

WORDS | Thommy Hutson

When asked to write about a favorite horror film from that divine decade of the 80s (oh, how you are missed!), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* immediately came to mind. As tempted as I was to lay down words about the who, what, why, where, when, and how of Wes Craven's original masterpiece, I had already done so—quite extensively and with the gracious help of over fifty cast and crew—in my book, "Never Sleep Again: The Elm Street Legacy." Of course, while there is always more to say about a film you love, I wanted to take this opportunity, this assignment, if you will, to explore another gem from the timeframe. So, I'll lay down the glove, take off the red and green sweater, hang up the fedora, and ask that you come with me on another journey. Different, but no less impactful, no less important.

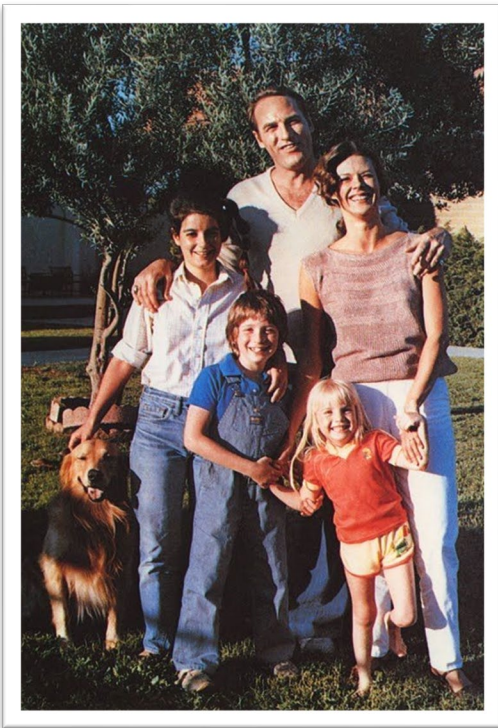
Picture it. 1982. Michael Jackson released *Thriller*. The first CD player sold in Japan. Time magazine selected the personal computer as its Man (machine?) of the Year. Disney's future world park, EPCOT, opened its gates. It was a year full of fascinating events in several areas. It

was also a darn good year at the movies. Whether you were fascinated by the sci-fi action of *Blade Runner*, Dustin Hoffman donning a dress in *Tootsie*, falling in love with *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, or running scared from that other, less-than-friendly alien in John Carpenter's *The Thing*, there was, it seemed, something for everyone.

And what could be more for everyone than another PG-rated offering from Steven Spielberg? Sure, it was a thriller. It also delved into the supernatural. All right, fine, it was horror. Directed by Tobe Hooper of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* fame, there was not a Black & Decker in sight and the film was rated PG. It was also about a family, particularly an adorable, cherub-faced little girl. Okay, so they had some ghosts. How scary could it be? I mean, PG, remember?

You know what? It wasn't scary.

The film—*Poltergeist*—was downright terrifying.



That terror befell the Freeling family: dad Steven (Craig T. Nelson), mom Diane (JoBeth Williams), oldest daughter Dana (Dominique Dunne), young daughter Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke), and young son Robbie. And while many horror films of the time (and, truth be told, of this time) depended on masked killers, lumbering villains, buckets of gore, or a combination of all of the above, *Poltergeist* smartly relied on its characters. As Roger Ebert stated in his (I feel one less star than it deserves) three-star review of the film, "The haunted house doesn't have seven gables, but it does have a two-car garage." And that is why the movie was—is—so compelling. It really, truly brought the horror into our homes; a suburb, a subdivision, with house on top of house. If you opened your window and stretched your arm out, perhaps you could grab that desperately needed, borrowed cup of sugar from your neighbor for the cake you were baking for the upcoming block party. That familial and

familiar aspect set the stage for how real the people and setting were. This, in turn, allowed us to believe the horrors happening to them. And, in a way, all of us.

I was very young when I saw the film, and it certainly made an impression. We won't get into the debate of what is too young to see a horror film—sorry, I mean Steven Spielberg-produced supernatural thriller, right?—but let's just say the babysitter who took me did not babysit me again. But until the moment my parents bid her *adios!* I remember being as transfixed as I was terrified, trying to watch and listen, even as I closed my eyes and covered my ears. I counted in

relief with Robbie during the thunderstorm but then screamed with him when the tree (A. Tree!) tried to gobble him up. I worried with Carol Anne when the closet opened and became so bright



it hurt. I came home and got rid of any toy that even remotely resembled the clown—that thing

that grinned as if it were just waiting to do something terrible to anyone in its clutches and, as we all saw and all screamed, it did. Of course, of the almost too many to count incredible moments in the film, one that

is so well-remembered, oft-talked about, and certainly at the core of any *How in God's name is this film PG!?* arguments, is when Marty (Martin Casella), well, you know, takes matters into his own hands.

And you know what? I never even saw that moment in a movie theater. Nope. I had to go to the bathroom, and when I came back, my babysitter whispered, “It’s a good thing you went. You don’t even want to know what happened.” Um, yes, I did, but it would take a few years until the film popped up on cable (thanks, HBO) for me to see a crawling steak, maggot-covered fried chicken and, well, you know.

