

Deathdream

USA / Canada / UK | 1974 | 88 minutes

Credits

Director	Bob Clark
Screenplay	Alan Ormsby
Photography	Jack McGowan
Music	Carl Zitrer
Cast	
Charles Brooks	John Marley
Christine Brooks	Lynn Carlin
Andy Brooks	Richard Backus
Dr. Philip Allman	Henderson Forsythe

Synopsis

The plot is a familiar one to anyone familiar with the story of the *Monkey's Paw* - grieving parents wish for the return of their dead son with dire consequences - but *Deathdream* (released under a host of other titles including *The Night Andy Came Home* and *Dead of Night*) puts a contemporary spin on events.

Directed by Canadian Bob Clark (*Black Christmas*, *Porky's*, *A Christmas Story*) and introducing the horror world to the talents of make-up effects guru Tom Savini, this atmospheric chiller was one of the first films to deal with the legacy of Vietnam. A young soldier, believed killed in battle, returns home to his parents - but he is very definitely a changed man...



Known originally as *Dead of Night* but released in America as *Deathdream*, Bob Clark's second foray into zombie cinema is an engaging, well invested 88 minutes of thrills, technical artistry, and provocative social commentary about the Vietnam War.

Clark's early career essentially started with three horror flicks: the zombie films *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (1972) and *Deathdream* and the slasher classic *Black Christmas*. In the late 1970s, he turned to crime dramas with *Breaking Point* and *Murder by Decree*. By the early 1980s, his comedies *Porky's*, *Porky's II*, and the iconic *A Christmas Story* earned him an office in CinephileLand. Notwithstanding that eclectic run, it's Clark's early work in horror that put him on the map.

Besides unveiling Clark's directorial talents, *Deathdream* also served as training ground for two other horror stalwarts: Tom Savini and Alan Ormsby. Savini's talents need no further explanation here, but it is worth noting he considers *Deathdream* an important rung on the ladder of his success. The DVD features a 10-minute short about Savini titled *The Early Years* that is worth watching. Ormsby wrote *Deathdream*, and he later wrote *Cat People* and *The Substitute*. Also in 1974, Ormsby directed and wrote *Deranged*, a biopic about serial killer Ed Gein that showcased Savini's early makeup work.

Deathdream's plot is straightforward, and that relative simplicity allows the film to shine. Andy Brooks is a Vietnam soldier killed on the battlefield. While dying, he is transfixed by an ambiguous something. Back home, a soldier reports the tragic news to the Brooks family. However, something is amiss, and Andy appears back in America as a traumatized, speechless hitchhiker. Much later that evening, hours after a tranquil Brooks family dinner, Andy returns home. The family is ecstatic, but Andy is tuned out. He stumbles through the motions, but eventually, the family's happiness turns into curiosity and later fear over Andy's condition. Something is definitely wrong with him. Mr. Brooks and Andy's relationship becomes increasingly strained as it becomes clear Andy may have been involved in two local murders. After some creepy scenes and exchanges that further reveal Andy's monstrous state, his menacing presence is obvious. The film culminates in a date with his old girlfriend that turns ugly.

The cinematography in *Deathdream* casts a splendid gloom. Two years later in *Black Christmas*, Clark fully developed his eye for cinematic horror, but in *Deathdream* those cinematic seeds are planted. The early war footage, although brief, is courageous and haunting, especially since this film is one of those war flicks that indicts War without focusing on battlefield nightmares. The carefully crafted suspense conjured in the doctor office scene is hair-raising, especially with Clark's use of shadows and night-for-night shooting. Another poignant cinematic motif is the staircase in the Brooks house. Complex and maze-like, it is an expressionistic symbol of the family's psychological angst.

I'm always amazed how zombie films can skip explaining how or why the zombies emerged. They just did and that often seems enough. This is true in *Deathdream* as well; Andy dies in Vietnam, then suddenly, he turns into a zombie. Why? Who cares? The film is a vehicle for exploring much more complicated themes and adds intriguing twists to the zombie mythos.

Andy is as much a vampire than anything else because he feeds more on blood than human flesh. He wants transfusions, not body parts. He also can exist awkwardly in a trance-like state among the living. He hides his monstrous side with clothing and secretive behavior like *The Invisible Man* or *Mr. Hyde*. Although he obviously can only hide for so long, his attempts to blend in are fascinating. Is he hiding because he wants to conform as Andy the civilian? Or does he blend in to lure his prey and ultimately nourish Andy the zombie? Richard Backus's devilishly stoic performance as Andy forces us to choose. He eventually dates his old girlfriend, but at the film's conclusion, he seems no longer satisfied with his zombie status. Strangely, he seems more satisfied with *The Other Side*. This may be a commentary on the zombie film itself. His characteristics and actions produce a tragic, sympathetic, and complex zombie.

The film never fills some basic plot holes, which inevitably challenges its logic and rationality. For example, how did Andy return home from Vietnam? Why exactly is he a zombie? Why doesn't the family question the military's initial claim that Andy died? Why doesn't anyone realize earlier he is a zombie? These are legitimate questions. However, such plot holes make sense if one reads the film as a deranged, metaphorical fantasy dreamed by families grieving over their deceased children who died in combat. The Brooks family is initially eager to overlook Andy's traumatized state and the apparent contradiction of his return because they are overjoyed he is alive. That seems normal. The film's title obviously refers to a dream, and nothing is rational in a dream. The family also is reluctant to believe Andy is guilty of anything. They just want their boy back, and they are willing to believe anything.

