Arts & Humanities

Spooky Movies to Stream this Halloween — all with Columbia Connections

Whether filmed on campus, made by an alum, or starring a famous Columbian, these haunting tales are perfect for a morbid movie night at home.

By
Julia Joy
|
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Blair Brown and William Hurt in *Altered States*. (Warner Bros.)

Altered States

This sci-fi horror film from 1980, about a Columbia psychopathologist (William Hurt) who experiments with sensory deprivation and hallucinogenic drugs, features notable shots of the Morningside campus. The setting isn't the film's only Columbia connection: John Corigliano '59CC composed the music and received an Oscar nomination for best original score.



Jordan Ladd and Rider Strong in *Cabin Fever*. (IMDb / Tonic Films)

Cabin Fever

The career of child star Rider Strong '04CC, best known for playing Shawn Hunter in the family-friendly sitcom *Boy Meets World*, took a darker turn when the actor starred in the 2002 horror movie *Cabin Fever*. The film, directed by Eli Roth, follows a group of young people who encounter a flesh-eating virus on a summer getaway.



Sissy Spacek in *Carrie*. (IMDb / Red Bank Films)

Carrie

Director Brian De Palma's 1976 breakthrough film, about the prom-night revenge of a telekinetic teen loner (Sissy Spacek), continues to be a horror classic. De Palma '62CC isn't the only Columbia graduate to bring this Stephen King novel to the screen: in 2013, director Kimberly Peirce '96SOA released her own version starring Chloë Grace Moretz and Julianne Moore.



IMDb / © 2004 Universal Studios. All rights reserved.

Dawn of the Dead

Best known for his work on superhero movies, James Gunn ’95SOA started his career at indie horror studio Troma Entertainment, where he co-wrote the B-movie *Tromeo and Juliet*. He later moved to Hollywood and penned the hit 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*, updating George A. Romero's zombie classic in a contemporary setting. (Richard E. Rubinstein ’63LAW produced the original 1978 film.) Gunn is currently the co-chairman and co-CEO of DC Studios, a division of Warner Bros. Discovery.



Iggy Pop in *The Dead Don't Die*. (IMDb / Focus Features)

The Dead Don’t Die

Jim Jarmusch ’75CC, beloved for his understated indie films like *Stranger than Paradise* and *Coffee and Cigarettes*, broke convention when he wrote and directed *The Dead Don’t Die*, a 2019 horror-comedy about a zombie invasion in a small town. Bill Murray, Adam Driver, Tilda Swinton, Iggy Pop, Tom Waits, and other past Jarmusch collaborators make up the film’s ensemble cast.



Florence Pugh in *Don't Worry Darling*. (IMDb / New Line Cinema)

Don’t Worry Darling

Katie Silberman ’12SOA wrote the screenplay for *Don’t Worry Darling*, a 2022 *Stepford Wives*-inspired thriller set in a midcentury desert town. Florence Pugh and Harry Styles star as a young couple whose seemingly perfect marriage takes a dark turn.



Jake Gyllenhaal in *Donne Darko*. (IMDb / Flower Films)

Donnie Darko

Set around Halloween, this 2001 cult classic is about an angsty suburban teenager who encounters a demonic rabbit while sleepwalking. Jake Gyllenhaal, a former Columbia student, joins his real-life sister Maggie Gyllenhaal ’99CC, a Columbia College alumna, to play siblings Donnie and Elizabeth Darko.



Gene Tierney in *Dragonwyck*. (IMDb / Twentieth Century Fox)

Dragonwyck

Before winning back-to-back Oscars for *A Letter to Three Wives* and *All About Eve*, Joseph Mankiewicz ’28CC made his directorial debut with *Dragonwyck*, a 1946 gothic period drama about a country girl (Gene Tierney) who moves into the haunted mansion of her sinister cousin (Vincent Price). The following year, Mankiewicz directed Tierney in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, about a widow who falls in love with the ghost of a rugged sea captain (Rex Harrison).



Angie Dickinson in *Dressed to Kill*. (IMDb / © 1980 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.)

