

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief, I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**It was 1988. I was riding the school bus home. I remember the exact street we were on when we heard over the radio that Heather O'Rourke, the little girl from the Poltergeist movies, had died of a rare intestinal disease. We were shocked. Then one of the other kids on the bus said that several other actors from the Poltergeist movies had died – including the teenage star of the first movie, Dominique Dunne, who was killed by her boyfriend. And this wasn't just a series of disturbing coincidences. The franchise was supposedly cursed.**

**Eventually I learned there is a list of horror films that were supposedly cursed. And when I say cursed, I mean people believe that demonic or otherworldly forces put a curse on the cast and crew.**

**I never believed the curse was real. A lot of films have terrible luck. Things go horribly wrong on set regards of what kind of movie it is. Cast or crew can die during production or shortly afterward. And these tragedies don't happen more often on horror movies – but when they do, I'm fascinated that people build this narrative that fits perfectly with the genre, as if they want what's on screen to be real.**

**Jay Cheel is a documentary filmmaker who just made a limited series called Cursed Films for the streaming site Shudder. He also was a Poltergeist fan as a kid, and first learned about the curse the same I did.**

**JAY: Yeah, I grew up, I grew up with these stories. I never really never really believed that there was anything supernatural behind any of it. But it, it definitely piques my curiosity along with everyone else who, who talks about and perpetuates these legends.**

**Full disclosure, Shudder has advertised on this podcast before. That did not affect our decision to talk with Jay. In fact, we wanted to do an episode about this subject for years, but we had trouble finding people to talk to. A lot of serious horror fans, and people who worked on those productions, are so disgusted the urban legends exist, they don't even want to engage with them on any level. But they're still out there. Just Google cursed horror films and you'll get pages of articles, blog posts and YouTube videos taking these curses seriously.**

**Now if you look at the lists of cursed films, most of them go back to Rosemary's Baby in 1968 because it came out the year before the Manson murders. But the**

**first horror movie to be publicly labeled as cursed when it came out was The Exorcist in 1973. There were a lot of scary mishaps and injuries on set. Actors or people connected to the movie died during production. And the studio encouraged these stories to spread because they decided – as they old saying goes -- no publicity is bad publicity.**

JAY: It was the one that extended beyond, uh, the film and into the, the PR campaign. And you know, the, the idea of Billy Graham, apparently having said that, the film itself is cursed and when you projected in a theater, the, it could have negative effects on the audience. And, and that was leaned into and reports of people passing out and a sub, apparently in Toronto, supposedly someone passed out and hit their jaw on the floor and had to be taken to the hospital. And it's certainly, if it's not the first one, it's certainly the first one that had the kind of coverage that you would expect from, um, a film that would go on to be considered a legendarily cursed production.

**In 1976, The Omen had many of those same kinds of mishaps. Gregory Peck's plane was struck by lightning when he was on his way to make The Omen. A stuntman was mauled by a tiger. But The Omen came out three years after The Exorcist. By that point, working on a demonic horror film already into fit a pre-existing narrative.**

**Here is a clip from Jay Cheel's documentary where the director of The Omen, Richard Donner, describes a conversation he had with the religious advisor on the movie, Robert Munger.**

*DONNER: In the very beginning when we were first setting up the process of filming in England, Munger told us we were treading on very thin ice that the anti-Christ would do everything not to have this picture made. For me, that was in one ear and out the other.*

JAY: You know, in in our Omen episode, Richard Donner and Mace Neufeld, the director and uh, executive producer of The Omen both say that they feel that The Omen was actually blessed because it did so well in the, you know, the, the box office numbers were amazing and they all survived. You know, the further you dig into that, all of the stories surrounding the making of The Omen are all, it's just a list of close calls. It's a lot of, we were at a cafe that was bombed an hour after we left, or we were supposed to be on a plane that then crashed, which raises the question of either the devil is really not good at killing people, or the devil was protecting the crew because the devil wanted this story told.

