

# Wolfen

USA | 1981 | 115 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Michael Wadleigh
<b>Screenplay</b>	David Eyre/Michael Wadleigh Whitley Strieber (novel)
<b>Photography</b>	Gerry Fisher
<b>Music</b>	James Horner

## Cast

<b>Dewey Wilson</b>	Albert Finney
<b>Rebecca Neff</b>	Diane Venora
<b>Eddie Holt</b>	Edward James Olmos
<b>Whittington</b>	Gregory Hines

## Synopsis

After attending the groundbreaking of a real estate development he's building in the impoverished South Bronx, industrialist Christopher Van Der Veer stops off with his wife in Battery Park, where Van Der Veer's ancestors built the first windmill in New York. Stalked by an unseen predator with four legs and highly acute senses, the couple are quickly attacked and killed. Their driver has his hand severed before he's able to get off a shot.

Haggard detective Dewey Wilson (Albert Finney) receives a page from his commanding officer (Dick O'Neill) and is dispatched to the crime scene: "It's very weird and it's very strange, just like you." A coroner named Whittington (Gregory Hines) – full of grisly facts, like how long a severed head can remain conscious – finds no trace of metal on the victims' wounds. The high-tech security firm protecting Van Der Veer pairs Dewey with their own expert, psychologist Rebecca Neff (Diane Venora).

Counterterrorism tactics fails to net a suspect, but when the predator attacks a vagrant in the South Bronx, hairs found at both crime scenes indicate the killer is the same. Dewey and Rebecca visit a zoologist named Ferguson (Tom Noonan) who reveals the hairs belong to "canis lupis." A wolf. Dewey's suspicions lead him to Eddie Holt (Edward James Olmos), former member of the Native American Movement. Holt spends his time on top of bridges and claims to be able to shape shift into different animals.

Ferguson maintains that wolves were wiped out in the east a century ago, along with the buffalo and Indians. "Wolves and Indians evolved and were destroyed simultaneously. They're both tribal, they look out for their own, they don't overpopulate and they're both superb hunters." It becomes obvious that something out there is preying on New Yorkers. Dewey and Whittington arm themselves with night vision and go hunting in the South Bronx, but discover they're up against something more than a pack of wolves.

## Production history

The *Wolfen* was the 1978 debut novel by Whitley Strieber. The book opened with the deaths of two police officers and focused on the efforts of cranky detective George Wilson and his young partner Becky Neff to track down the killers. They discover a pack of highly intelligent wolves preying on the castoffs of society. The wolves are also willing to kill to keep their existence secret. Strieber's agent showed her husband – producer Rupert Hitzig – an advance copy of the book, which Hitzig bid on and won the screen rights to.

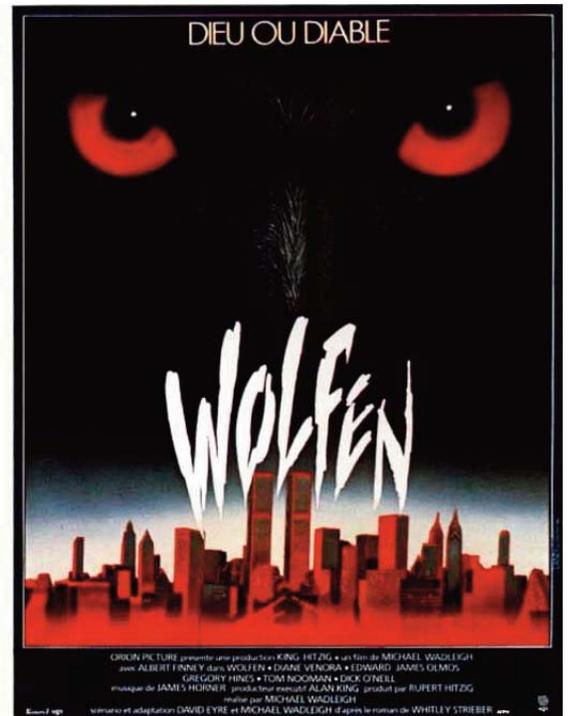
With the property set up at Orion Pictures, Hitzig offered the directing job to Michael Wadleigh, a talented documentary filmmaker best known for *Woodstock*. To adapt a screenplay, the studio was interested in Oliver Stone. When Hitzig and Wadleigh met with the Academy Award winning screenwriter in Rome, Stone didn't care for the environmental approach they wanted to take with the story. David Eyre was brought in to write the script with Wadleigh instead.

Over the course of shooting, Wadleigh fell behind as many as six weeks. Notified by the studio that he had five days to finish, Wadleigh submitted a four hour and four minute assemblage with thirty six "scene missing" cards inserted. He was fired. Hitzig assumed directing duties for thirty days of reshoots, including the solarized "Wolfen vision" shots with Steadicam creator Garrett Brown operating the camera. John Hancock was brought in to finish the movie due to DGA regulations. Wadleigh never directed a feature film again.

## Opinion

*Wolfen* was released in July 1981 between *The Howling* and *An American Werewolf In London*, but it's a testament to the strength of the finished film that not only is it as great as those two genre classics, but it spins the werewolf movie off in completely innovative and exciting directions. Seen today, it plays like a big budget season finale of *The X-Files*, establishing strong performances from its cast, some ghoulish autopsy scenes, a weird mystery and incredibly vivid atmosphere.