Dressed to Kill

After the success of *Carrie*, writer-director Brian De Palma ’62CC made a string of dark thrillers, including the Hitchcock-inspired *Dressed to Kill* in 1980. The psychosexual slasher film stars Angie Dickinson as a housewife who gets violently murdered after a brief affair with a stranger, and Michael Caine as her psychiatrist.



Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight*." (IMDb / © 1944 - Warner Bros. All rights reserved.)

Gaslight

Gaslight, the 1944 film that introduced the term “gaslighting” into the modern lexicon, tells the story of young woman (Ingrid Bergman) whose criminal husband (Charles Boyer) tries to manipulate her into thinking she’s insane. The gothic thriller, which landed Bergman her first Academy Award, was cowritten by John L. Balderston, a veteran horror writer who studied journalism at Columbia before becoming a war correspondent during World War I.



Dan Aykroyd and Bill Murray in *Ghostbusters*. (Columbia Pictures)

Ghostbusters

Columbia’s campus serves as a backdrop for this 1984 supernatural comedy, in which three parapsychology professors (Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, and Harold Ramis) get fired from their faculty positions and start a “ghostbusting” service. Four decades later, the story was adapted into a 2016 remake starring Columbia alumna Kate McKinnon ’06CC.



Ian McKellen and Rosalind Ayres in *Gods and Monsters*. (IMDb / Lionsgate)

Gods and Monsters

When Bill Condon ’76CC wrote and directed this biopic of *Frankenstein* director James Whale, he was no stranger to dark subject matter, having previously made gothic thriller *Sister, Sister* and *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*. Condon’s script for *Gods and Monsters* won the 1999 Oscar for best adapted screenplay, and the filmmaker later made other acclaimed films such as *Kinsey* and *Dreamgirls.*



Amanda Peet in *Identity*. (IMDb / Columbia Pictures)

Identity

James Mangold ’99SOA directed this 2003 murder mystery inspired by Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None*, in which strangers in a remote Nevada motel are killed off one by one. Amanda Peet ’94CC stars as Paris Nevada, a Las Vegas escort trying to leave the sex trade.



From left: Aaron Paul, Garret Dillahunt, Spencer Treat Clark, and Riki Lindhome in *The Last House on the Left*. (IMDb / Rogue Pictures)

The Last House on the Left

Spencer Treat Clark ’10CC began his career as a child actor with roles in *Gladiator* and *Unbreakable* before graduating from Columbia with a degree in political science. In *The Last House on the Left*, a 2009 remake of Wes Craven’s 1972 exploitation-horror film of the same name, he plays Justin, a teenager with a menacing family.



Kathy Bates in *Misery*. (IMDb / © Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.)

Misery

Writer William Goldman ’56GSAS received a master’s degree in English from Columbia before penning iconic twentieth-century films like *All the President’s Men* and *The Princess Bride*. His 1990 film adaptation of Stephen King’s *Misery*, which stars Kathy Bates as an obsessive fan who holds her favorite mystery writer hostage, remains a creepy classic of stalker cinema.



Boris Karloff in *The Mummy*. (IMDb / Universal Pictures)

The Mummy

Playwright and screenwriter John L. Balderston, who studied journalism at Columbia, contributed to some of cinema’s most influential early monster movies. His stage productions of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* were made into popular films, and he worked on the 1935 horror flick *Bride of Frankenstein*. For *The Mummy* (1932), which stars Boris Karloff as an ancient Egyptian priest who rises from the dead, Balderston is credited as the sole screenwriter.



Lance Henriksen in *Near Dark*. (IMDb / F/M)

Near Dark

Before making prestige war films like *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, Oscar-winning director Kathryn Bigelow ’81SOA directed several thrillers, including *Near Dark*, a 1987 horror-western about a group of RV-dwelling vampires.



Robert Englund as Freddy Krueger in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. (IMDb / Zade Rosenthal - © 1984 - New Line Cinema Entertainment, Inc.)

