



ATTACK OF THE KILLER B-MOVIES !

HOW ROGER CORMAN
REVOLUTIONIZED CINEMA

BY IAN LENDLER

DURING

the Golden Age of Hollywood, big-budget movies were classy affairs, full of artful scripts and classically trained actors. And boy, were they dull. Then came Roger Corman, the King of the B-Movies. With Corman behind the camera, motorcycle gangs and mutant sea creatures filled the silver screen. And just like that, movies became a lot more fun.



Escape from Detroit

For someone who devoted his entire life to creating lurid films, you'd expect Roger Corman's biography to be the stuff of tabloid legend. But in reality, he was a straight-laced workaholic. Having produced more than 300 films and directed more than 50, Corman's mantra was simple: Make it fast, and make it cheap. And certainly, his dizzying pace and eye for the bottom line paid off. Today, Corman is hailed as one of the world's most prolific and successful filmmakers.

But Roger Corman didn't always want to be a director. Growing up in Detroit in the 1920s, he aspired to become an engineer like his father. Then, at age 14, his ambitions took a turn when his family moved to Los Angeles. Corman began attending Beverly Hills High, where Hollywood gossip was a natural part of the lunchroom chatter. Although the film world piqued his interest, Corman stuck to his plan. He dutifully went to Stanford and earned a degree in engineering, which he didn't particularly want. Then he dutifully entered the Navy for three years, which he didn't particularly enjoy. Finally, in 1948, he set his sights on something he did want—to make his mark on Hollywood.

Rising from the Ocean Floor

Corman's career began at the bottom. He started in the film business as an entry-level reader for 20th Century Fox, wading through the worst scripts at the studio. The job was thankless, but the incompetent writing inspired Corman to give screenwriting a try. He moved to Paris to focus on his craft and eventually sold a script to Allied Artists Pictures. However, the resulting film was so awful that Corman vowed never to let a studio meddle with his work again. From that point on, Roger Corman was determined to make his own movies.

It was a bold statement at the time. Because Hollywood studios owned all of the theater chains, movies couldn't be shown without studio backing. But in 1948, the Supreme Court decided the system constituted a monopoly, and it forced studios to sell off their theaters. Suddenly, every Ed Wood with a camera could get his movie on the big screen. But without big stars or big



budgets, indie flicks had to find other ways to attract audiences. And so the “exploitation movie” was born. The films shamelessly drew in crowds with shocking subjects, jazzy titles, and special effects—three things right up Corman’s alley.

In fact, part of Roger Corman’s legend springs from the fact that he could create an entire movie out of a single good special effect. One of his earliest films, *Monster from the Ocean Floor* (1954), was conceived when Corman posed as a major producer and convinced inventors to loan him their new, one-man submarine for his “next project.” With a spiffy prop secured, all Corman needed was the little stuff—a title, a story, a screenplay, actors, and money. After scrounging up \$12,000, he concocted a film about a man-eating, mutant sea creature that terrorized good-looking tourists until a dashing marine biologist rams the beast with a submarine. Then he sold the movie for \$100,000. All in all, it provided Corman with his trademark recipe for success—cheap production values, a wild sense of humor, and pulp-fiction plots all whipped briskly into a hefty profit.

Little Shop of Hormones

It wasn’t long before *Monster* caught the attention of American International Pictures (AIP), a production company that believed in the then-revolutionary idea of marketing movies to teens. And Corman fit right in with their mission. With AIP’s backing, Corman began churning out an unbelievable six movies a year. At that pace, logic and continuity went out the window. Vikings appeared on screen wearing sunglasses, and actors were reused in multiple roles. In one Western, a cowboy shoots at himself dressed as an Indjan. But with the cheapskate director behind the camera, it wasn’t just the actors being repurposed; it was also the scenes. Corman liked some

ROGER CORMAN'S FRUGAL HALL OF FAME

THE MOVIE: *Waterworld* (1995)

THE PROBLEM: Upon reading the script, Corman famously announced, “We can’t do this. It’ll cost \$5 million!”

THE SOLUTION: Corman sold the screenplay to Universal Studios, which produced it for \$175 million. The movie bombed at the box office.

THE MOVIE: *Cockfighter* (1974) Tagline: “He came into town with his cock in hand, and what he did with it was illegal in 49 states.”

THE PROBLEM: The sport of cockfighting was a source of shame in the South, and many people were uncomfortable seeing a movie about it.

THE SOLUTION: Corman downplayed the cockfighting by adding sex scenes to the film’s trailer, despite the fact that those scenes didn’t appear in the movie. When *Cockfighter*’s director, Monte Hellman, argued that this was false advertising, Corman simply inserted the sex scenes into the film. *Cockfighter* turned a nice profit.

THE MOVIE: *The Big Bird Cage* (1972)

THE PROBLEM: Women in prison make for great exploitation movies, but it costs money to film in a prison.