Instead of reducing itself to a creature feature, serial killer thriller or cop procedural, the script is an artful combination of all three, layering a deeper message about man's precarious relationship with the environment. *Wolfen* has a bold visual sheen and breathtaking production value as well, with key sequences shot atop the George Washington Bridge and in the ruins of South Bronx. The cast shines, particularly



The Werewolf

# Wolfen



Gregory Hines in his screen debut. A 27-year-old composer named James Horner replaced Craig Safan on short notice and produced a rousing musical score. **(Joe Valdez)**

What sets *Wolfen* apart from all its werewolf picture cohorts is the allegorical tale at its centre, the fate of the "Wolfen", once the masters of their eminent domain, now reduced to living in squalor as the victims of the white-man's urban decay, is paralleled with that of the Native American (Indian), driven out and down in a Caucasian dominated society - and much of this intuitive element is down to a clever script by David Eyre and Woodstock director Michael Wadleigh. The linear plotting contains much that is relatively standard fare, police procedural elements, the cliché 'growing attraction/relationship'

between male and female lead, and the by now de-rigueur 'unorthodox coroner' who demonstrates complete indifference to the more ghoulish or even the more reverential aspects of his job, but in drawing in the deeper observations on show, *Wolfen* is elevated beyond the mere status of 'supernatural/creature-feature thriller. Oddly enough, when director Michael Wadleigh delivered his first cut of *Wolfen* to the execs at Warner Brothers back in 1981, they took one look and recoiled in horror; "Oh My God(!)-A horror movie with a social conscience", and promptly unleashed a battery of editors upon it. This resulted in a version with no Indians, one with no wolves and one with no terrorists (urban terrorists also feature within the film's scenario), until commonsense prevailed and Wadleigh's original version was allowed out onto general release, whereupon it promptly went belly-up in the States, obviously containing too much in the way of taxing cerebral requirement for the average American theatre-goer to ingest at a single sitting.

A beautifully lensed picture, *Wolfen* captures the look and feel of New York circa late 70's/early '80's in a way few other films have ever managed, and the effective camera-trickery that gives us "Wolfen-Vision" is almost dream-like and effective in sustaining the atmospherics of the attack sequences. *Wolfen* is refreshingly subtle in its depiction of the titular character and intelligently restrained in its depiction of the attacks themselves. The film carries too much intelligence to be undermined it might've been had it been allowed to degenerate into a bloodbath during the attacks and their aftermath. The playing is perfectly adequate, the script literate and sharp, whilst Wadleigh's direction is stylish and assured. Easily the best of its subgeneric strand, only Landis' wonderful, but totally different *An American Werewolf in London* comes even close, *Wolfen* is an essential choice for those who enjoy intelligent thrillers as opposed to blood-splattering slice and dice and braindead horror films. **(Dr. Obrero)**

## Michael Wadleigh

Michael Wadleigh (born September 24, 1942) is an American movie director and cinematographer renowned for his groundbreaking documentary of the 1969 Woodstock Festival, *Woodstock*.

A native of Akron, Ohio, Wadleigh entered films in his early twenties as a cinematographer on independently-produced low-budget films David Holtzman's *Diary* and *I Call First* (both 1967), and *My Girlfriend's Wedding* (1969). Billed as Michael Wadley, he gained notice for his work from critics who followed independent and underground films, but the films, primarily aimed at a specialized and counterculture audience, brought him no financial success.

In April-May 1969, Wadleigh undertook the monumental task of documenting the rock music festival scheduled in the vicinity of Woodstock, New York on August 15-18. He arrived on the site in Bethel with over a thousand reels of film and a crew of several camera operators. The finished product was said to have consisted of about 120 miles of footage which, over the next months, was edited down to 184 minutes. Warner Brothers, the film's primary financial backer, released it on March 26, 1970.

The film, which reportedly cost \$600,000 to produce, earned over \$50 million in the United States and more millions from foreign rentals, but due to a complicated arrangement with Warner Brothers, Wadleigh received only a small percentage of the profits. *Woodstock* stands as a milestone in the documentary film field, receiving an Academy Award for Documentary Feature at the 1971 ceremony.

*Janis*, a 1974 documentary about Janis Joplin, gave Wadleigh credit as cinematographer for his archive footage, but it would be eleven years after the release of *Woodstock* before he received his next and, last to date, directorial credit. *Wolfen*, a unique 1981 horror phantasmagoria based on the novel by Whitley Strieber, was praised for its dreamlike nature and striking visual quality, but despite a top-notch star turn from Albert Finney, turned out to have been too offbeat for the general public to achieve financial success. Wadleigh also wrote the *Wolfen* screenplay and has a bit part as "Terrorist Informer."

In August 1994, twenty-four years after its original showing, a 228-minute "director's cut" of *Woodstock* was released, and in 1999, another *Woodstock*-based documentary, *Jimi Hendrix: Live at Woodstock* gave Wadleigh another archive footage credit for cinematography. **(Wikipedia)**