**Since the idea of cursed films touches on religion, I wanted to talk with a religious scholar who is also an expert in horror films.**

**Brandon Grafius is a professor at the Ecumenical Theological Seminary. And he wrote the book, "Reading the Bible with Horror." He first made the connection between horror and The Bible when he was working on his dissertation.**

BRANDON: And for my dissertation I was reading the Book of Numbers, there's a story in Numbers. The Israelites are wandering through the desert. They start messing around with foreign gods. God gets angry at them. And when, uh, uh, Israel man brings a Midianite woman into the camp and he, they go into the tent and are doing something together, one of the priests named Phineas picks up a spear and skewers them both. Um, and as I read this, it connected with me. Hey, I've seen that in Friday the 13th Part 2, so started to, to think about this story is being really similar to the 1980s slasher films that are about these anxieties over our community boundaries, anxieties, over control of sexuality, and how the patriarchy tries to reassert itself.

**Brandon is not surprised that troubled horror films are labeled as cursed because the filmmakers are trying to show images that are considered forbidden knowledge in our culture.**

BRANDON: I think a lot of horror is really about forbidden knowledge, knowledge of the afterlife, knowledge of evil and even knowledge of the insides of bodies. Um, the insides of our bodies are supposed to be hidden from us and often horror exposes that. So there's a sense that when we watch horror, um, we sometimes have this sense that this may be isn't something we're supposed to be watching. But we do, we do enjoy it and you know, there's been all kinds of academic studies about why that is, um, from, you know, experiencing it in a safe distance or overcoming your fears of death or anything like that. But we have some, some piece of our mind that tells us if we were really normal, we wouldn't like this stuff.

***That's so interesting. So, in a weird way, like you, you feel like you're desecrating your mind, you know, to some extent by watching horror.***

BRANDON: Absolutely. Absolutely. So, I think, uh, the idea of a curse movie, it's kind of taking that one step further. One of the major functions of religion is about how we navigate the space between humanity and the divine. Frequently the realm of the divine and the monstrous are, are blended together. They're all outside of the human realm. So, there's not such a distinction between the divine and the monsters when you get outside of the human, it's all just space that we're, we're not supposed to go. You see it in the Old Testament, in the priestly texts, like in, um, Leviticus and numbers that all of these rituals are set up for how you safely navigate those spaces, how you exist in

those spaces, even temporarily, safely. We see a couple of stories where it goes wrong. Like when the priest Uza accidentally touches the arch it's, um, you know, it's not odd on a parade going to Jerusalem and it starts to wobble. So he tries to steady it and he's killed instantly. Um, even though he was doing it with good intention, this is, he was not following the rules.

***Yeah, I was just thinking, one of the things I find fascinating about ultra-Orthodox Judaism is that it's all about the rules. If you violate those rules, you will pay the price. Maybe that's another reason why these ideas of transgressions in horror films or in religious practices really interest you.***

BRANDON: I think that's a really, really good point that, um, both horror and religion are concerned with transgressions and how we, how we stay away from them. We repair things once they've, once they've been committed because both horror and religion acknowledged that transgressions are also a part of life.

***And when somebody says like, in the Scream movies, these are the rules, break them at your peril -- or in the Bible, these are the rules. You know, somebody is going to break those rules.***

BRANDON: Of course. Yeah. That's I, I think that was a Freud who came up with the notion that the only reason we have rules is because we want to break them. You don't have rules for things that you don't want to do!

***Do you think there's something particularly interesting about the movies that often get chosen, like The Omen or Rosemary's baby or The Exorcist for tempting fate?***

BRANDON: They tend to be movies that are showing us, um, ideas about how the, the struggle between good and evil on a, on a cosmic level might play out and, in a way, that we as a culture maybe haven't seen before, dramatized in this kind of a way. So, the, the cursed movies, the movies that get labeled as cursed, like, like Rosemary's Baby, like the Exorcist or are really groundbreaking movies.

***Oh, you know, that makes sense because a lot of the restrictions and codes, that had been around since the 1930s, were being lifted. And there was probably this feeling by the 1970s of, we were never supposed to be seeing this kind of thing on screen, but hey, we're all grown-ups. We can watch this stuff, right?***

BRANDON: Yeah. No, I think that, I think that's really, really true. That we were, we were seeing things on screen that we had not seen on screen before.

