

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

In my elementary school every year, they dedicated a day to talk about nuclear war. They'd cancel classes. We'd watch a movie about Hiroshima, and then we'd have breakout sessions with the teachers to talk about our fears. And I remember in one of those sessions, this kid said, very matter of factly, none of us are going to live to see our high school graduation. Everyone was quiet, even the teacher, the Cold War was so hot that year, 1984. How could it end any other way?

1984 was the first year I became totally aware of what was going on in the world. I went from 12 to 13 elementary school to junior high, and it was quite a year to have that kind of awareness. I remember there was already a lot of anticipation going into 1984. Because of the novel, people actually wondered if the novel would suddenly come true, or we'd realize that *Big Brother* had been on our walls all along. But instead of an Orwellian dystopia, we got a lot of fun stuff like *Sixteen Candles*, *Karate Kid*, *Miami Vice*, *Purple Rain*, *Like a Virgin*, *Born in the USA*.

1984 was also a huge year for science fiction and fantasy for movies to TV shows, to novels, to comics, to video games. So we are kicking off a mini-series about different works of sci-fi and fantasy that made their debut 40 years ago, and they're still having an impact today.

And when I looked at the sci-fi and fantasy movies from 1984, right away I noticed a murderer's row of villains. In fact, four movies caught my eye. These four films were meant to be mainstream blockbusters, but there were also manifestations of our collective anxieties. So we're going to look at what each of these villains were tapping into and why they became iconic, and that includes their design because they're all visually striking.

By the way, this episode is full of spoilers, but these movies are so famous, I'm going to assume you already know what they're about even if you haven't seen them. Like this guy needs no introduction.

THE TERMINATOR: I'm a friend of Sarah Connor. I was told that she's here. Could I see her please?

DESK SERGEANT: No, you can't see her. She's making a statement.

THE TERMINATOR: Where is she?

DESK SERGEANT: Look, it may take a while. Want to wait? There's a bench over there.

THE TERMINATOR: I'll be back.

JR Forasteros is a pastor, podcaster and writer. He's covered villains a lot in his work. He thinks it's hard to watch The Terminator now without the future in mind – not the future war against the machines, but the future career of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

JR: He is so much bigger than anyone else on the screen. And I mean, bodybuilding was still a thing that resided in the realm of the professionals. And so there was not like a guy down the street working out in his garage that looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger. You know, no one looked like this dude, that's why he won Mr. Universe. Right?

Shannon Shea is a special effects designer. 40 years ago, he was trying to break into the business, which was really taking off.

SHANNON: So when you picked 1984, you're talking about when the ship is leaving the port, I mean the most exciting time. It was really a magical, magical year.

Shannon went to see the Terminator with some friends because he was a fan of Stan Winston who did special effects for the movie and in the theater, they were geeking out about the scene where the Terminator digs out his fake human eye and we see the robot eye inside of his skull. And back then they had to create a life-sized puppet of Schwarzenegger's head.

SHANNON: The shot where he's the puppet's looking in the mirror, you know, and he's, and the hands come in and touch his face and then take the razor blade and start cutting the eye. I think we were all like, whoa. That's amazing.

Years later, Shannon found himself working on Terminator 2. He was excited to work with one of his heroes, Stan Winston, but he was also impressed by how much James Cameron was involved in the design process.

SHANNON: Jim Cameron is, he was such an, an amazing artist before he became a director. And, uh, I, I know that much of the Terminator design was his. In fact, I saw his drawings. You know, the, the Terminator design, I think is it's, you can see things like, you can see that in the hips and the pelvis, you can see that these big ball joints in the

pelvis that go up to what appeared to be like hydraulic or pneumatic cylinders, you know? And so it just looks like it would work.

Neill Gorton is another veteran of the special effects industry. He has a similar take on why The Terminator is a great design.

NEILL: There's a logic to it. You know, if you're going to strip away flesh, you're going to find muscle and bone. And of course it's a robot from the future, so it's going to be a chrome bone.

In fact, he says, think about this arc visually speaking. The first time we see The Terminator, it's Schwarzenegger in the nude.

NEILL: You are getting more of those one-liners and, you know, little looks. And even the fight just to get the jacket and the clothes that alone is, is funny, you know?

THE TERMINATOR: Your clothes. Give them to me now.

Then halfway through, we get that scene in the bathroom where he digs out his eye. We get a peek at the robot underneath. By the final battle, he is now an animated robot skeleton that moves like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

NEILL: It's a great kind of slow reveal. You know, you're getting little bits, little bits, little bits, and it's building up, uh, so you know what's under. But by the end it is pure horror because it is the relentlessness of it and, and the fact that it's so alien by that point. Uh, any connection you've felt with it, or fun you had with that character is gone by that point.

