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Reviewed by  
Ron Goulart

**GREMLINS**  
Reviewed by Robert Bloch

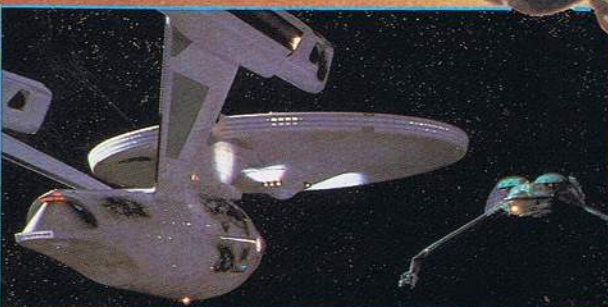
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# GH<sup>0</sup>STBUSTERS

Reviewed by RON GOULART

**V**ery uneasy is what I've been almost ever since I saw this movie.

Initially, I was sanguine, but very soon I came to realize that something strange and sinister was afoot. Now, I am firmly convinced that demonic forces were unleashed and put to work for the benefit of *Ghostbusters*. There seems to be no other explanation for the odd things that have occurred.

Take, as a prime and highly unsettling example, the grosses. During its first weekend

gards *Ghostbusters*. David Denby, of *New York* magazine, went on record as saying the picture was "a convulsively funny classic comedy." Writing in the *New York Post*, the usually perceptive Rex Reed maintained that "*Ghostbusters* towers above most modern comedies." Siskel and Ebert raved that it was "a really funny movie that combines great special effects with wonderfully sly dialogue." And take, as just one more of far too many horrifying examples, the frightful case of

watched it again the other night. Mostly, this most recent viewing was to flush my mind of the after-effects of seeing the movie to which this essay is devoted. *Ghostbusters*' similarity to the earlier Hope work ends at the title. A fat-budgeted, technicolor opus, it is rarely either funny or scary. If Sigourney Weaver hadn't been aboard, I would have run screaming from the theater long before the final reel.

The plotline, which kept reminding me of



Have a poltergeist haunting your library? Who you gonna call? *Ghostbusters*! Here, the courageous trio (Dan Aykroyd, Harold Ramis and Bill Murray) tries to book a spooky suspect.

in release, the movie grossed \$13.6 million, beating *Gremlins* by more than a million bucks and causing *Indiana Jones* and *Star Trek III* to take a back seat. No other Columbia film in the studio's history has ever done as well in a single weekend as *Ghostbusters*. Not *Tootsie*, not such earlier hits as *Gilda*, *It Happened One Night*, or *Boston Blackie Goes Hollywood*. Why would millions of otherwise rational people flock to see it? The answer is obvious. They were hexed or coerced in some other black magical way.

Next, let's consider the critics and reviewers. Usually an astute and cynical bunch, they obviously went bonkers as re-

Richard Schickel. A respected critic and historian, a student of comedy, a man who wrote an entire book about silent comedian Harold Lloyd, Schickel said the movie was "grandly comic... neatly timed and perfectly packaged" right out in the open in the pages of *Time*. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* kept her head a bit better than most of her colleagues, noting that "there is more attention to special effects than to humor. There are also far too many loose ends in the screenplay." Unfortunately, she also states that Bill Murray is a gifted comedian and that he "would be even more welcome if his talents were used in the service of something genuinely witty and coherent, rather than as an end in themselves." Mass hypnosis, evil spells, possibly even possession by demons are the only rational explanations for the behavior of the critics in this affair.

One of the favorite films of my vanished youth was *Ghost Breakers*. A modestly budgeted 1940 black and white spook comedy, it starred Bob Hope, Paulette Goddard and Willie Best. Thanks to the magic of videotape, I own a copy of the movie and I

the story used in a 1937 Disney short called "Lonesome Ghosts," deals with three fellows who, after getting bounced from the Parapsychology Department of Columbia University, set up in business as freelance ghost hunters and exorcists. Murray, Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis play the trio of ghostbreakers; it was Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy in the Disney version. After catching various special-FX ghosts and creatures, they meet up with Miss Weaver, a lady who has a gateway to another dimension inside her refrigerator. We now switch to demonic possessions, evil gods of ancient days unleashed upon the world and so on. There is considerable fun-loving destruction, as well as some interesting displays of Miss Weaver's flesh, before all ends well.