**But what about the people who worked on the movies that are labeled cursed? Are they able to shrug it off, or did the media hype around a curse affect them personally? After the break, we'll go behind the scenes of one of the most supposedly cursed franchises.**

**BREAK**

**I have to admit until I watched Jay's documentary series, I hadn't thought much about how the cast or crew was affected by these urban legends. I sort of thought the people making these lists of cursed films, and the people making the films didn't come into contact with each other. Turns out, I was wrong.**

**To begin with, the people on those productions were traumatized by what happened. In Jay's episode about *The Crow*, we hear from the actor Michael Berryman who worked with Brandon Lee before he killed by a faulty prop gun on the set of *The Crow*.**

*CLIP And then people are going the Curse of The Crow, someone got electrocuted, this happened that happened, don't you think this is possible?! Really? Really? No. The Crow was not cursed. The Crow was created out of love and loss. In my opinion, Brandon died because a studio cut corners.*

**But the episode in Jay's series that really got to me was the one about *Poltergeist*. And there's a very specific, unusual reason why the franchise is supposedly cursed. It goes back to a scene in the first *Poltergeist* film where JoBeth Williams' character ends up in a flooded swimming pool full of skeletons.**

*CLIP: The Poltergeist curse is often attributed to the fact that they used real skeletons from India, and this is blasphemous, and these desecrated these bodies and it lead to a curse. Whether that's true or not, I don't know, but I tend to believe it's true because those skeletons look pretty good.*

**If the use of real skeletons supposed triggered a curse, Jay wanted to talk with Craig Reardon, the special effects designer on *Poltergeist*.**

JAY: And I reached out to him via email and he sent a very long response that basically he basically threatened to sue me personally if we even mentioned his name in the show because he, he had a bad experience when he was interviewed for E True Hollywood stories, the curse of *Poltergeist* episode, which leans very, very heavily into the supernatural side of things and presented his interview in a light that wasn't very, you know, in his opinion. Fair. I guess

**Jay got me in touch with Craig Reardon, who confirmed when Jay first asked him to be in the documentary:**

CRAIG: I vowed that I would, uh, come at them with all my guns, you know, and even if it was bluff, so poor Jay, who, I've since come to know and admire and respect sends me a, you know, a courteous email and I basically tell them, you know, first of all, go F yourself. Second of all, if you even tried to associate me with anything you're going to do, I'll show you, which of course, you know, empty threat.

**Before working on Poltergeist, Craig was a go-to guy for horror and supernatural effects, back when those effects were mostly what we would call “practical effects,” meaning not CG. He was thrilled to get a call to work on Poltergeist because it was produced by Steven Spielberg. Working on a Spielberg movie propelled him to the next level in his career. Then years later:**

CRAIG: In just regular Google searches of my name, which I would only do periodically to see, you know, some friend had posted an old photo of me or something like that, you know, simple, stupid ego, uh, you know, explorations and I keep hitting this goddamn story of how I killed half the cast of Poltergeist.

**What really upset him was to see these deaths listed as bullet points. He worked with Dominique Dunne, the teenage star of Poltergeist, who was killed by her boyfriend a year after the movie came out.**

CRAIG: I can't believe that anyone that worked on Poltergeist wasn't heartbroken and appalled to hear the news about Dominique Dunne. My first thought and hearing it in the evening news was that the following day I would try to find out what hospital she was in and send her some flowers because all they said was, she was in critical condition. It was just the next day she died, and I couldn't believe it.

**What really blew his mind was that he was to blame for these deaths because he used real skeletons – like it was a big taboo. But filmmakers had been using real skeletons on movies going back to Frankenstein.**

CRAIG: It almost made me think I'm going to keep a notepad by me when I look at some of my movie collection because there are hundreds of old movies with bones in them.

