

# ROCOCO Horror Redefined

by Michael Orlando Yaccarino

Within any film genre, there are various sub-classifications. The genre of the horror film contains many interrelated types, each given considerable analysis in the past: for example, science fiction, the vampire, and, most recently, the slasher. One category within this genre is worthy of closer analysis. It contains enough of its own distinct conventions to be categorized as a subgroup. The ultimate validity of this classification lies in its offer of noteworthy alternatives within the horror genre.

Because of the particular characteristics of the films to be described, I propose to title this sub-genre "rococo horror". The term "rococo", often used to identify specific styles of architecture and music, is appropriate here for its connotations—being that which is profusely ornamented...often to the point of vulgarity.

Wandering through the dazzling splendor of a late-17th-century Italian or Germanic church, one becomes deliciously light-headed amongst the blinding colors of its interiors, or startled by an unclad, life-size effigy defying gravity and bursting into flight. A frenzied harpsichord sonata by Padre Antonio Soler leaves us panting from its precarious acrobatics and sometimes brutal savagery. Relishing these individual gems within such extravagant settings sometimes leads one beyond satiety. Viewed as an organic unit, many of the films to be explored lose their coherency. It is the individual scene that is of interest here—the staccato virtuosity within the piece.

With several exceptions, these films were produced over a decade beginning in the mid-1960s. Almost all have traversed the Atlantic, never to be seen here in their original undubbed, unedited form. Even so, these films are characterized by similarities in acting techniques, story line, various forms of exploitation, and production values.

52 Scarlet Street

The rococo horror film should be distinguished from the baroque. Most notable among the baroque horror films are the seminal *I VAMPIRI*, or *THE DEVIL'S COMMANDMENT* (1957), and *BLACK SUNDAY* (1961). These black-and-white works laid the foundations for what was to come; namely, an expansion of their already bizarre form.

In terms of story line, the rococo horror film also concerns characters who become involved in unusual circumstances as a result of forces beyond their control. The films of the Italian maestro Mario Bava are commonly centered around such a character. In one of his later and most outré works, *LISA AND THE DEVIL* (1976), the plot revolves around a young woman (Elke Sommer) who, simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, becomes absorbed into a strange universe filled with living mannequins, dia-



Lilli Palmer walks the Gothic corridors of a girl's school in the stylish but unappreciated *HOUSE THAT SCREAMED* (1971).

bolical families, and necrophilic lovers. A lack of motivation and personality development are standard; for example, the sometimes senseless behavior of the victims in Bava's *BLOOD AND BLACK LACE* (1964) leaves the viewer with little sympathy for their gruesome fates.

The sexual content is that predominantly found in heterosexual, male-oriented pornography: exploitation of the female and, often, the inclusion of lesbian sex. This is a strong theme throughout the brilliant and little-seen *THE HOUSE THAT SCREAMED* (1971) starring Lilli Palmer and John Moulder-Brown. This harrowing film concerns the downward struggle of a girl trapped in a sadistic 19th-century boarding school for girls.

Often these films star a certain brand of actor. One might be the genre cult star: for example, Barbara Steele, the undisputed empress of the horror film and herself a masterpiece of the rococo. Often a second-rate or aging but once-great actor will be involved:

the wonderful Boris Karloff in **BLACK SABBATH** (1964) or Joseph Cotten as the wicked spectre in **BARON BLOOD** (1972). As a result, the acting style is largely excessive and sometimes inexplicably inappropriate; witness the unhinged monologue Telly Savalas expounds over an unconscious Elke Sommer in **LISA AND THE DEVIL**.

Most notable among the conventions of the genre are its masterful production values. Color is used with violent intensity, especially red, blue, and green (i.e., the three primary colors in color photography). Sound design is also utilized in dramatic ways. A simple dripping faucet completely dominates the entire "A Drop of Water" segment of **BLACK SABBATH**. Careful attention to art direction results in intriguing settings. The brightly garbed characters move through decaying, high-ceilinged rooms; narrow doorways; and crumbling courtyards. This, coupled with unusual lighting design, gives the rococo horror film an almost expressionistic look (e.g., the midnight chase through the misty streets of **BARON BLOOD**). Special mention should be given to the efforts of Roger Corman for his series of Poe-inspired ventures in this area. The final setting of the torture chamber of **THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM** (1961) is unforgettable.

In the rococo horror film, the camera is used to its fullest capabilities: unusual angles and tracking shots, with minimal reliance on special effects, are common fare. The camera becomes an active, but unsympathetic, observer of the weird events. Uncommon editing techniques are used (for example, the closeup, freeze-frame, dissolve, and fade to white—the frame actually seems to burn to a golden hue as mother and son kiss in **THE HOUSE THAT SCREAMED**).

The films of Dario Argento have revived and cultivated the style Bava helped to create. In a succession of highly imaginative films, Argento has created a phantasmagoria never before seen. **SUSPIRIA** (1977), **INFERNO** (1978), and **OPERA** (1987), Argento's best work, rely heavily on unparalleled flights of fantastic cinematography and production design, which subvert narrative structure and character development.