But even before the robot is revealed underneath, there are aspects of the human-looking Terminator that are really disturbing. Yannie ten Brooke is a professor of criminal psychology, and she is fascinated by the psychology of villains. In fact, she likes to figure out where they fit on something called The Dark Triad.

YANNIE: Of the psychological traits that sometimes accompany violent people, they call them The Dark Triad, which is psychopathy and Machiavellianism and narcissism.

She says the Terminator in his human form bears a striking resemblance to people with psychopathy – more commonly known as psychopaths.

YANNIE: One of the most recognizable traits in them is that they lack empathy. They, they can't see the world from other people's perspectives. They can't feel things, other people feel not at a cognitive level or a thought level or a physical level. So when you have character like The Terminator, who is devoid of that basic biological reflex, we have to feel other people's pain. It's very notable. It's very, it's very obvious. You know, he doesn't have a capacity for things like compassion or empathy, because it wasn't programmed into him, at least in the first movie.

There are many scenes of the Terminator shooting people in cold blood, and we get a glimpse of the world after a nuclear holocaust, but the scene that really disturbed JR was a scene where an artificial intelligence that looks human stands in a phone booth and memorizes a list of Sarah Connors in a paper phone book.

JR: You just get this sense that, you know, you know, he doesn't need to sleep. So it doesn't matter if there's 8,000 Sarah Connors in the metro area, like he's just going to one by one look each one up and go to their house. And he's not afraid of the police finding a pattern. And you know, NCSI figuring some stuff out, like there's, there's no, there's no appealing to his emotion. because he doesn't have any. And I think that's terrifying.

Today people are creating AI that's meant to mimic humans from chatbots to robots to image generators. I think that's why that scene 40 years later is more chilling than ever.

BREAK

When we mentally project ourselves back 40 years ago. It's hard to imagine how groundbreaking Steven Spielberg and George Lucas were. I mean, they were like rock stars to me as a kid. Neil Gordon says a lot of adults felt the same way, not to mention filmmakers who were trying to copy their style.

NEILL: Suddenly in the '80s you got the permission to be a kid again. You know, everything before then was much more, especially in film, it was much more highbrow. And, you know, and the science fiction was things like 2001 and Silent Running, you know, films with a serious message, and then suddenly you can be an adult going see a kid's film. You're allowed to enjoy it <laugh>. And you know, we, we just got more childish in the '80s.

A perfect example is Gremlins.

TRAILER GUY: Steven Spielberg presents Gremlins.

When I first saw that trailer, I was cynical. “Steven Spielberg presents?” He didn’t direct this! But Gremlins, which was directed by Joe Dante, is a lot weirder and darker than many people expected. And it has a lot more to say than I realized at the time. It’s also the movie whose longevity surprised me the most. I was just in a comic book store recently and they’re still selling Gremlin toys.

TRAILER: And most important, no matter how much they beg, never, ever lets them eat midnight because when they do, they change.

Neill loves the design of The Gremlins and The Mogwai, the cute furry creatures they evolved or devolved from.

NEILL: And it looks like what would you get if you took that cute thing with the big ears and, and shaved it off, you know, you'd still be left with these big fleshy ears.

I think those big ears and big eyes on the Gremlins make them seem weirdly cute, and the fact that the Gremlins are only about two feet tall, they're just disarming enough to make you let down your guard for an instant. And as I learned from my days in animation, when you're designing a character, it's really important that it reads in silhouette. Shannon says when you look at the outline of a Gremlin hunched over with its talons for hands and grinning fangs, it looks mean and mischievous.

SHANNON: You show someone a Gremlins, they know exactly what it is by the, by the silhouette. And let's face it, they, they use the silhouettes in the movies many times. You know, you see them behind screens giggling and laughing and all that stuff. So yeah, I think the silhouette is really, really important to really iconic creature design.

Gremlins are also super mailable like Funko Pops. You can dress them up as anything. JR watched the movie again recently, and he was struck by:

JR: How readily the Gremlins understood human culture. I mean with like, literally they eat after midnight, they hatch the next morning, and then they are playing poker <laugh>. They are ordering different liquors at the bar. They are singing Christmas carols in harmony. They are rewiring electronics <laugh>. So I think the bar scene is a great example. You're, you're looking around this bar and they are just having the time of their life. One is swinging from the ceiling fan, they're all getting drunk, they're playing cards. There's like a jazz Gremlins somehow, right? <laugh>. And the bar is getting

destroyed in the process. But again, not intentionally. Like it's clear they're not there to burn the bar down. They're not there trashing it. They're just using it for their pleasure in a way that it is going to render it uninhabitable even by the next day.

I asked Yannie to analyze the behavior of the Gremlins. I thought she'd say they embody psychopathy because they don't care about the effects of their actions. She says, not exactly.