**He thinks the urban legend probably dates to an interview he gave, where he explained how he had never used skeletons before. He didn't know where to get them. So, he asked his friend, the legendary special effects artist Rick Baker.**

CRAIG: And he uh, he was helpful. He told me, well these are obtainable through a biological supply. So, I obtained their catalog. They had an option between actual skeletons or plastic skeletons. The, I chose the human skeletons. They had a character each have their own novelty that they were imperfect. The plastic skeletons were uniform, they would all look absolutely identical. Same height, same skull, same, same, same.

**Also, plastic skeletons are more expensive because someone had put the work in to make them. Low budget horror films over the years couldn't afford plastic skeletons. Although Spielberg used real skeletons in Raiders of the Lost Ark because they had a lot of character to them. In fact, Spielberg had specifically asked Craig to do a better job animating skeletons on Poltergeist than what they did in Raiders of the Lost Ark.**

CRAIG: He says I want them to be on the edge, so people will something they can't process, are they alive, or aren't they? I thought that's a cool notion, but Spielberg is a sharp cookie! But what we did – I say we because I was working with a talented guy named Mike McCracken. I did the bulk of the sculptures right over the skulls, even though nobody saw them move because once we got them into the pool, which we had never had an opportunity to do, the mechanism simply didn't function properly and besides that there was no way to route the means of how they moved out of the pool.

**As you can tell, Craig is still annoyed that he has to defend himself weighing a special effects job against the deaths of all these people.**

CRAIG: I often wonder, in fact, if these people really feel badly about these people's death, or if they're just, you know, they're just playing, you know, our statistic game.

**But the death that really fueled the legend of the Poltergeist curse, was Heather O'Rourke, who died during the making Poltergeist III. She had a rare disease called congenital stenosis. But her doctors thought she had Crohn's disease, and they didn't realize their mistake until it was too late.**

*CLIP: Carol Ann, tell me about what's just happened. The man wanted me to lead him into the light. So cold there. I heard them talking. They said it was my Daddy's fault because of the houses, the houses built on their graves. They said I had to lead them into the light – into the light!*

**Gary Sherman was the director of Poltergeist III. He was willing to talk to me, and appear in Jay's series, because he wanted to pay tribute to Heather – so she's remembered for the way she lived.**

**He did not enjoy working on Poltergeist III because the studio didn't give him any creative freedom with the story.**

GARY: I hate the movie as a movie. I love the effects. I love what we were able to accomplish with the effects as a movie. I think it's an awful movie.

**But working with Heather O' Rourke made the experience worth it.**

GARY: Heather was fantastic. By about the second week or something of shooting, Heather came up to me and said, you know, I really liked the way you work. She said, this is really fun. She said, I, I, there were other directors that I've worked with that I haven't liked working with lot. She said, you know, Steven was wonderful, you know, but Poltergeist 2 I didn't enjoy myself that much and, but she said, I'm really enjoying this, and I liked the way it work. And she says, you know, I'm not planning on being an actor my whole career. I want to be a director and I think I could learn a lot from you. So, do you mind if when I'm not on camera, if I kind of sit on the set and watch you work, you know, if it's okay with the welfare worker, it's okay with me. I love having you around and I mean I directed a lot of scenes in that movie with Heather's sitting next to me on the set! The best moment was, you know, when we were shooting the garage scene and the explosion in the garage, we had a problem and I'm in the explosion, got out of hand was all over the news and everybody was going on about it. And so, the next morning I'm sitting in my office and Heather comes running in and says to me, and said Gary, I saw in the news about the explosion on the fire. I said, yeah, it was really, it was really dramatic. And she said, was everybody okay? And I said, yeah, everybody was fine. And she said, Oh, that's good. And then she looks at me and says, did you get the shot?

***That's so great. I mean, when you, when you talk about what happened on the set of Poltergeist III, it's, it's so like, it's, you talk about it like it just happened, you know, and it was a long, long time ago. I mean, does, does it still feel like something you, you think about periodically? Um, and think about Heather?***

GARY: Yeah, I do think about it. She was an incredibly interesting human being. 11 years old. She was like 11 going on 45. She was just fantastic, and she wasn't well, which was, you know, another problem. And we had doctors around for her all the time. Unfortunately, they had misdiagnosed what was wrong with her.