The directors responsible for these films appear to be master technicians run rampant. Their craft culminates in wordless explosions of visually indelible moments—the unexpected appearance of the bloodthirsty wurdulak to the terrified mother in the third segment of **BLACK SABBATH**; the corpse of Nicholas Medina's wife, Elizabeth, rising from her shadowy crypt in **THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM**; or the mother's discovery of her son's unspeakable obsession in the finale of **THE HOUSE THAT SCREAMED**.

Occasionally the influence of this sub-category will be felt in the work of a director not normally associated with this genre. A



*Barbara Steele and canine friends in a richly atmospheric shot from Mario Bava's **BLACK SUNDAY** (1961).*

prime example of this is the "Toby Dammit" sequence of **SPIRITS OF THE DEAD** (1971), directed by Federico Fellini. The bizarre characterizations, amorphous locales, and grisly conclusion employed by Fellini are trademarks of the rococo horror film. Also, the homage/spoof of this sub-genre should be mentioned. These are films that refer to the conventions of the form while parodying their extreme characteristics. **THE FEARLESS VAMPIRE KILLERS** (1967, Roman Polanski) and **ANDY WARHOL'S FRANKENSTEIN** (1974, Paul Morrissey) both employ elements of cinematography, production design, and narrative similar to those described earlier.

Because of poor distribution and lack of recognition by the critics and public, many of these films may be viewed only on video cassette or late-night cable television; for this reason, it is nearly impossible to experience one in its original, unabridged form. After additional editing, dubbing, and manipulation by producers is completed, we are left with a work far different from that which the director originally intended.

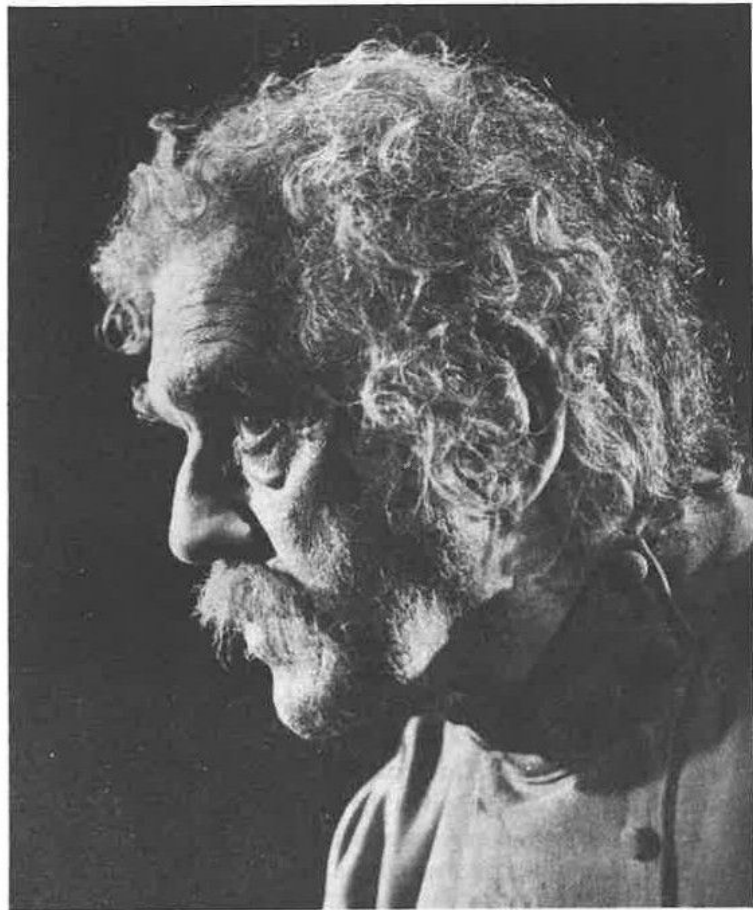


©1971 American International Pictures

**ABOVE:** Vincent Price, the only actor who can go over the top in a dungeon. With Luana Anders and John Kerr in *THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM* (1961).

**RIGHT:** Boris Karloff had one of his best latter-day roles as the family-oriented wurdulak of Mario Bava's *BLACK SABBATH* (1964).

**BELOW:** John Moulder-Brown loves his mom, Lilli Palmer, so dearly that he builds himself a second mom out of spare parts from the students at an all-girls school. *THE HOUSE THAT SCREAMED* (1971).



7190-40

©1971 American International Pictures

The validity of this sub-category lies in its proposal of viable alternatives within the genre of the horror film. There is a conscious move away from the creature syndrome—that is, the threat appearing in the form of an inhuman being who may be destroyed by any number of methods. In the rococo horror film, the peril is of a more cerebral kind—usually the result of fear, guilt, or indefinable terror—and therefore not as easily hindered. This concept of internal danger transcends the stereotypical and controllable menace of the typical horror film.

The rococo horror film is often branded “confused” or “muddled” by critics not taking into consideration the very nature of the material involved. Here, a bizarre cosmos is created—a sensuous, unsettling world governed by wild passions. Communication is accomplished by means primarily visual, sometimes almost inexplicable in words. These films generate a visceral atmosphere of heightened states of awareness. The ultimate value of the rococo horror film is in its daring ability to present a universe in which extremes of emotion are expressed in an all-encompassing visual style. They reflect the darker, hidden places and events of forgotten nightmares.

