

Netflix Films to Skip and Stream This Halloween

By Bruce Bawer

If you're too old to go trick-or-treating, too full of self-respect to hang around your front door all day on Halloween so you can hand out candy to other people's brats, and too much of a loser to have friends with whom you can celebrate the holiday by meeting for a few drinks, you may want to spend your Halloween watching one or two suitably scary films on Netflix. As it happens, I've been checking out some of the streaming service's approximately 1.5 trillion offerings in the horror genre and herewith offer a few tips.



First of all, there's *The Open House* (2018), written and directed by Matt Angel and Suzanne Coats. Like many of these movies, it's about people moving into a house and involves a creepy basement. In this one, after his father is killed in a random shooting while buying groceries, high school runner Logan Wallace (Dylan Minnette) and his mother, Naomi (Piercey Dalton), are forced by their suddenly straitened financial situation to move into her rich sister's recently vacated house in the countryside. The one catch is that they're obliged to leave the house for a few hours every week so it can be shown by realtors to prospective buyers.

At first the movie looks promising. Logan is a sympathetic character, especially given his obvious pain over the loss of his father. His loving but fraught relationship with his mother has potential. And when odd things start happening in the house – for example, the heat keeps getting turned off – one is intrigued. But the picture soon goes downhill. Everything that seems to be an important plot point turns out to be a red herring. The circumstances under which Dad was killed turn out to have nothing whatsoever to do with the story. Nor do Logan's athletic skills. Ditto the psychologically aberrant behavior of the family's new neighbor, Martha (Patricia Bethune). When Logan finally explores the house's basement and figures out what's been going on, what follows is exceedingly disappointing. Movies in this genre have an unspoken contract with the viewer, and this movie violates that contract big time. (Also, while we're at it, why call it *The Open House* and not just *Open House*?)

I put on *Get Out* (2017) expecting a run-of-the-mill horror flick. But when I saw in the opening credits that it was written and directed by Jordan Peele, a name I recognized, I looked it up and saw that it had been nominated for Oscars for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Actor, and had actually won Best Original Screenplay. (I used to watch the Oscars religiously, and I'm pretty knowledgeable about nominees and winners from half a century or more ago, but results from recent years are another matter.) The reason for *Get Out*'s popularity with Academy voters soon became clear: whatever its merits or demerits, it's an ardent, utterly irrational indictment of white racism.

Our hero is a successful young black photographer, Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), whose WASP girlfriend, Rose (Allison Williams), takes him from New York City to meet her parents, neurosurgeon Dean (Bradley Whitford) and psychiatrist Missy (Catherine Keener), at their elegant country house. Chris is a

tad uneasy about the meeting – how will Rose’s folks react to her black beau? – but she assures him that they’re totally open-minded. During Chris’ initial interactions with them, indeed, they come off as virtue-signaling liberals of the first water, embarrassingly eager to prove that they’re not bigots. (Out of the blue, Dean tells Chris that Obama was his favorite president and that he’d have voted for him, if possible, for a third term.) But gradually Chris comes to recognize that something disquieting is afoot. The family’s black servants, for example, seem like zombies. After Missy hypnotizes him, supposedly to help him kick smoking, he has psychic experiences that make him yearn to bail *prontissimo*. But it soon becomes clear that Rose’s family doesn’t want him to leave – ever.

Yes, *Get Out* is an offensive, self-indulgent exercise in anti-white fantasies. If the races had been reversed, it would never have been green-lighted by any studio on the planet; as it is, *Get Out* would fit perfectly, along with the works of Robin DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi, into the syllabus of the most hysterical and unhinged Black Studies course on the planet. Still, it’s an eerily engaging ride, and Peele’s blatant bigotry contributes a big dose of wacky wokery that only adds to the level of horror.

Black Phone (2021), directed by Scott Derrickson from a screenplay by him and C. Robert Cargill, takes us to a North Denver neighborhood in 1979, where, over a brief period, several middle school boys living within close proximity to one another have disappeared, obviously nabbed by some predator. For some reason, however, local life goes on as usual, with families, rather bemusingly, taking absolutely no reasonable precautions. The crime spree hits home for our protagonist, Finney (Mason Thames) – a sensitive boy who, as we’ve been shown, habitually shrinks from violence – when two of his friends, Bruce and Robin, disappear. Soon enough it’s

Finney's turn to be snatched by the masked marauder (Ethan Hawke), who locks him in – where else? – a creepy basement.

But this isn't just another realistic movie about child abduction victims. On the contrary, it's chockablock with supernatural phenomena. For one thing, Finney's sister, Gwen (Madeleine McGraw), has inherited from their late mother a tendency to have weirdly revealing dreams. For another, on the wall of the kidnapper's basement is a telephone on which his previous victims, now dead, call Finney with advice about how to escape his captor.

