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In all my travels to horror events and goings-on, I get asked one question more than any other: "What is the scariest movie you've ever seen?" One would think that if this is such a common question, I should have some brilliant answer ready…some perfect title I can whip out and have the whole room agree, "Yes, this film is in fact scary as hell."

Instead, I tend to rattle off a number of movies that frightened me upon first viewing, and go off on a tangent about how "scary" is personalized to each viewer. It is not until hours later, when I'm sitting in traffic or in some idle grocery store buying blueberry yogurt, that I think, "I should have said this title!" or "Hey, that particular movie scared the hell out of me."

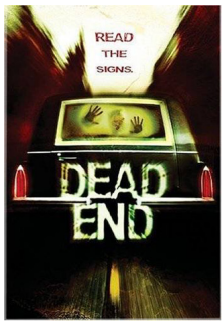
The list below is composed of the flicks that frequently cross my cranium, usually hours after those "scariest film ever" discussions. But there is an important key element here that we must all remember (my aforementioned tangent): The idea of being "scared" can largely depend on the setting and age when the movie or TV show is watched, as well as our own personal fears. At a young age, ALF used to scare the hell out of me. Somewhere in my child-brain, Alf's elongated snout and visible teeth looked wolf-like. To my 5-year-old self, ALF was not some alien with snappy comebacks, but rather a monstrous creature ready to eat my cat. Don't worry, I did not put ALF on this list, but I think the point is still important. I do cite one of my childhood horrors here because it still spooks the bejeezus out of me today.

I also have to add a very brief analysis of the word "scary," as my internalization of this term has changed over time as well. For example, when I was a kid, scary things would make me cry or bury my face in a pillow, often even leading to subsequent nightmares. But as I grew older, "scary" took on a different meaning. Instead of crying out or suffering from nightmares, I find myself judging "scary" by how much the film sticks with me. How much do I think about it after the fact? Or how much does it make me question the possibility of those same horrors occurring in my own life?

There is also a strong difference between "scary" and "disturbing." Movies like FAT GIRL and A SERBIAN FILM disturb me, but don't scare me. There is a weird variance between the two that can be boiled down to finding an act or image revolting vs. actually being frightened that this situation could affix itself in your real life.

There—got that bloody tangent out of the way. Let's move onto to the scares!

AUDITION (1999; pictured above): Some horror films are scarier if you know nothing about them. That is how I approached AUDITION. When I first saw it, I was teaching film school in Washington, DC. One of my students, knowing what a horror geek I was, brought me a copy. I viewed it with no prior knowledge about the plot or twists. Wow! This one scared me to no end, and still enters my brain anytime I see an acupuncture needle.



DEAD END (2003): This is a quiet little indie film that went straight to video, about a family on a holiday trip who are stuck on an endless wooded road, being stalked by a mysterious black car. Like AUDITION, I watched it with no prior knowledge, except for a vague plot summary. Very chilling.

ILS (THEM; 2006): A French film about a schoolteacher and her husband who are being tormented by unseen assailants inside their rural country home. I think about this film every time I hear weird noises in my house at night.

JACOB'S LADDER (1990): Though arguably not a true horror film, this suspenseful thriller plays with the viewer's mind and sense of reality. Plus, there are ample freaky images to stick to your bones…the eyeless surgeon, *chill*!

[REC] (2007): A found-footage film done right! Instead of using the first-person perspective as a variant means of storytelling, this film employs that perspective to drive the terror. The zombies aren't just attacking some secondary character; they're attacking the screen, and by default you!

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES (1983): This is the inclusion from my childhood that still gives me goosebumps today. Based on the Ray Bradbury novel of the same name, SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES frightened an entire generation of kids. I still have nightmares occasionally about tarantulas in my bed.

EVENT HORIZON (1997): It has been touted as HELLRAISER set in space, and that is not a far-off summation. But EVENT HORIZON packs a startling punch of fear, one that is both shocking and gory.

LOST HIGHWAY (1997): I'm still confused as to exactly what this film is about, but it scares the hell out of me. With a typical David Lynch dose of midgets, strange videotapes and complex language issues, LOST HIGHWAY is a cryptic noir journey down a very confusing and frightening road.

THE SHINING (1980): This one is pretty standard on "scariest film" lists. Between bleeding elevators and creepy twins, Stanley Kubrick's interpretation of Stephen King's novel has embedded itself into many of our psyches. I will always picture a red ball rolling toward me anytime I'm walking down a long hallway. "Come play with us, Bekah!"

THE BABY'S ROOM (2006): This short feature is part of the Spanish 6 FILMS TO KEEP YOU

AWAKE series, and seemed to get lost in the mix, not garnering much exposure. That's a shame, because THE BABY'S ROOM is wonderfully frightening. Directed and written by Alex de la Iglesia, the genius behind other genre greats ranging from THE DAY OF THE BEAST to THE LAST CIRCUS, THE BABY'S ROOM focuses on a new dad who can see ghosts in his child's room via a video baby monitor. The fun part is that the ghosts can see him as well…