery. We've had *Alone in the Dark* and *Resident Evil* (the first one, anyway) that felt like they were written by someone who only played the games in five-minute bursts. So, when *Silent Hill* hit theaters in 2006, there was a specific, cynical fear that it would be a glossy, hollow imitation of a world that had terrified teenagers since 1999.

It wasn't. Christophe Gans, a French director with a penchant for European folklore and dark fantasy, took the reins, and despite a few narrative stumbles, he delivered something that actually feels like a "real" movie. It's grim, it's messy, and it's utterly unapologetic.

The premise is simple enough for a mother-in-distress movie: Rose (Radha Mitchell) is desperate. Her adopted daughter, Sharon (Jodelle Ferland), sleepwalks and murmurs the name of a town. Rose decides the only cure is to take her to Silent Hill. They drive into a fog bank, crash the car, and Sharon vanishes.

From there, the film becomes a masterclass in environmental storytelling. We know the lore of Silent Hill—it's a town trapped in a perpetual hellish nightmare. Gans and his crew don't explain it to you; they just subject you to it. The cinematography, by Dan Laustsen, creates a stunning dichotomy: the "real" world is a desolate, ash-covered wasteland of monochromatic greys, while the nightmare is a rusted, orange nightmare of industrial decay.

This is where the film's budget really pays off. Unlike the CGI-heavy bloat of its contemporaries, *Silent Hill* leans heavily on practical effects. The monsters—most notably the "Red Pyramid Thing" played by creature designer Roberto Campanella—are tangible, horrifying physical entities. They feel heavy, gritty, and rooted in a weird, cosmic body horror that feels less like a video game boss fight and more like a manifestation of the town's collective guilt.

But the core of the movie isn't the monsters; it's the people. Rose is a perfectly competent lead for a genre movie, which is refreshing. She doesn't just scream and run; she investigates, she fights, and she endures. She isn't aided by a "just in time" savior, but rather by sheer determination. Her husband, Christopher (Sean Bean), is a side character who functions more as a narrative anchor to keep the audience grounded in the "real world" timeline, which splits off from the main action about 45 minutes in.

The villains are the religious zealots known as the Order of the Holy Militia. They aren't stock villains; they are presented as genuinely terrifying fundamentalists. Their doctrine is twisted, but the fear they inspire is palpable, anchored by the performance of Deborah Kara Unger as Dahlia Gillespie, the town's former resident and drug-addled prophetess.

It is easy to get lost in the atmosphere, but the film has a specific, grotesque history involving a child named Alessa. It is often misremembered that the cult burned Alessa in a simple kitchen oven. In reality, the narrative centers on the industrial atrocity committed at the town's ironworks, where she was burned alive at a massive furnace. This distinction is vital; the horror of the scene isn't domestic, it's industrial

and catastrophic. It's the difference between a gruesome family dispute and a state-sponsored atrocity.

The narrative logic gets a little bit hazy in the third act, as the film tries to explain the metaphysical mechanics of how the town splits into the "Otherworld" based on the memories of those who enter it. It becomes a bit of a brain-bender, leaning heavily into the "cosmic horror" elements of the game series. If you are looking for a slasher where the killer has a motive you can understand, you might get frustrated by the cult's random cruelty.

However, the film's commitment to its own madness is what makes it work. The resolution hinges on the duality of Sharon and Alessa, played by the young Jodelle Ferland. It's a heavy, emotional punch that lands despite the confusing science.

One of the few genuine missteps is the ending. Gans decided to cut to the real world where Christopher is frantically searching for his wife, hoping for a domestic reconciliation. While this gives Sean Bean something to do, it dilutes the bleak, apocalyptic tone that the movie spent two hours building. It feels like a studio interference requirement—a happy ending for the "real world" characters that feels tacked onto the grim finale of the nightmare.

Ultimately, *Silent Hill* is a technical marvel. The production design, created by Carol Spier, is incredible. The score by Akira Yamaoka and Jeff Danna blends industrial noise with haunting melodies that will stick in your head. The sound design is aggressive; the silence of the fog is louder than the monsters.

It's hard to imagine a movie like this getting made today. It's long—clocking in at 125 minutes on TMDB—which feels like an eternity when you are trapped in a nightmare town, but in the best way possible. It's a production by Davis Films and Konami that dared to be weird. It respects the intellectual property enough to not just be a license to print money, but ambitious enough to try and elevate the genre.

It isn't perfect. The dialogue is sometimes clunky, and the ending drags. But it stands as a

testament to the potential of the adaptation medium. It takes a property defined by static black-and-white 2D graphics and brings it to life in a way that is 3D, visceral, and genuinely scary. We've been waiting for another horror film this atmospheric since this one first hit the theaters, and despite two sequels that failed to capture the same spirit, we're still waiting.

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