

The Fog

USA | 1980 | 89 minutes

Credits

Director	John Carpenter
Screenplay	John Carpenter, Debra Hill
Photography	Dean Cundey
Music	John Carpenter

Cast

Stevie Wayne	Adrienne Barbeau
Elizabeth Solley	Jamie Lee Curtis
Kathy Williams	Janet Leigh
Mr. Machen	John Houseman

In Brief

One hundred years ago, on April 21st, the wealthy leper Blake bought the vessel Elizabeth Dane and sailed with his people to California to form a leper colony. However, while sailing through a thick fog, they were deliberately misguided by a campfire onshore, steering the course of the vessel toward the light and crashing her against the rocks. One hundred years later, on the centenary of the fishing town Antonio Bay, Father Robert Malone (Hal Holbrook) finds the journal of his grandfather hidden in the wall of his church. It discloses how Antonio Bay was built using Blake's fortune after a group of conspirators, including his grandfather, lighted the fire to sink the Elizabeth Dane and stole Blake's fortune. A strange glowing fog appears, bringing the ghosts of Blake and his crew up from their watery graves to seek vengeance.

Claudio Carvalho, www.imdb.com

After the phenomenal success of Halloween (1978), there was a lot of speculation as to what John Carpenter would do next. A sequel? Another slasher film? He confounded all expectations by working in television on a movie-of-the-week entitled, Someone's Watching Me! (1978), and a mini-series biopic (1979) about Elvis Presley, starring a then-up-and-coming Kurt Russell. His next proper feature film would be an atmospheric ghost story entitled, The Fog (1980). At the time, it was considered an odd choice for Carpenter as that particular sub-genre was not all that popular or commercially successful. After all the good will he enjoyed with the underdog status of Halloween, the knives were out when it came to The Fog as he faced criticism for conducting reshoots to add more gore. This was done reportedly because the studio was not happy with his first cut of the film. Critics savaged the end product as betraying its own logic and for not being all that scary. It underperformed at the box office, especially in comparison to Halloween. However, for me, The Fog has only improved over time, despite its flaws, and deserves to be rediscovered and reconsidered as one of Carpenter's better films.



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The film opens with a tell-me-a-scary-story prologue that Carpenter would use again in Big Trouble in Little China (1986) as an old man (John Houseman) tells a group of children about a small clipper ship known as the Elizabeth Dane that was beset by a thick fog many years ago. The ship's crew saw a light and mistook it for a lighthouse and crashed into the rocks. All the men aboard perished. It has been said that when the fog returns to Antonio Bay, the ship's crew will rise from the depths and will exact their revenge on the ones that led them to their deaths.

And with that appropriate mood setter, Carpenter proceeds to introduce the more significant inhabitants of the town. There's the alcoholic pastor Father Malone (Hal Holbrook) of the local church that harbors a horrible secret. He finds the diary of his deceased grandfather with a rather ominous entry that reads, "midnight 'til one belongs to the dead. Good Lord deliver us." Stevie Wayne (Adrienne Barbeau) is a sexy late night disc jockey whose show runs for an hour starting at midnight, which just so happens to be the time when the fog appears and the attacks happen. There's Dan O'Bannon (Charles Cyphers) who uses the weather reports to flirt with Stevie. They're two disembodied voices that will probably never meet. Meanwhile, Mayor Williams (Janet Leigh) is busy organizing a celebration for the town's centennial with the help of her assistant Sandy (Nancy Loomis). Finally, Nick Castle (Tom Atkins) picks up a female hitchhiker named Elizabeth (Jamie Lee Curtis) on the way into town.

As Antonio Bay celebrates its 100th anniversary, not so coincidentally, the fog has decided to return and with it the crew of the Elizabeth Dane. Their first victims are three fishermen on a trawler. Carpenter does his best Val Lewton imitation as he uses shadows and the darkness to create an oppressive mood of dread as the three men are quickly murdered. Nick is friends with one of the men and once he discovers their bodies, decides to look into their murders with Elizabeth in tow. The Fog actually starts off as a mystery as the protagonists try to figure out why the crew of the Elizabeth Dane have come back and what it is they want. We learn that the town was founded on greed and now the past sins of their forefathers are coming back to haunt them.



The Fog is a master class on how to create an ominous atmosphere through cinematography and musical score. Carpenter teamed up again with director of photography Dean Cundey, whom he worked with previously on Halloween. They make great use of the widescreen frame, like the shot of the camera looking down the many steps that lead to the lighthouse where Stevie broadcasts her radio show. You really get a sense of how remote the location is. There's also a creepy shot of an overcast sky with the fog slowly encroaching on a dock in almost monochromatic colors. The fog takes on an otherworldly look thanks to a glowing effect that Carpenter employs in order to reinforce its supernatural attributes. Cundey's lighting is particularly effective in making the fog sequences so creepy. It can't be overstated just how important his contributions were to the films he made with Carpenter.

There are all kinds of small, but memorably unnerving moments, like the mysterious piece of driftwood that Stevie's little boy finds and that spontaneously leaks sea water only to then burst into flames and yet shows no signs of damage. There's a scene where an apprehensive Elizabeth is alone in a room with the corpse of one of the fishermen and we see the body stirring slightly under a white sheet in the background while she stands in the foreground unaware of what is happening. Then, Carpenter cuts to a close-up shot of a hand reaching out from under the sheet and grabbing a scalpel, all to the filmmaker's own unsettling minimalist musical score. Another spooky moment is a shot of the fog rolling in at the beginning of night. It glows white in contrast to the red of the sky as the sun disappears for the day. Only Carpenter could make a fog bank look scary as evident from the unnecessary and bland remake that failed miserably on every level.