Although special effects abound in *Ghostbusters*, there's little in the way of what you might call non-special effects—everyday stuff like suspense, chills, laughs. The things that a good script and passable acting and directing traditionally supply. Aykroyd and Ramis provided the script. They seem to believe that gags and comic

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situations are not logically built up, but simply stuck into a story like raisins in rice pudding. Firmly in the *Animal House* school of comedy, they provide quite a lot of body function jokes, being especially fond of those that involve eating in gross ways. But their favorite source of fun and laughter is vandalism, a grand-scale and mindless destruction of property. To guarantee a maximum of this, they do their ghost hunting with massive sci-fi weapons and manage to destroy hotel ballrooms, apartment houses and whole city blocks in the course of their work. Perhaps this rampant destruction was meant as satire on the traditional SF monster movies or maybe the zaphappy ghostbusters represent a sly parody of the United States' military attitude toward pacifying smaller countries. I'm only guessing here, since usually satire and parody are funny and thereby provide a clue to the intent.

Aykroyd gets my nomination for the Sydney Carton Self-Sacrifice Award for co-authoring a script in which he has not one good scene and few good lines. He's so noble he didn't even write himself a romance. Nope, he lets Murray handle that. Bill Murray ending up in a clinch with the exorcised Sigourney Weaver is one of the most frightening aspects of *Ghostbusters*. This triumph of the schmuck violates the basic rules of comedy, not to mention those of decorum. It's as though a Three Stooges short concluded with Moe getting the girl.

Quite obviously, I haven't, as yet, fallen under Bill Murray's spell. He strikes me, at best, as a moderately gifted second banana. What unsettles me is the way he, as to a lesser degree do Aykroyd and Ramis, gets such a kick out of playing a jerk. Murray's glorification of the jerk goes beyond anything Steve Martin ever dreamed of. He is so determinedly cloddish that he makes that pioneering jerk, Jerry Lewis, look as suave as Cary Grant. He isn't, on screen anyway, just your typical misunderstood ugly duckling. He plays a chap with serious personality problems and Miss Weaver's initial revulsion seems *completely* justified. I suppose the awful truth is I am simply too old to savor his sort of performing. For me, the spectacle of a grown man acting like a ninth-grade class clown is *not* the apex of comedy. Murray's smugness bothers me, too. He radiates a self-satisfaction I can see no basis for, and I keep picking up subliminal messages along the lines of "I'm a slob, but don't you just love me?"

The non-comedy aspects of *Ghostbusters* didn't impress me much either. Being firmly rooted in the more-is-best camp, its director, Ivan Reitman, misses not an opportunity to show us the horrible stuff. To rub our noses in slime and grue, to let us see clearly every awful monster and demon his large budget has allowed him to buy and play with. Subtlety is nowhere in evidence, the technicolor ghosts and horrors just keep rushing at us like the monsters in a fun house. In the aforementioned *Ghost Breakers*, there are *one* ghost, *one* skeleton and *one* zombie, none on screen for more



**Mayhem in the middle of Manhattan, as the *Ghostbusters* bust up the Big Apple.**



**Sigourney Weaver is the mild-mannered, demon-possessed lady. And the *Ghostbusters* must repossess her.**

than a few moments. But the possibility of scary stuff is hinted at, the camera shots help, as do the lighting and the sets. The notion that you can hint at a possible terror, that you can tease and scare by gradually leading up to it is alien to Reitman and company. If he were staging a burlesque show, he would have all his ladies troop out on stage at once—jaybird naked.

The profession of ghostbusting, how it would actually be gone about, was given little careful thought. The logic is akin to that found on afternoon kid cartoon shows. There's a dragonmonster on the loose and He-Man just happens to have a dragonmonster-destroying sword handy. There are hardly any scenes in *Ghostbusters* where the trio, all supposedly college professors, sit down and discuss what they're up to and why they're going to try a certain approach to a certain problem. Murray's nonchalant slob is so indifferent that he leaves Miss Weaver alone in her apartment *after* she has been taken over by an ancient god (I think that's what it was). Later, in returning to save her, he pauses to clown around in front of her apartment building and make wisecracks to the gathering crowd. Good for a cheap laugh maybe, but it doesn't make his character very appealing.

Thanks to what I assume must be an innate immunity to the type of hexing Columbia Pictures apparently used on reviewers, I am just about the only writer in the country to get the *real* story of *Ghostbusters* into print.

At least I think I'm immune. Or can it be that Hollywood just doesn't think I'm important enough to waste expensive sorcery on? ★



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