A Nightmare on Elm Street

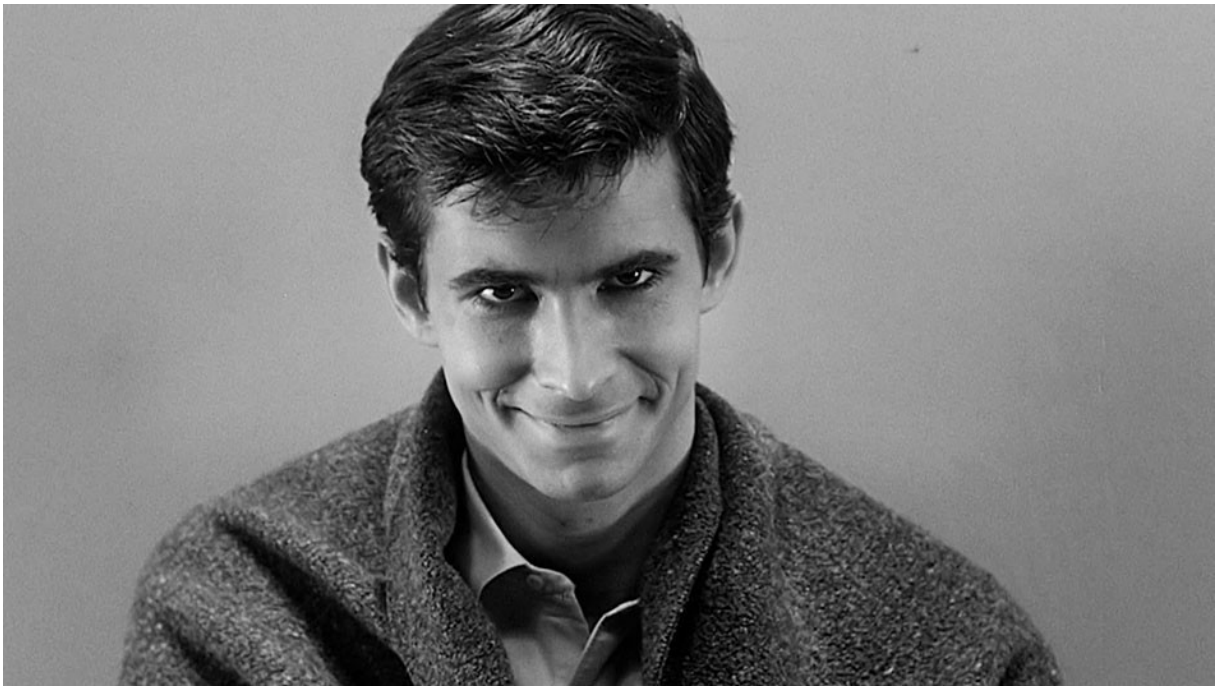
As the founder of New Line Cinema, Columbia Law School alumnus Robert Shaye ’64LAW has produced a wide range of Hollywood movies, including *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and its sequels. Shaye, an occasional actor, makes numerous cameos across the franchise, from voicing a radio announcer in the original 1984 film to playing a school principal in *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003).



Julia Stiles in *The Omen*. (IMDb / Twentieth Century Fox)

The Omen

Julia Stiles ’05CC, who got her big break with the Y2K teen rom-com *10 Things I Hate About You*, had recently graduated from Columbia with a degree in English when she starred in the 2006 remake of *The Omen*. Stiles plays Katherine Thorn, a mother whose young son, Damien, is believed to be the Antichrist.



Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*. (IMDb / Shamley Productions / Universal Pictures)

