Film Critic

A musical film - *Sinners* (2025)
An animation - *ParaNorman* (2012)
A subtitled movie - *House* (*Hausu*) (1977)
A documentary - *My Amityville Horror* (2012)
An independent film - *Good Boy* (2025)
An action movie - *Train to Busan* (2016)
An arthouse movie - *Suspiria* (1977)
A comedy - *The Babysitter* (2017)
A biography - *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* (2019)
A silent movie - *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)

A musical film

Sinners (2025) - Ealing Picturehouse

I heard about *Sinners* earlier this year, and was happy to get the chance to see it in the cinema this month: it was screened on 16 October, the same date on which, in 1932, the film takes place.

Directed by Ryan Coogler, the movie follows twin brothers (both played by Michael B. Jordan) as they set up a juke joint in their Mississippi hometown. What begins as a joyous opening night where Black people can relax and enjoy themselves, turns into tragedy as the club is attacked by a posse of vampires.

Music plays a crucial role in the film: one of the key scenes in the movie sees aspiring blues guitarist Sammie (Miles Caton) summon musicians from past and present with the power of his playing; an intense and immensely powerful moment. In addition, the vampires share their own music, this time influenced by Celtic folk. The film acknowledges the significance music has over the human psyche and how some believed it had supernatural power. Ludwig Gõransson is responsible for the score, which is memorable and hugely elevates the film.

The film also explores racism in the Deep South. It's no accident that the vampires threatening the twins' venture are white. As well as supernatural threats, they have to contend with the KKK. It's not the first time horror has been used as a means to explore racial prejudice, and it is used to powerful effect here.

The period setting is effective, but does not detract from the still-relevant issues explored in the film. The performances are superb, particularly from Jordan as Elijah "Smoke" and Elias "Stack" Moore, as well as Jack O'Connell as Remmick, the Irish leader of the vampire coven. The characters are well-drawn and, as they were picked off one by one, I felt genuine sadness. This isn't just horror, it is a tragedy, and those that survive are affected for the rest of their lives.

An animation

ParaNorman (2012) - BFI IMAX

ParaNorman is an animated ‘horror’ film for kids, created by Laika Studios, who were also responsible for *Coraline*. Originally released in 2012, and remastered for a 2025 re-release, the film’s protagonist is a young boy, Norman Babcock, who has the ability to see and speak to ghosts. He is ostracised by his peers and even distrusted by his own family, but when Norman’s town Blithe Hollow happens to be suffering under the weight of a witch’s curse, it seems only Norman can save the day.

This film is a delight from start to finish and there is much for adults as well as children to enjoy. The stop-motion animation is gorgeous - one scene in particular involving toilet paper (!) is incredibly impressive. There are nods to genuine horror films including *Halloween*, as well as child-friendly gore (removable zombie arms) and dark humour that would go over the heads of small children, but gleefully delight accompanying adults (one of the ghosts Norman can see is wearing cement shoes, a nod to fabled Mafia killings).

The characters are great fun, from Kodi Smit-McPhee’s plucky Norman to Anna Kendrick’s bratty Courtney and Tucker Albrizzi’s loyal and cheerful Neil. I also liked Christopher Mintz-Plasse’s Alvin, the school bully who somehow ends up as part of Norman’s supporting crew. The zombies - eighteenth-century town officials condemned to rise again after condemning a ‘witch’ to death back in 1712 - are standout characters and highly enjoyable to watch.

There is plenty of humour in the film, from straightforward fun (Norman: “[Grandma’s] not in a better place. She’s in the living room”) to sharp satire (Sheriff: “What do you think you’re doing, firing on civilians? That’s for the police to do!”). The art of the movie is superb, with Norman’s small town drawn in loving detail. I particularly liked his zombie-themed bedroom.

The film’s plot is darker than you might expect, and without giving too much away, brings home the cruelty of the Puritan-era witch hunts. That said, the overarching themes of kindness, tolerance and forgiveness make it perfect for kids as well as grown-ups.

A subtitled movie

House (Hausu) 1977 - Ealing Picturehouse

The debut feature film by Japanese director Nobuhiko Obayashi, *House* (or *Hausu*) has gained a cult following in recent years despite being critically panned on its original release in 1977. The movie sees a schoolgirl travelling with her six friends to her aunt's house in the countryside; one by one, the girls are devoured by the house.