I learned very quickly the well, you know was that after experiencing a nasty double whammy of bad chicken and beef, Marty doesn’t just go ahead and do what most people would, which is rinse out their mouth and wash their face. No, this is a Steven Spielberg production, remember? The guy who had children rushing to theaters as Indiana Jones watched Mola Ram rip someone’s *still beating heart* out of their chest in yet another of his PG affairs. But I digress. No, Marty, the paranormal investigator in *Poltergeist*, goes a step further in his quest for cleanliness by, well, you know—



Tearing. Off. His. Own. Face. In bloody, sinewy, gory chunks. Now, I am sure there had to be more than one adult in the audience who, in between their screams, thought, “Parental Guidance is just *suggested!*?” Upon finally seeing the scene



and, let's be honest, relishing in its ooey-gooley delight as a horror fan, I realized why Dr. Lesh (Beatrice Straight) tells Diane that Marty won't be coming back. Good call, Marty.

So, like me, if after your first viewing of this film, you didn't wonder about the dangers of a newly waxed floor, the closet light, old trees, that creepy toy you always threw a last glance at before bedtime, giant monsters, or whether or not things really did go bump in the night, then you did not see the same film I did. But, if you're reading this, I have a sneaking suspicion that is how each of you felt because of the extraordinary, heart-pounding terror it delivered. Hooper and Spielberg knew how to get us, and fought with the MPAA for a PG rating so as many people as possible could be gotten. And, really, aren't we thankful?

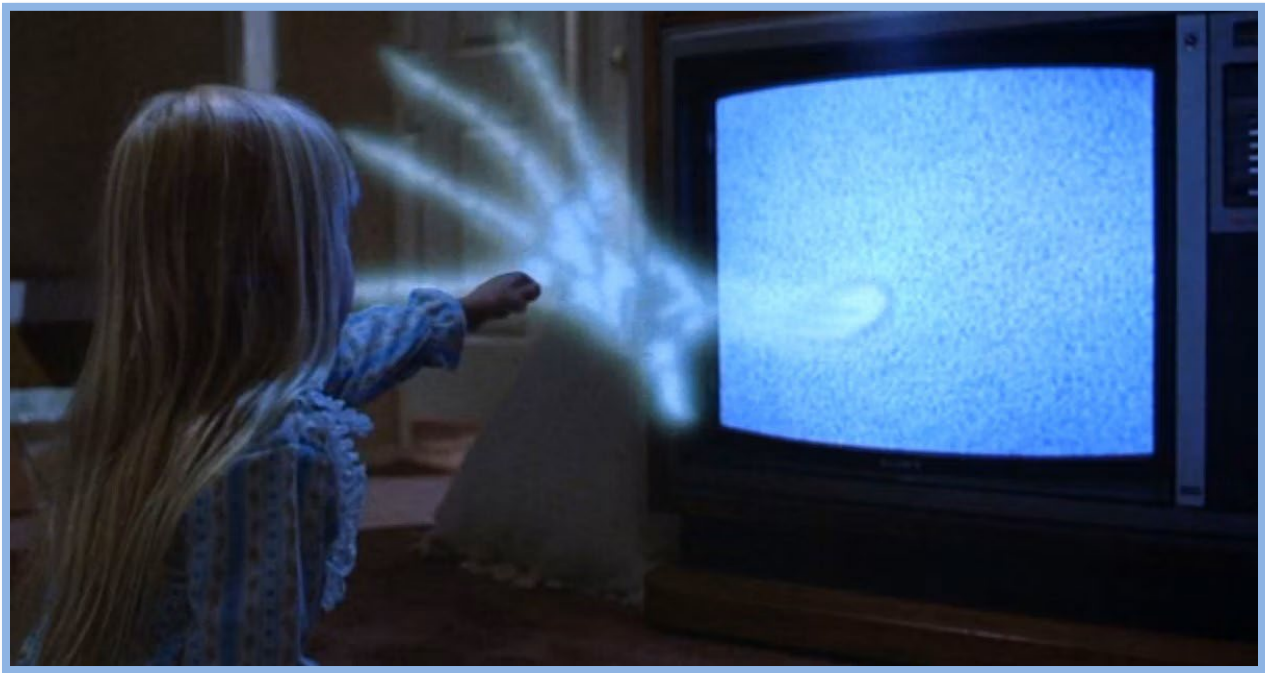


But the film is, and should be, remembered for delivering far more than deep-rooted fear, perfectly-timed jump scares, and very cool special effects. It made us think and feel exactly what we would do to help a child. How deep into the light would one go to save someone they loved. How far down the seemingly everlasting hallway you would run to stop the monster that wasn't supposed to be under the bed but was. (Or, in this case, outside the bedroom door because, you know, it's cramped under that bed with all the other waiting monsters.)



What resonated with me as a child, and now as an adult, and with so many others, is that *Poltergeist* was

always about a family, their love, and whether or not a singular, traumatic event would tear them apart or bring them closer together. It's a film that, much like the Freeling house, has many hearts. Because of that, the film that scared us for reasons when we were younger scares us for entirely different ones now. And what a feat that is. It was a movie that worked on so many levels, for so much time, for so many people. A film that proved horror didn't have to only be stalk and slash. It's a testament to the story, the acting, the effects, and the power of a motion picture that started because a little girl decided she would talk to the— TV people. In this day and age when screens are omnipresent, maybe Steven Freeling was right to wheel the television out of the motel room. And maybe, just maybe, we should heed that warning and start putting our devices down a bit more.



Until then, I'll always wonder what might be happening between those dots of light on the screen and whether something isn't looking back. My hunch is you will, too. For decades, we've all learned to hang back so we do not jam the frequencies. And what are those, exactly? For me, the film proved they are story, character, dialogue, action, suspense, drama, thrills, horror, and dazzling effects. All those touches, large and small, combined to create a film that resonated with us then and stays with us now. It's what great movies are all about. It's what 80s horror was all about. *Poltergeist* may have been just one of them, but what a damn good one of them it was.