

Black Sunday

**WE FEEL A MORAL
OBLIGATION TO WARN YOU
THAT THE PICTURE YOU ARE ABOUT TO
SEE WILL SHOCK YOU AS NO OTHER
FILM EVER HAS...**

In 1960, there were three films that would change the face of horror cinema forever – one from the United States, one from Great Britain, and one from Italy. One of the films made an already hugely popular and iconic filmmaker into more of a legend than he already was – Alfred Hitchcock and *Psycho*. One of the films made a hugely popular and beloved filmmaker into a pariah and outcast – Michael Powell and *Peeping Tom*. And one film was the official debut of its director – Mario Bava and *Black Sunday* (originally *La Maschera del Demonio*). All three films pushed the envelope for frankness and what could be shown on the screen. And for audiences of the day, all three films were shockers and not easily forgotten.

The moral obligation warning came at the head of the American International Pictures US version of 1960s *Black Sunday*, which was actually released in the US in 1961. And for once that kind of hyperbolic hype was true and you knew it right from the get go – first, with a woman being branded with an “S” (for Satan) in extreme close-up, with the sound of the brand searing her flesh, and second, having a mask of spikes hammered into her face by a huge masked man with a huge mallet. That alone was enough to send impressionable young people running up the aisle – I know, I was one of them. And there was more to come, a lot more – a whole plethora of nightmare-inducing images. American International actually trimmed the most violent moments (a spike through someone’s eye, melting flesh, spurting blood), but what was left was still pretty potent for its time. Add to that, Bava’s mist-shrouded exteriors and beautifully shot interiors, and you had atmosphere to spare. But the most brilliant bit of atmosphere a filmmaker could ever have was the ethereal presence of the absolutely stunning Barbara Steele, who would go on to become one of the most iconic faces in 60s horror cinema.

Bava, prior to *Black Sunday*, had been a cinematographer for many years and had unofficially finished several films for other directors. He photographed several films that had success in the United States, such as *Hercules*, *Hercules Unchained*, *Caltiki*, *The Immortal Monster*, and *The Giant of Marathon*. He was forty-eight when he finally received his first directing credit.

Black Sunday was very loosely based on the

Nikolai Gogol story, *Viy*. The film begins in 1635, with a witch named Asa (played by Barbara Steele) being sentenced to death by her brother for sorcery. She vows revenge and puts a curse on her brother’s descendents. Two hundred years later, a drop of blood awakens her and she is soon getting a lot more than a drop of blood from those descendents. One of those is Katia (also played by Steele), the haunted daughter of Prince Vajda. Asa feels if she can drain Katia of all her blood she will achieve immortality. Rather than go on, do yourself a favor and seek out the film if you haven’t seen it.

After the release in Italy, the film was bought by American International, who, as noted, made several editing changes, excising a couple of short dialogue scenes, some gore, and re-ordering a couple of scenes, but essentially the film remained pretty close to what it originally was. The film was dubbed into English, of course. Interestingly, in no version of the film do we ever hear Barbara Steele’s real voice, and yet her performance loses none of its poetry or power.

One of the first decisions American International made was to replace the moody score of Roberto Nicolosi, with a more conventional horror score, which they assigned to composer Les Baxter. Baxter had just finished scoring Roger Cornman’s *House of Usher*, and he was a perfect choice. He delivered a classic score, which was occasionally moody like the original Nicolosi score, but also delivered the kinds of musical horror moments to which American audiences were accustomed. Right from the start, with the warning logo, you get that wonderful Baxter sound – shrieking brass that was literally warning you to *watch out*. There’s a beautiful love theme for Katia, there’s ominous, brooding music, there’s music for beer drinkers, there’s music that brilliantly punctuates a couple of the film’s scariest sequences, and the score just does what a score for a horror film should – underline the horror in the best and most visceral way it can.

The film garnered surprisingly strong reviews, although a couple of reviewers, especially the *New York Times*, really hated the film. But then, the *New York Times* hated *Psycho*, so *Black Sunday* was in very good company. The film did huge business for American International and, according to reports at the time, was its biggest hit up to that point. The fact that all publicity carried the tagline “No One Under The Age Of Twelve Will Be Admitted” was just the kind of thing kids under the age of twelve needed to hear and they flocked to the theaters, where they had no trouble whatsoever getting in. For

many of those young people, the film made an impact that they never forgot.

Black Sunday was hugely influential on an entire generation of filmmakers, and continues to be to this day. Its combination of brilliant and moody photography, horror, and poetry, has been paid homage by directors such as Francis Ford Coppola and Tim Burton – the latter noted that “One of the films that remains with me probably stronger than anything is *Black Sunday*.” You can see that influence throughout most of Burton’s film, *Sleepy Hollow*.

A thirty-four minute suite from *Black Sunday* was originally released on LP, where it was rather ludicrously mislabeled as *Black Sabbath* (another great Bava film whose US release also carried a score by Les Baxter). That suite was assembled from a 7½ ips tape of not great quality. The suite received its first CD appearance on Bay Cities and then subsequently on Citadel, both releases from that same tape. Missing from the suite was not only good audio quality, but an awful lot of the film’s best music. The suite also was assembled in no particular order and didn’t really reflect the way the music was used in the film at all.

For this release, we found the original mixed two-track session masters in the MGM vaults, which were in excellent condition. The best news was that those tapes contained every note of music Baxter wrote for the film. The only piece that was missing was the little thirty-second solo piano piece played by the character of Katia in the film. The sound on those original tapes is, of course, miles ahead of the previous version – it is pristine mono sound and finally allows the score to be heard in the way that it should be. We’ve assembled the score in precise film order, which is how it plays best.

As Barbara Steele wrote, “I always wanted to make a silent film with Mario Bava. No one I can think of could equal him in grabbing those wonderful silent landscapes; glorious, ominous, and menacing. I personally think that black-and-white suited him best. It allowed him to express this terrible tension with perfect finesse, always walking the high wire between drama and melodrama, never falling off the rope. An exquisite balancing act, bold, baroque and beautiful.”

So here, at long last, is Les Baxter’s great score to one of the all-time classic horror films, Mario Bava’s *Black Sunday*. Be afraid, be very afraid.

— Bruce Kimmel