House is a bizarre fever dream. I've never seen anything quite like it. There is death and gore, but it is all very stylised, and not all that frightening. The girls are all stereotypes - the clever one, the sporty one, the sweet one, the food-lover - which adds to the fairytale-like quality of the film. There are magic mirrors, possessed dolls, and a sinister well. The house is a character in its own right, in the best tradition of haunted house movies.

The movie is billed as a comedy as well as a horror, and this is understandable given the deeply odd nature of many of the film's goings on. Having a character eaten by a piano is just one example of this strangeness. Some of the ideas in the film came from Obayashi's pre-teen daughter Chigumi, but others came from the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Born in Hiroshima, Obayashi lost childhood friends in the bombings, and it is the legacy of WW2 that sets the events of *House* in motion.

Impressively, considering their capable performances, most of the young actresses in the film were amateurs. Yōko Minamida, one of the few experienced performers, made a strong impression as the protagonist's mysterious aunt. Less impressively, I felt the nude scenes were unnecessary and gratuitous, especially since the girls are supposed to be of school age.

Obayashi purposely created the special effects to look as if a child created them. The result is surprisingly effective. They are not 'realistic' but they are not supposed to be.

I can't stop thinking about this incredibly odd movie. I am not surprised it has such a cult following and it's definitely something I want to see again.

A documentary

My Amityville Horror (2012) - Apple TV

The Amityville haunting was a series of events that may or may not have been supernatural in origin, the consequence of the actions of Ronald DeFeo Jr. who shot and killed six members of his family at 112 Ocean Avenue, Amityville, in November 1974. Subsequently the Lutz family, who moved into the house in 1975, reported numerous paranormal events and left after only 28 days. Whether real, exaggerated, or completely made up, the events inspired a novel, a hugely successful film (*The Amityville Horror*, 1979) and multiple sequels and spin-offs.

My Amityville Horror is a 2012 documentary directed by Eric Walter, focusing on Daniel Lutz, son of Kathleen and stepson of George. With Daniel's two siblings (who were asked to appear in the documentary but refused), the family spent a memorable month in the infamous house.

In order to get the most out of this documentary, some knowledge of the Amityville story would be helpful. That said, this film is very different to the more famous horror-laden movies and books. Ultimately it is a psychological study of a troubled individual. Whatever your views on the Amityville happenings, Daniel Lutz was deeply affected by the events of his childhood. He had a troubled relationship with George in particular. Daniel sticks by his view that the hauntings were real, but either way, he has been left with scars.

Walter doesn't deliver any definitive answers about what happened back in 1975. He lets Daniel speak for himself and features interviews with psychologists and some individuals who were there at the beginning, such as reporter Laura DiDio and psychic Lorraine Warren. At the same time, he shows the more dislikeable side of Daniel's personality - he refuses to take a lie detector test, for instance - and features scenes of assorted reporters and psychologists strongly refuting the supernatural claims.

If you want to make up your mind once and for all about whether the Amityville hauntings were real, this film won't help you to do so. Instead it is a study of the impact the situation had on one young boy, now a man, and his ongoing trauma.

An independent film

Good Boy (2025) - Odeon Richmond

A horror film seen from the perspective of a dog? I thought it sounded intriguing, so made sure to check out *Good Boy*, directed by Ben Leonberg. His own dog Indy stars in the film, which was made over three years on a very low budget, and is all the more impressive for it.

Loyal Indy is worried about his owner, Todd (played by Shane Jensen, although we don't see his face very often). From the start of the film it is clear that Todd has experienced some health issues. Nevertheless, he decides to take Indy, against the advice of his worried sister Vera, to their grandfather's old house in the middle of the woods. There, the haunting gathers pace - but it's not what you might expect.

Old horror films and home video footage of Todd’s deceased grandfather help to add atmosphere and tension, while the ghost of the grandfather’s dog lends further intrigue. There are lots of atmospheric shots of the autumnal woods - a perfect horror setting.

The film is surprisingly emotional and I cared a great deal for its canine hero. I wouldn't describe myself as a dog person, but I would make an exception for Indy. Leonberg has coaxed a fantastic performance from his pup, and I really felt Indy's fear, curiosity and worry.