Psycho

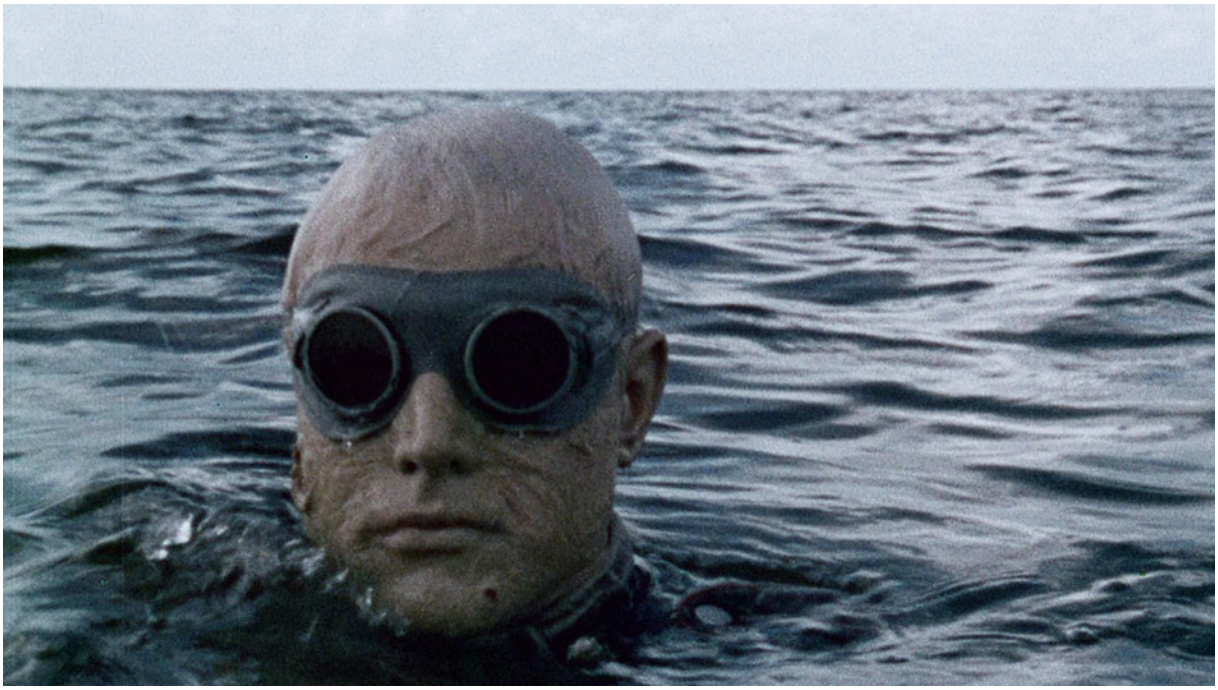
Anthony Perkins may not have graduated from Columbia, but he’s among the University’s most famous former students. After leaving his studies for Hollywood, Perkins played a series of heartthrob leads before landing the role of Norman Bates — one of the most iconic movie villains of all time — in Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 slasher thriller *Psycho*.



IMDb / Warner Bros.

The Shining

Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 horror masterpiece about a family’s fateful stay in a haunted mountain hotel derives much of its eeriness from the soundtrack. Wendy Carlos ’65GSAS, who helped develop the Moog synthesizer as a Columbia graduate student, joined collaborator Rachel Elkind to compose the soundtrack, including the ominous electronic rendition of Hector Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique in the famous opening credits.



Zopix Company / IMDb

Shock Waves

As Columbia film students, Ken Wiederhorn ’74SOA and Reuben Trane ’74SOA made *Manhattan Melody*, which won the 1973 Oscar for Best Dramatic Student Film. Their follow-up movie *Shock Waves*, released in 1977, tells the story of shipwrecked tourists who encounter a group of underwater Nazi zombies. Wiederhorn cowrote and directed the film, with Trane serving as producer.



Michael Rooker in *Slither*. (IMDb / Gold Circle Films)

Slither

Writer-director James Gunn ’95SOA followed up his success on *Dawn of the Dead* with *Slither*, a campy horror-comedy about an alien parasite invasion. Although it failed to attract a large audience at the time of its 2006 release, the movie has gained a cult following.



IMDb (Palomar Pictures / Columbia Pictures)

The Stepford Wives

Several years after winning an Oscar for writing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* , William Goldman ’56GSAS adapted Ira Levin’s 1972 “feminist horror” novel *The Stepford Wives* for the screen. The chilling 1975 satire, which was made into a 2004 remake starring Nicole Kidman, tells the story of a wife and mother (Katherine Ross) who uncovers a dark secret about the women in her idyllic suburban community.



Tilda Swinton and Jasper Newell in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. (IMDb / © 2011 - Oscilloscope Pictures)

We Need to Talk About Kevin

We Need to Talk About Kevin, about a married couple dealing with a psychopathic child, takes parental anxiety to terrifying extremes. The 2011 film, which stars Tilda Swinton, John C. Reilly, and Ezra Miller, was adapted from a 2003 novel of the same name by Lionel Shriver ’78BC, ’82SOA.

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