

THE AMITYVILLE HORROR

Directed by Stuart Rosenberg
Produced by Elliot Geisinger and Ronald Saland
Distributed by American International Pictures
Released in 1979

First of all, just because a story is based on a true-life event, that doesn't mean there can't be alterations. And if some are inevitable, drop the true-to-life spin-doctoring and tell a great story inspired by real life.

The Amityville Horror keeps the one element of the real-life story that most disappoints—the Lutzes' departure. Something far more spectacular would be preferable. The climax involves George going back to rescue the family dog (and some of the greatest dread generated by the story involves worries of what's going to befall that dog [which is an indictment of the paucity of sympathetic human characters]). George falls into the Hell portal and the dog attacks him before realizing that this unrecognizable blob is his master. George emerges from the house with the dog. That's it. Wouldn't it have been more satisfying if the little girl who is friendly with the spirits had to die in order to break the curse, and George is the one to do it since he's got an axe and he's not her father? (This might feel too much like *The Omen*, though.) Another possibility, hinted at when Kathy asks her daughter what "Jody" has been saying, is that the daughter could be fooled into divulging critical information that could be used to destroy the spirits. However you like it, a real win of protagonist over antagonist is not the Lutzes getting out alive. (After all, the spirits want the house empty; so they're getting their way.) A real win is George overcoming his desire to kill his family and, instead, switching sides to confront and purge the spirits. This is where Rod Steiger's Father Delaney should have made a triumphant return. After all, he's left blind and defeated; we never get the pleasure of seeing him finally reunited with Kathy and exacting his holy revenge.

Subverting some expectations is good. But *The Amityville Horror* goes so far that its surprises feel like plot holes rather than ingenious twists.

Many characters serve no unique purpose or start off strong but never go anywhere. The investigator, the junior priest, the business partner, the business partner's wife, the nun, and the baby sitter go nowhere and tack forty minutes on to the run time. The family stays in the house about five days longer than is plausible. It's all such a let down—once we've got the set-up, all that's left is to wait for the inevitable showdown between the spirit world and the Lutzes. And otherwise great gimmicks—the missing cash, the flies, George's obsession with fire, the cats—are never explained, thus reducing the movie to a series of predictable shocks that delay the inevitable confrontation, which is, itself, a letdown. Touches like the rocking chair that rocks itself, and the walls dripping blood look great, but don't mean anything and really aren't scary.

The movie is scariest in the beginning, seeing the murders in a series of fragmented inserts while the Lutzes tour the house. (The freeze-frame as they climb the stairs is a stand-out.) This mood of looming terror is quickly dissipated, however, particularly since the editing

from here on is perfunctory, merely arranging events sequentially rather than punctuating the narrative with nightmare visuals that the audience cannot steel itself against.

But the leads are good. Brolin does some nice work with his eyes that makes us wonder if he's been taken over; Kidder is impassioned and uniquely beautiful, while Steiger provides bombast and the appropriate touch of camp.

Lalo Schifrin's theme is justifiably famous, but he apes *Psycho's* shrieking violins with embarrassing frequency.

Perhaps the biggest failure of this movie is that it doesn't play fair—the antagonist (broadly speaking, the house) is waging a psychological and spiritual fight. The Lutzes are impotent and we're denied the chance to see Father Delaney go to town exorcising recalcitrant demons. When the Lutzes finally get serious and begin incanting blessings while waving the crucifix, we sense that the stakes have been raised. But the name of Jesus Christ is impotent, George is compelled to drop the crucifix, and Kathy develops boils (or something, who knows?). So we've got another letdown and, what, an insult to Christians?

Maybe not. In the nineteenth chapter of Acts, a Jewish priest invokes the names of Jesus Christ and St. Paul when attempting an exorcism. The demon basically tells him to blow off. He says, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" The man who was possessed then jumps up and thrashes everyone, so that they fled, naked and bleeding.

While doubting the filmmakers had this biblical truth in mind when fashioning the story, it makes sense that the priest's incantations accomplished nothing: he was trying to employ the name of Jesus as a magic word. There was no power, because there was no belief; nor did the priest bear the power of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. And that's why the Lutzes failed. When faced with something like *The Amityville Horror*, the fight belongs to God. Anything we attempt just gets in the way.