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Action Cinema

Thrillers and Horror Films

This new section has been added to the London Film Festival to help spotlight films from action genres that are sometimes ignored by serious filmgoers. As Manny Farber pointed out in a famous 1957 essay, the action films are the true "underground" movies that slip into release with little critical or public attention. Yet if Hawks, Wellman, Walsh, Mann or Whale were starting today, this is the area in which they would probably be working. The vitality and craftsmanship of some of these relatively low-budget films is truly remarkable and it is often possible to make statements about society in action films that would not be allowed in big-budget productions. In the so-called "exploitation" area of the market, producers don't mind how much intellectually subversive sub-structure a film has as long as it conforms to the demands of the action public. The nine films we have selected for showing in this section are, in my opinion, the highlights of the year in the thriller-terror-horror-SF action genres. They are suspenseful, frightening and sometimes horrific but they are also made with genuine cinematic skill. In the words of Manny Farber, they have "the swallowed-up intricacy of a good soft-shoe dance". Let us know what you think of this new section.—Ken Wlaschin.



Assault on Precinct 13

U.S.A. 1976

Thu 1 Dec 11.00 a.m. 6.15

Director: John Carpenter

Production Company: CKK

Producer: J. S. Kaplan

Screenplay: John Carpenter

Photography (Metrocolor): Douglas Knapp

Editor: John T. Chance

Music: John Carpenter

Sound: William Cooper

International Distributor: Turtle Releasing Organisation, 9229 Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, California

Leading Players: Austin Stoker, Darwin Joston, Laurie Zimmer, Martin West, Tony Burton, Charles Cyphers, Nancy Loomis

Running Time: 91 mins

Cannes, Edinburgh Film Festivals 1977

John Carpenter, whose small-budget science-fiction epic *Dark Star* was widely acclaimed, has turned his inventive imagination to the thriller for his first solo directional effort. The result, even without taking into consideration his tiny budget and cast of unknowns is astonishing. *Assault on Precinct 13* is one of the most powerful and exciting crime thrillers from a new director in a long time. It grabs hold of the audience and simply doesn't let go as it builds to a crescendo of irrational violence that reflects only too well our fears of unmotivated attack. The story revolves around the all-night raid by a gang of suicidal hoods on an isolated, almost abandoned police station in Los Angeles. The gang, infuriated by the killing of one of their number, crazily beseege the station in order to get the man who did the killing. They have taken a blood oath for revenge of which the station's defenders are unaware. The police survivors, one young lieutenant and a woman officer, are eventually helped in their defence by condemned criminals. These are the mechanics of the film and they are set in motion with conscious irony (the onslaught is triggered by a little girl wanting to change the flavour of her ice cream) but the feeling of the film is something else again. It is a frightening look at the crumbling of rational ideas of law and order under an irresistible attack by the forces of irrationality and death.—Ken Wlaschin.