Some movies feature supernatural elements that the viewer is expected to buy into, otherwise the pictures don't work. In fact, I think it's fair to say that they *usually* don't work, and that filmmakers' increasing preoccupation over the decades with vampires, werewolves, zombies, and the like has been detrimental to the horror genre. In this case, the combination of the girl's prescient dreams and the phone calls from beyond the grave just didn't do it for me. Not to mention that the whole thing (which is based on a short story of the same name by Joe Hill) felt padded out beyond all reason. Most of all, however, the very premise struck me as detestable. Again, this is a matter of crossing a line that's hard to locate exactly. The various versions of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the many films in the *Scream* franchise involve the slaughter of innumerable teenagers, but somehow they don't seem to me to be particularly offensive. This one does.

Why? Perhaps, first of all, because the murders in the *Chainsaw* and *Scream* movies are so over the top, and the victims so unidimensional and stereotyped, whereas Finney and his friends, as introduced in the opening sequences, are real and endearing, bringing to mind movies like *Stand by Me*; second, because the types of abductions depicted in *Black Phone* happen all too frequently, and are a serious matter; and, third, because introducing supernatural elements into the mix feels particularly tasteless. Nonetheless, plenty of

people apparently disagree: for a low-budget thriller, *Black Phone* was a box-office smash, and a sequel is scheduled for release next October. So check this one out, if you're tempted, and decide for yourself.

Another creepy basement figures in *Barbarian* (2022), which was written and directed by Zach Cregger and which is the worst-ever ad for Airbnb. It's set in an extremely seedy Detroit neighborhood where Tess Marshall (Georgina Campbell), who's come to town for a job interview with a hip documentary filmmaker, discovers that the house where she's arranged to spend the night has also been rented to Keith (Bill Skarsgård), of whom she's suspicious until it turns out that he's a hip local musician with whom she shares hip professional acquaintances. They agree to share the place for the night, and all goes well until Tess, during a quick visit to the creepy basement to fetch some toilet paper, comes across a hidden corridor that Keith decides to investigate. I won't serve up any spoilers. Suffice it to say that it's a chilling watch, in which the further developments in the plot involve A.J., an obnoxious Hollywood actor played by Justin Long – whom horror fans may recognize as the boyfriend from *Drag Me to Hell* (2009).

After losing their friend, Ally, in an automobile accident, three young people who look like twentysomethings but are apparently supposed to be teenagers, Peter (Rory Alexander), Monica (Annie Hamilton), and Tilly (Anna Bullard) – who was apparently driving the death car and is riddled with guilt – come up with a cure for their grief: road trip! Their destination: the uninhabited country home of Monica's late grandparents, which, naturally, comes complete with a creepy basement that Peter, upon discovering it, describes succinctly as a "creepy basement." As in *The Open House*, odd things start

happening: Tilly keeps blowing out candles only to discover they've been mysteriously lit again. She hears Ally's voice – or does she?

On their second night in the house, the kids realize that they're not alone – and that they should vamoose pronto. But their car won't start. And when they go back inside, the floor is covered with pictures of Ally. An audio tape of Ally's final moments – but who could have taped it? – plays. We learn some unsettling new details about the accident. And next thing you know, a masked marauder has dragged Monica off and Peter has fled in fear, leaving Tilly to her fate.

Directed by Alex Herron from a screenplay by Wolf Kraft, *Dark Windows* (2023) is blessedly short and legitimately disturbing, with two or three echoes of (homages to?) Bryan Burtino's first-rate horror flick *The Strangers* (2008). In short, a pretty worthwhile watch – never mind that the villain's identity isn't really all that hard to guess, the two girls are so much of a type that (in the early scenes, anyway) they can be hard to tell apart, and both of them seem to have attended the Claire Danes School of Overacting.

I'll close this round-up with *Wounds* (2019), written and directed by Babak Anvari. Will (Armie Hammer, previously seen subjecting Timothée Chalamet to statutory rape in *Call Me by Your Name*), works at a crummy New Orleans bar where, during a violent fracas involving a couple of unsavory regulars, a group of scrawny teenagers flee in fear, one of them leaving behind a cell phone. Will takes the phone home, and soon begins receiving a series of bizarre, gruesome messages – and then starts experiencing hallucinations.

None of it adds up – for me, anyway – and the film concludes, abruptly, with a repulsive supernatural event that has no clear relationship to anything. After it was over, I read an

online synopsis that purported to explain what it all supposedly meant, but it just left me more baffled. But give it a try, if you wish: maybe it'll make more sense to you than it did to me.

Oh, well. At least it doesn't include a creepy basement.

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