Through clever camera work, sound and lighting we see events transpire from Indy's point of view. There are a couple of jump scares, but most of the horror is slow burning, with some really creepy sequences. There are also changes in Todd’s personality which lends further tension to the plot - Indy's protector, and the person he is trying to defend, might be his biggest threat.

This different, clever and surprisingly moving film is certainly worth watching. I've never rooted for a hero more.

An action movie

Train to Busan (2016) - Lumiere Romford

Train to Busan is a film that's been on my list for a while. This South Korean zombie horror, directed by Yeon Sang-ho, has been acclaimed as a modern classic. I've actually been on a train to Busan myself - thankfully my journey was much less eventful.

A divorced fund manager, Seok-woo, is persuaded to take his daughter to see her mother in Busan. He is so preoccupied with work that he barely notices what is going on in Seoul, except when it affects stock prices. He and his daughter, Su-an, make it to the train just in time to escape the chaos of the capital, but it seems the train has an unwelcome passenger. He and his fellow passengers must work together to keep the train on track and reach the hoped-for safety of Busan.

I absolutely loved this film and was gripped throughout. I spent the majority of the runtime on the edge of my seat willing the characters to survive. Yeon has managed to create fully fleshed-out characters to root for in a short space of time. I was honestly devastated when some of them didn't make it. Gong Yoo and Kim Su-an give excellent performances as father and daughter; other standouts are Jung Yu-mi as a young pregnant woman, Ma Dong-seok as her badass husband (possibly my favourite character), and Ahn So-hee and Choi Woo-shik as a pair of teenage lovers.

The film has points to make about the evils of capitalism and the scourge of selfishness, as well as the importance of working together in the face of adversity. It's a tad on the nose, but the film is so good it's forgivable. Not to mention that *Train to Busan* managed to make me cry - no mean feat for a zombie movie.

There's a reason this film is considered a modern classic, and is one of the reasons Korean cinema is held in such high esteem. Definitely recommended.

An arthouse movie

Suspiria (1977) - Prince Charles Cinema

Over the years I've heard a great deal about *Suspiria*, the Dario Argento film considered a horror classic. Released in 1977, it follows a young American ballet dancer who moves to Germany to attend a prestigious dance school and uncovers something sinister going on behind the scenes.

The film is absolutely beautiful to look at. If it was 2012 I would absolutely be posting stills all over my Tumblr account. Argento's use of colour is unparallelled and the design of the movie is gorgeous. I almost feel that getting to study and live in such a stunning building as the Tanz Akademie would make all the sinister happenings worthwhile.

However, aesthetics aside - and they really are glorious - there isn't much substance to the film. The acting is average, though Jessica Harper does a good job as protagonist Suzy. The lines have been dubbed over the film - apparently a common practice in Italian cinema of the 1970s - and it frankly sounds a bit dodgy. (Incidentally, the film is in English, bar a handful of German phrases - I'd assumed it would have been in Italian). There are some clever and memorable individual scenes - notably the demise of Suzy's friend - but there are also moments where nothing much happens.

I didn't find the film scary at all, not even towards the end when things really start to get going. The whole plot is rather bizarre and doesn't make much sense - what were the characters' motivations? It was all a bit confused, and the dull exposition scene didn't add much. The score by Goblin, however, is another highlight and is unique, memorable and distinctly creepy.

I would probably watch *Suspiria* again, just because it looks so good. Apparently it is the first in a trilogy of films by Argento known as the 'Three Mothers' - I would be interested in seeing the other films, to see if the overarching experience is greater than the sum of its parts.

A comedy

The Babysitter (2017) - Netflix

I do love a good horror comedy and I heard good things about *The Babysitter*, released on Netflix in 2017. I decided to give it a watch, but I was somewhat underwhelmed.

The movie stars Samara Weaving as babysitter Bee, who takes care of twelve-year-old Cole (Judah Lewis). Cole is a timid kid who is bullied at school and Bee is one of the only people who stands up for him. She is a friend to Cole as well as a sitter, and the pair watch films, order food and have fun together. However, one night Cole stays awake in secret and discovers that Bee is part of a demonic cult that wants to kill him. He must summon every ounce of bravery to save himself from Bee and her friends, who fulfil all the most common stereotypes: the goth, the jock and the cheerleader.

