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Aaron Sullivan Illustration

Don Coscarelli's 1979 film, "Phantasm," is a bizarre classic of the horror genre.

PHANTASM

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such a way that it never flows as smoothly as your average horror film.

Structurally, the film is to horror what free jazz is to bebop. Coscarelli doesn't stick to a single structure to propel the film, nor to a simple plot to hold it together. Instead, he moves freely through a wide range of ideas and images, many of them not connected by anything so limiting as logic. The plot doesn't hold up to much scrutiny, but this hardly matters, because the idea is not to create something lucid, but rather something nightmarish. The choice of the word "phantasm" as the title was not an arbitrary one.

Briefly, the film is about two brothers recovering from the deaths of their parents two years before. The younger brother has become obsessed with the idea that he might lose his older brother as well, and follows him like a homesick puppy. One day he spies while his brother attends a friend's funeral, and he gets his first glimpse of the proprietor of the local funeral home, the aptly

named Tall Man. From then on the kid gets suspicious about the funeral home and its neighboring cemetery. He discovers that Tall Man is actually an alien who reanimates corpses and turns them into dwarves so they can be used as slave labor on his high-gravity planet.

This is all completely absurd, but it somehow works, because the plot doesn't require that you pay attention to it, so much as take it seriously. The entire film is based around creating a particular feel, an oddly creepy mood that doesn't let up for a moment, even when the characters crack jokes or the violence finds some release in mindless bloodletting.

The film accomplishes this mood through a number of interesting aesthetic choices. For starts, the camera hardly ever moves, not even to pan or tilt. Instead it keeps static, drawing attention to its lack of motion when characters walk onto screen without the audience ever knowing they are there. The film takes an old horror cliché, that nothing can be seen by the characters until it appears on screen, and pushes it to bizarre lengths, with characters popping out of the ether

as if they were suddenly transposed their through some sort of worm-hole.

This would seem like simple, low-budget amateur film making, but the style is so consistent that it seems impossible that it could have been an accident. The bizarre look of the film fits with the plot, whose absurdity mounts with every passing moment. The analogy to free jazz works on this level as well. In free jazz, a soloist will go off on whatever melodic fancy takes them at the moment, often passing through melody lines from popular songs or going through completely new inventions regardless of the original structure of the song. Coscarelli makes a similar move with the plot, starting off with what seems like a straightforward slasher and then moving off through a variety of horror trapping, even ending on the old "It was all a dream (or was it?)" conceit. In the hands of a hack it would come off as sloppy and ineffective. But Coscarelli is no hack, and "Phantasm" is a strange, twisted classic.

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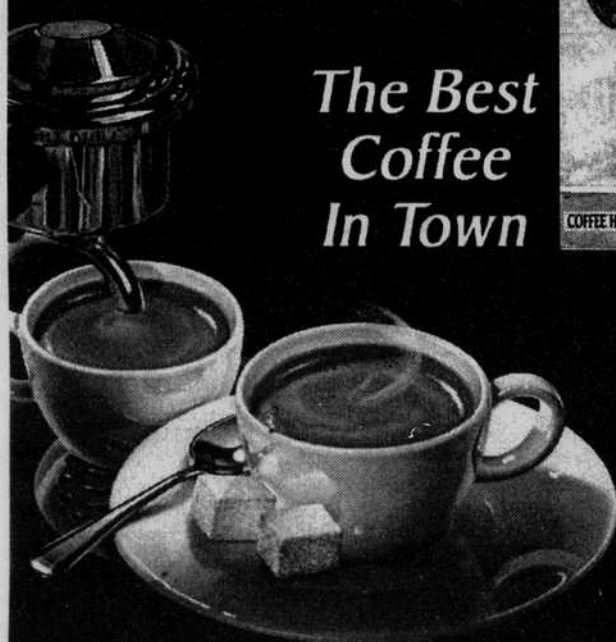
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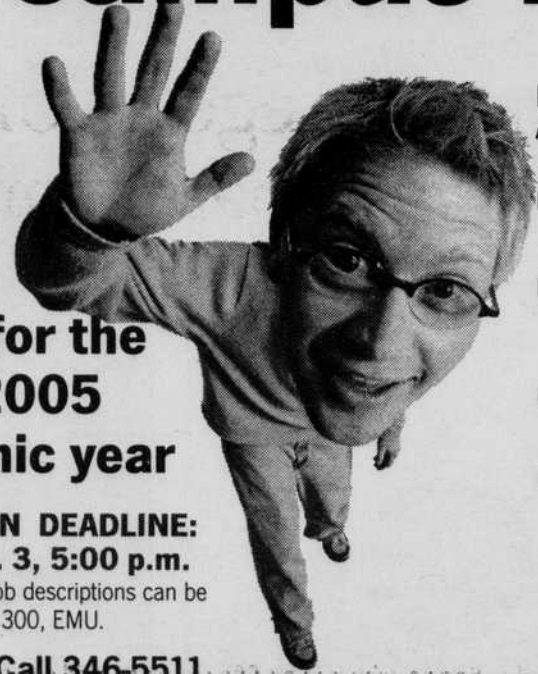


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