THE SOLUTION: A little barbed wire and some bamboo huts in a Philippine jungle helped Corman invent an entirely new (and incredibly cheap) genre—women in prison *camp!* The increased sweatiness didn’t hurt sales, either.

THE MOVIE: *The Terror* (1963)

THE PROBLEM: After completing *The Raven* ahead of schedule, Corman had a leftover set and actors, and nothing to do with them.

THE SOLUTION: Make another movie. Written in five days and shot in two, *The Terror* makes absolutely no sense. Corman let his crew take turns directing it, so in the end, the film fell into the hands of Francis Ford Coppola, Monte Hellman, Jack Hill (one of Quentin Tarantino’s greatest influences), and even Jack Nicholson—thus earning it the “Most Great Directors Ever To Make One Bad Movie” award.



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of his footage so much that he reused it in other movies, again and again.

Corman also ruthlessly jettisoned elements that bogged down big-budget Hollywood films—elements such as nuanced characters and storylines. Instead, Corman focused on bells and whistles. In *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957), he drew on his engineering background, meticulously placing a horror scene every five minutes throughout the film. With a running time of 62 minutes, only the basics of plot and humor survived. The final product wasn't art, but it wasn't boring, either.

Surprisingly, the faster Corman made his movies, the better they turned out. Another cornerstone of his legend is the making of *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), which he reportedly conceived, wrote, and filmed in less than one week to take advantage of a leftover stage set before it was torn down. The result (which included an early Jack Nicholson appearance) was one of Corman's finest movies.

Tripping Ahead

Roger Corman aspired to make more than just cheapo flicks. In the 1960s, he began directing bigger-budget films based on Edgar Allen Poe stories, starring Vincent Price. These became instant classics of gothic cinema. The success encouraged Corman to flex his creative muscles further and make what his peers thought impossible—a *serious* film. *The Intruder* (1962), starring newcomer William Shatner, told the story of a man fighting racism in the South. The movie was shot on location in Missouri, but when the locals discovered that the script addressed the evils of segregation, they physically chased the

crew out of town. Although the film played well to critics and was hailed as a masterpiece in Europe, U.S. audiences hardly got a chance to see it. American theaters refused to show the

incendiary film, and the movie flopped. The director learned his lesson and never made another "message" film again.

Not one to sulk, Corman reverted to what he knew best—fast, cheap entertainment. His assembly-line productions required a huge amount of manpower, and in the process they attracted an entire generation of young directors and actors. Martin Scorsese, Peter Fonda, Robert De Niro, and Sylvester Stallone all apprenticed under Corman, accepting minimum-wage work in exchange for the opportunity to study his low-budget ways. As legendary director James Cameron once put it, "I trained at the Roger Corman Film School."

But the younger generation provided more than just cheap labor. They also gave Corman a window into America's growing counter-culture of motorcycle gangs, hippies, and LSD. The result can be seen in his definitive LSD movie, *The Trip* (1967). The fact that he dropped acid before filming (to create a more "authentic" experience) only added to the lore.

Through the years, Corman's films became increasingly anarchic, putting him at odds with the older producers at AIP. The final straw was his 1971 flick *Gas-s-s-s*, in which a mysterious gas wipes out everyone over the age of 25, and wild subcultures dominate the Earth. AIP re-edited the entire film without Corman's permission, dramatically decreasing its grooviness. Corman retaliated and formed his own company, New World Pictures, where he continued refining his aesthetic. In his own words, he aimed to produce "contemporary dramas with a liberal-to-left-wing viewpoint and some R-rated sex and humor."

How B-Movies Joined the A-List

Working with Hollywood's future luminaries, New World raised trashy cinema to an art form during the 1970s. Ironically, Corman's company also brought legitimate art films to the masses. It distributed the works of critically acclaimed foreign directors such as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, and Roberto Rossellini to drive-in theaters. Corman knew the films' casual attitude towards nudity would appeal to the drive-in crowd, while their artistic merits would draw in the intellectuals. Bergman, for one, never decried the crass commercialization of his work, but rather rejoiced at the thought of drunken teenagers necking to his brand of existential dread.

During the 1980s, Corman's empire slowly dwindled, as companies such as Miramax muscled him out of the foreign-film market. His movies also suffered as VHS killed off smaller theaters, meaning his exploitation films were forced to go straight to video. Worst of all, he lost his pool of talented young directors and writers to the big studios, which were replicating his style of action movies, emphasizing thrills and humor over plot and character. The only difference was that instead of calling them "exploitation movies," the studios called them "blockbusters."

In fact, Hollywood's obsession with blockbusters originated with the success of one movie. The plot? A man-eating sea creature terrorizes good-looking tourists until a marine biologist hunts it down. The movie was *Jaws*. But it sounds an awful lot like *Monster from the Ocean Floor*, doesn't it? 🐛

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