I can't say that I loved this movie: the humour was crude and childish for the most part, typical teenage slasher fare. The performances were fine for the kind of film this is. There were a couple of fun unexpected moments and an amusing sequence where one of the killers encourages Cole to stand up for himself against his bullies before resuming his quest to kill him.

On the positive side, I liked the character of Cole and was rooting for him throughout the film. He comes up with some ingenious solutions to deal with the cult: in some ways the film is like a more gruesome *Home Alone* (though nowhere near as good). I liked his relationship with his only other real friend, Melanie (Emily Alyn Lind).

Directed by McG and written by Brian Duffield, *The Babysitter* is fine for a casual evening's horror viewing, and I'll probably watch the sequel at some point, but there are far better horror comedies out there.

A biography

Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile (2019) - Now TV

I tend to be ambivalent when it comes to films about real-life serial killers. I think it's so important that they are not glorified or romanticised in any way. Therefore it was with some trepidation that I sat down to watch the Netflix drama about Ted Bundy, starring teen heartthrob Zac Efron.

Despite its somewhat sensationalist title (which in fairness is taken from the judge's words to Bundy as he is sentenced to death), Joe Berlinger's film by and large succeeds in not glorifying its protagonist. It achieves this largely by exploring events from the point of view of Liz Kendall (a superb Lily Collins), Bundy's long-term partner, and how she comes to terms with her lover's actions. The impact on Kendall is clear as she follows his trial on television, turns to drink to cope, and struggles with feelings of guilt at being the one to give his name to the authorities many years ago.

Bundy is certainly charming, especially at the beginning. He seduces Liz, makes breakfast for her young daughter, and creates the perfect family unit. Things change when he is arrested for aggravated kidnapping in Utah, and from there his crimes become more and more apparent, as Bundy is wanted for murder in states as far apart as Colorado and Florida. Ted maintains his innocence throughout, and urges Liz to stay hopeful, even as she is increasingly filled with doubt.

This is no gruesome thriller: we don't see Bundy attacking anyone until right at the end. The film cleverly shows how killers can hide their true nature from everyone they know: Ted's old friend Carole (Kaya Scodelario) maintains his innocence and even marries him during his trial. However, it also reveals Bundy's arrogance, as he demands to represent himself in court, remains confident that he will be found not guilty, and accumulates a following of young women who believe in his innocence.

Zac Efron gives a superb performance as Bundy. He was an inspired casting choice as he helps to show that killers aren't necessarily socially inept loners but seemingly ordinary people walking among us. John Malkovich was also strong as the judge presiding over the Florida trial, and Haley Joel Osment was a comforting presence as Jerry, Liz's coworker who supports and eventually marries her.

This film wasn't quite what I expected, but it was probably all the better for it. It wasn't gory or sensationalist and was a thought-provoking watch.

A silent movie

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920) - Prince Charles Cinema

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, originally released in 1920, is an exemplary work of silent cinema. Directed by Robert Wiene and written by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, it tells the story of a hypnotist who makes use of a somnambulist to commit murder.

A quintessential example of German Expressionism, the film has a distinctive style with harsh angles, odd curving lines, and dramatic lighting. It is beautiful yet unsettling to see. The intertitles also have an angular design all their own (they are in German, but they had English subtitles at the screening I saw).

The writers were inspired by a deep distrust of authority resulting from their experiences in the First World War. This is apparent in the film, with its deeply disturbing protagonist and sinister plot. The film's frame story exacerbates this sense of threat, although the filmmakers claimed they did not want this frame plot and felt forced into adding it. I find this strange as the frame plot was particularly effective and found the twist ending hugely memorable.

Werner Krauss was superb in the title role, creating a vivid and deeply sinister villain with his round glasses and mad scientist hair. Conrad Veidt was suitably unworldly as Cesare, the somnambulist. Friedrich Feher was also strong as the film's hero trying to save his love Jane (an ethereal Lil Dagover). Some of the acting was exaggerated, as it usually is in silent movies, and there were a couple of unintentionally funny moments because of this, but overall I was drawn in to the film and found the performances compelling.

This is a must-see film, a deeply disturbing nightmare on screen that inspired countless horror films over the next century. It really shows how the early filmmakers were pushing the boundaries of what was possible with this new artform.

The screening I attended was accompanied by live music from Hugo Max, which was unearthly and atmospheric, and added greatly to the experience.