The cast acquits themselves admirably with Adrienne Barbeau being a real stand-out as the D.J. with a sexy voice. Much like Laurie in Halloween, Stevie Wayne is a resourceful woman and not some damsel in distress. In The Fog, it is the male characters that are ineffectual and get killed off fairly easily with the notable exception of Nick who saves Stevie's son at one point. The town even has a female mayor! For a short while, Tom Atkins, who plays Nick, was a favorite of Carpenter's, and he cast him as the unlikely male lead in both this film and Halloween III: Season of the Witch (1982). He comes across as frumpier, less gruff version of Nick Nolte but an effective leading man nonetheless.

After the surprise success of Halloween, Carpenter and his producer and co-screenwriter Debra Hill wanted to follow it up with another horror film and were interested in doing something different – not another slasher film. In 1977, they were in England visiting Stonehenge and noticed a fog bank that “was pulsating as if something was in it,” remembered Hill. Carpenter felt like that would be an ideal situation for a ghost story. They soon began writing the screenplay and decided to explore the notion of revenge because it was usually a strong motivating factor for ghosts.

Carpenter was inspired by E.C. Comics like Tales from the Crypt and Vault of Horror that he enjoyed in his youth and that sometimes involved rotting corpses coming back to life for revenge. The story itself was inspired by an actual incident that took place in Santa Barbara, California during the 1700 or 1800s that caused a ship to crash and only to be hijacked for its gold with the help of a fog. Both Carpenter and Hill also drew inspiration from literary sources. She was influenced by the work of Edgar Allen Poe and his knack for exploring fear of the unknown, while Carpenter was inspired by the notion of amorphous evil and “something from beyond” from the stories of H.P. Lovecraft.

Carpenter and Hill struck a two-picture deal with a small but promising company called AVCO-Embassy who gave them a \$1 million budget, significantly more than what they had to work with on Halloween. Carpenter shot the film in the Point Reyes Station area of Marin County in California, which he found while driving up the coast with Hill stopping at every place that had a lighthouse. When they got to Port Reyes, saw the building and found out that it was the second foggiest point in the United States, they knew they had found their location. Carpenter found the fog very difficult to control as it was never the same from scene to scene. During many of the outdoor scenes they were unable to shoot because it was too windy. To do the indoor fog, they would tent in the entire set and make sure no air got in so it would not blow away. The production had different machines for a specific effect, like using a small, hand-held fog machine to squirt it under a door and keep it close to the floor, and large machine to cover a big area. In addition, long shots of the fog in the distance were done by combining background plates with the fog optically. Carpenter found it very time consuming getting the right color, the right density and making sure the fog wasn't too slow or too fast.

The Elizabeth Dane ghost ship was an actual one anchored in Long Beach, California. The film's art directors put their own sails on it and surrounded it with fog machines on boats, on the ship itself and on the dock. They also used miniatures, like the scene where Nick saves Stevie's son at the beach house and the fog overtakes the place. The production built a miniature of the house in black on





a soundstage and then had the fog come up on it in scale. The actors were then combined optically.

During the editing phase, editor Tommy Lee Wallace “didn’t have a great feeling” about the footage Carpenter had shot,” and thought that “we did okay.” Carpenter realized that the film wasn’t working and when they screened it for the studio, the executives didn’t think it was scary enough. His original concept for the film relied almost entirely on mood and atmosphere for effect but he went back and added “visceral shock” when his commercial instincts told him that something was missing. He was originally interested in doing an understated horror film with a “brooding atmospheric feel to it,” but didn’t feel like it could compete with films like *Alien* (1979) and *Phantasm* (1979). With only three months to go before it would be released, the studio gave Carpenter money to shoot additional scenes, including the title sequence, the climactic top-of-the-lighthouse sequence and reshooting the trawler deaths making them more explicit. The initial version also had a slower pace to it and so he added more energy. In addition, he re-did the sound as the original sound-effects track wasn’t very good and his score, by his own admission, “didn’t work and was very heavy-handed.”

Predictably, the knives came out when film critics came to review *The Fog*. *Newsweek* magazine’s David Ansen wrote, “But as *The Fog* rolls on, it dissipates its mystery, shock and credibility.” In his review for the *Washington Post*, Gary Arnold wrote, “an acceptable scene-setter, Carpenter reveals glaring inadequacies as a storyteller.” Roger Ebert gave the film two out of four stars but felt that the film was “made with style and energy, but it needs a better villain.” Finally, *Cinefantastique* magazine’s David Bartholomew wrote, “I feel a lingering disappointment in *The Fog* because the movie isn’t more than it is, or hasn’t broken any new ground ... But as it is, *The Fog*

is a frisky, efficient and scary movie in a genre overloaded with ineptly lifeless pictures.”

Carpenter does a good job of spacing out the attacks and spends time letting us get to know the key inhabitants of Antonio Bay so that we care about what happens to them later on. For example, there’s the recurring interludes between Dan and Stevie where they coyly flirt with each other like something out of a classic Hollywood film. *The Fog* is a slow burn film as it gradually builds up the tension and the scares to an exciting finale. Carpenter often likes to explore how a group deals with a threat in his films and so this one features yet another fascinating ensemble cast of characters. With this film, he has crafted quite an effective ghost story that is a triumph of mood and atmosphere. He employs every trick in the book to make the fog something to fear. This is done largely because of what exists within it – the unstoppable, vengeful ghosts of the Elizabeth Dane. They aren’t really evil per se – they exist solely to punish the town for what they did 100 years ago. They only want to right an injustice. Carpenter examines the hypocrisy of a town celebrating an anniversary based on a foundation of lies. This a theme that he would go on to explore several times, most notably in *Escape from New York* (1981), *They Live* (1988), and *Vampires* (1998).

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