



The Fog (US 2008)

John Carpenter emerged as an innovative genre filmmaker in the 1970s, making films on low budgets and riffing off Hollywood classics. His biggest hit was his third feature, the original Halloween (US 1978). This was such a big hit in the US that Carpenter sought opportunities for a more substantial budget and the chance to make a film that he could really spend time on. With his producer, co-writer and ex-girlfriend Debra Hill he was able to enter into a deal with Avco-Embassy to make two films with guaranteed distribution.

The idea for a film that would use fog as the outward manifestation of a ghostly presence came when Carpenter and Hill were in the UK and visited Stonehenge on a misty day. Carpenter also remembered a British horror film, The Trollenberg Terror (UK 1958 and known in the US as The Crawling Eye) which he had seen as a child. This gave him the basis of a monster hidden by mists or fog. In the British film the monsters are aliens but Carpenter turned to stories from the California coast about traditional tales of ship-wrecking communities.

Carpenter and Hill created a suspense story with plenty of chills and although there are a few 'slasher' elements reminiscent of Halloween, this is really a traditional 'vengeful ghost' story. The production was budgeted at \$1.1 million but Carpenter decided on a 2.35:1 ratio using Panavision and shooting landscapes of the North California coast around Point Reyes, a feature of the coast some 30 miles north of San Francisco. The area has a very distinctive lighthouse that is central to the narrative. Stevie (Adrienne Barbeau, who had just married Carpenter) runs the local radio station from the lighthouse and tries to keep the community aware of what is happening. There are other locations in roughly the same area, including Bodega Bay (which also features in Hitchcock's The Birds (1963)). Interiors were shot in a small independent studio. It is generally acknowledged that this decision to use the wide frame and the very photogenic landscape gives the story a distinctive look and suggests a much more 'rooted' narrative. Some shots of this remote coastal region are not very different from Irish sea coasts.

Carpenter's skill, aided by the camerawork of Dean Cundey and several other crew members he had worked with on Halloween is to present a fairly conventional story with familiar genre elements in such a way that it feels like a genuine community under threat from a monster that emerges from the sea. He is well served by his actors. Jamie Lee Curtis who gained star status because of Halloween here plays a traveller passing through the community and hitching up with Tom Atkins who would go on to be a Carpenter regular. Jamie's mother Janet Leigh plays the town's mayor (adding another Hitchcock reference) and Hal Holbrook plays the town's priest, a major role in a ghost story. The film opens with John Houseman, a Hollywood legend as producer and star actor from the 1940s onwards who tells the town's children a ghost story on the beach at midnight – and, of course, this story sets up the whole narrative.

The town was founded 100 years ago this very night when a shipwreck provided the salvage resources which helped to build the church. The mayor is about to celebrate the centenary as part of her re-election campaign – despite the strange things that start to happen in the community. In the days before CGI, the appearance of fog, seemingly illuminated from within, rolling in across the waves and over the town is impressive. We know what is going to happen but Carpenter builds the tension perfectly, aided by his own musical score, one of his other filmmaking skills. Perhaps you should look out of your windows and make sure there is no fog rolling in before you start to watch this film?

Roy Stafford 10/11/22

IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

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