Deathdream



The film's greatest strength is clearly its commentary on the social implications of the Vietnam War. Andy's struggles on the home front are a metaphor for the difficulties many combat veterans have, regardless of their war, when returning to civilian life. Andy's friends back home are incapable of understanding his traumatic experiences. Although this misunderstanding does not cause his evil actions, he nevertheless is perceived as attacking and killing those who don't "understand" him. Andy's monstrous psychological condition is exaggerated to demonstrate how severe the horrors of war are. The effects of the war literally tear this family apart and have literally turned this soldier into a monster. In 1974 America, these wounds were all too fresh.

Political and social overtones aside, *Deathdream* is a neat chapter in the Book of Zombies. Replete with solid makeup work, piercing social commentary, and excellent direction, it is a dream worth realizing.

Chris Justive, www.creative-horror.com

Bob Clark

Benjamin "Bob" Clark (August 5, 1939 – April 4, 2007) was an American actor, director, screenwriter and producer best known for directing and writing the script with Jean Shepherd to the 1983 Christmas film *A Christmas Story*. His earliest success was the 1982 hit film *Porky's* and he also wrote and directed its sequel *Porky's II: The Next Day*. He is also known for kick-starting the slasher genre by directing the original *Black Christmas*.

Though best known for his involvement with these familiar titles, Clark's career actually began squarely in the horror genre, in the early 1970s. His first film of this ilk, *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (1972), was a blend of comedy and graphic horror.

Clark and his collaborator for this film, screenwriter and makeup artist Alan Ormsby, would revisit the zombie subgenre in 1972's *Deathdream*, also known by its alternate title, *Dead of Night*, a Vietnam War allegory that takes its cue from the classic short story *The Monkey's Paw*. The slasher film *Black Christmas* (1974) was one of his most successful films in this period, and is

remembered today as an influential precursor to the modern slasher film genre. Clark had moved to Canada, then a tax haven for Americans, and these productions were small by Hollywood standards but made Clark a big fish in the small pond of the Canadian film industry of that era.

Clark executive-produced the moonshine movie *Moonrunners*, which was used as source material for the TV series *The Dukes of Hazzard*. Clark later produced the 2000 TV movie *The Dukes of Hazzard: Hazzard in Hollywood*. Clark and others sued Warner Bros. over the studio's 2005 movie *The Dukes of Hazzard*, winning a \$17.5 million settlement just prior to the movie's release.

Turning toward more serious fare, Clark scored a critical success with the Sherlock Holmes film *Murder by Decree*, starring Christopher Plummer and Geneviève Bujold, which won five Genie Awards including Best Achievement in Direction and Best Performance for both leads. He followed this with a TV movie of the Bernard Slade play *Tribute*, starring Jack Lemmon reprising his Broadway role, for which Lemmon was nominated for an Academy Award and 11 Genies including a win for Lemmon's performance.

Clark returned to his B-movie roots, though, co-writing, producing, and directing *Porky's*, a longtime personal project. Clark had a detailed outline based on his own youth in Florida, which he dictated into a cassette recorder due to illness, and collaborator Roger Swaybill said of listening to the tapes, "I became convinced that I was sharing in the birth of a major moment in movie history. It was the funniest film story I had ever heard." Though set in the United States, the film would go on to gross more than any other English-language Canadian film. The film was the third most successful release of 1982 and by the end of the film's lengthy initial release, in 1983, *Porky's* had secured itself a spot, albeit short-lived, as one of the top-25 highest grossing films of all time in the US. The film was (also briefly) the most successful comedy in film history. *Porky's* overwhelming success is credited as launching the genre of the teen sex comedy so prevalent throughout the 1980s and which continued into the millennium in such movies as the *American Pie* franchise. Clark wrote, produced, and directed the film's first sequel, *Porky's II: The Next Day* (1983), which shifted the focus away from the title character to two new antagonists with perhaps greater relevance, a sleazy local politician who cynically caters to the influence of a blustering fundamentalist preacher while seducing a teenage girl. Clark refused involvement with a third film, *Porky's Revenge*, which brought *Porky* and the sexual exploits of the cast back front and center as in the first installment.

He instead collaborated with Jean Shepherd on *A Christmas Story*, which critic Leonard Maltin described as "one of those rare movies you can say is perfect in every way". Although not a box-office smash in its theatrical release, *A Christmas Story* would go on to become a perennial holiday favorite via repeated TV airings and home video. A joint effort at a sequel in 1994, *My Summer Story*, did not fare as well; Maltin said that the studio waited too long, and Clark was forced to recast almost the entire film. Three other film versions of the Parker family had been produced for television by PBS with Shepherd's involvement during the late 1980s, also with a different cast, but without Clark's participation.

Clark continued to stay active in the film industry until his death, with lower-budget fare mixed in with brief runs at higher targets. A *Hollywood Reporter* critic, speaking after his death, described his career as "a very unusual mix of films", because he "at times was a director-for-hire and would do films that, to say the least, aren't stellar". Some of his last output included *Baby Geniuses* and *SuperBabies: Baby Geniuses 2*.

Clark was nominated twice for the Razzie Awards as "Worst Director", for *Rhinestone* and *SuperBabies: Baby Geniuses 2*. At the end of his life, he was working with Howard Stern on a remake of *Porky's*, and three of his early horror films were slated for expensive remakes: *Children Shouldn't Play With Dead Things*, *Deathdream*, and *Black Christmas*.