**He'll never forget the phone call when he learned that Heather had died. They still had more work to do on the film. He wanted to walk away, but the studio made him to finish it. He filmed the ending with another little girl in Heather's role, but they obscured her face.**

GARY: You know, nobody wanted to do publicity. All of us refused to go on the publicity tour. None of us, we all said we're, we're not going out to promote to film. None of us felt the film should have been released.

**He was hoping to put move on, but the cast and crew were being hounded by media wanting to know if they believed the film was cursed, as if they had put Heather in danger for allowing her to work on it.**

GARY: I just got attacked from, I mean, I couldn't pick up my phone. I couldn't open my front door without there being reporters and things wanting to talk to me about Heather's death and about the curse. And I refused to talk to anybody. So, I actually moved temporarily and changed my phone number and I just couldn't, I couldn't deal with it. I just didn't want to talk about the curse. You know, I get contacted by people on Facebook and Instagram and everything all the time, it comes up even in social situations, people ask about the curse and I just say not a subject I am willing to discuss cause not something I believe in.

**Talking with Craig and Gary, I began to realize that the real curse is the legend of the curse. It's even a curse for people not involved in the productions. In Jay's episode on Poltergeist, he shows a montage of fans going to the house where Poltergeist was filmed, almost like a pilgrimage.**

*CLIP: FANS AT POLTERGEIST HOUSE*

JAY: And there was a scene that we ended up having to cut where we actually were filming in front of the Poltergeist house and the owner of the house happened to pull up as we were filming, and they were not happy. They were not interested in talking on camera and there so we couldn't use the footage. Um, so yeah, I mean I think that definitely could feel like a curse to someone who lives in that home.

**In another episode, he talks with Linda Blair, who enjoyed making The Exorcist. The real hell was the publicity around the film, answering questions about the curse, and some people couldn't separate her from her character.**

*CLIP: Were you assigned bodyguards? I won't talk about it. No? That's – I don't talk about it. So, what's another one?*

JAY: That's the legacy of *The Exorcist*, and the legacy with Linda Blair and people actually thinking that this little 12-year-old girl could actually at the very best have been psychologically damaged by her experience on the film working on the film. And the very worst could actually be the devil. There are many ways in which these films are cursed and the people that worked on them are cursed in kind of more of not so much of a literal sense.

**On the bright side, Jay says not as many horror films are being labeled as cursed anymore, even if they have troubled productions.**

JAY: The fact that curse are not really -- you don't hear about them too much nowadays because everything is so well documented and, and might sort of, um, for a lack of a better phrase, like kill the buzz that people might have in perpetuating these stories at parties when they see how real, uh, some of these events were and the effects that they had on, on the people that were involved with them. So, I don't think PR, um, the PR surrounding major blockbuster films really wants to embrace a stunt person losing an arm on the set of a *Resident Evil* film or a camera assistant being hit by a train. You know, those accidents now are to, to frame those as having been curses. I think we're in a different time where that would just be looked at as very tasteless.

**I understand why the idea of curse would be appealing. It creates a narrative framework around chaos. Even if it's scary to imagine some kind of demonic entity in charge – at least someone's in charge. Imagining bad things happening at random can be much scarier.**

**And we don't need dark supernatural forces to curse someone. A curse can be psychological. That doesn't make it any less real. We can curse someone with our words, and our actions – no spells required.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Brandon Grafius, Craig Reardon, Gary Sherman and Jay Cheel. His series, "Cursed Films," is on the streaming site Shudder.**

**Registration is open for the summer session of my class on making podcasts. Originally the class was in person, but NYU has gone virtual for the time being. So, you can take the class wherever you live. It runs for eight consecutive Mondays starting June 22<sup>nd</sup>, from 6:30 to 9pm Eastern Time. If that fit with your**

**schedule, the class is called Creating a Narrative Podcast and you can sign up on the NYU website.**

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