YANNIE: Psychopaths do not hang out with and do their thing with other psychopaths. There are cases of that but they are few and far between. What it really is in a weird way, is if they represent, you know, growing up like so, going from this cute, fuzzy docile, easy to control, eager to please fluffy little baby-like with big wide set eyes, creature. They transform into this reckless, you know, spawn that are just hell bent on destruction and fun. It's not necessarily psychopathic. It is developmentally appropriate if they were young teens, because it is completely developmentally appropriate for teenagers to care more about the opinions of their peers. They don't conceive of consequences for their actions. I mean, the way they dress differently, you know, the way they, their faces and everything are more defined. You know, they, they physically transformed from this doughy soft thing into these kind of bony, potentially, you know, smelly, strange looking, gangly hell bent on fun destruction. But they also seem to embody another aspect of teenagers and, and their developmental phase, which is their propensity for things like groupthink, like things that are terrible ideas when you're alone, and you would never, ever do them. All of a sudden, if you're in a big, enthusiastic pack of people whose recognition and esteem you want, it sounds like a great idea.

Teens gone wild, definitely checks a box of anxiety in the 1980s. The lead Gremlin has a mohawk. Although there are a lot of theories out there about what the Gremlins could symbolize.

In fact, JR wonders if the Gremlins are actually the villains of the movie. I mean, of course they kill people, but some of those people had it coming -- like Mrs. Deagle, the richest person in town.

JR: Most of the Gremlins even have these moments of playfulness and hilarity. Mrs. Deagle does not. Like, all she does is kick people out of their homes on Christmas and threaten, uh, to kill the main character's dog like <laugh>. She is just rotten.

MRS DEAGLE: I'll take him to the kennel. They'll put him to sleep. It will be quick and painless, which is better than what I could do to him.

JR: I think a film set at Christmas time that opens with such a strong picture of how the wealthy harm the less wealthy. And then you get into these monsters that are basically just having a blast using anything they want as they want it when they want it becomes a really sharp critique of that, that same kind of rampant consumerism.

I discovered there's actually a lot of critical analysis of Gremlins which says exactly that. The Cold War wasn't just about nuclear weapons. It was a battle of ideologies -- communism vs. capitalism. The sneakiest, most mischievous thing about Gremlins is that it's actually a biting social satire. The sequel essentially takes place in Trump Tower with a parody of Donald Trump who has his own version of The Art of the Deal.

KATE: I hope you enjoyed today's tour and don't forget to pick up a copy of Mr. Clamp's best-selling book "I Took Manhattan" on sale at our newsstand for only \$19.95.

Yannie says there's another villain in 1984 from a different movie who represents the dangers of capitalism, although we may not think of him that way. Dan Aykroyd didn't.

STANTZ: I tried to think of the most harmless thing. Something I loved from my childhood. Something that could never ever possibly destroy us. Mr. Stay Puft.

YANNIE: The Dan Ackroyd's character says, I wanted to think about the most harmless thing I possibly could. You know, and he thinks about a, a sub-brand from some kind of major food producer. That is certainly something that is not harmless.

Ghostbusters has a lot of memorable villains beyond a giant man made of high fructose corn syrup. In fact, I just learned recently that the gargoyles, which come to life are called Terror Dogs.

TULLY: Okay, who brought the dog?

SFX: CRASH, GROWL, SCREAM

And Neil says, once again, the design of the Terror Dogs works really well in silhouette. It's clear and simple.

NEILL: You know, you've got a gargoyle on top of a New York building. Well, they're fairly, you know, the gargoyles are very classical things, you know, so let's make it

fleshy. Its straight forward. It gets confusing if you get presented with something that really is just too left field.

Except for the final villain: Gozer -- the one who's actually in charge.

SHANNON: Here you are at the end of the film, we've seen terror dogs, we've seen Slimer, you've seen the ghost come out of the subway. You've seen the corpse driving the taxi down the street. What could Gozer be?

STANTZ: It's a girl.

SPENGLER: It's Gozer

WINSTON: I thought Gozer was a man

SPENGLER: It's whatever it wants to be.

SHANNON: Gozer, could've been, I mean, what does Ernie's character say? Some moldy Babylonian God. You're expecting a moldy Babylonian God, and you get 1980s rock and roll MTV star? And she's got her costume with all that kind of bubbles and stuff on it and she's wearing stiletto heels?

Gozer made a big impression on me in 1984, and I may be the only one because everybody I talked to was baffled that I wanted to focus on Gozer The Terror Dogs Slimer, the Stay Puft marshmallow man. Everybody remembers them.

And then JR turned the question around on me and asked why. And as you were talking, I realized I went to see Ghostbusters with a bunch of guys from my class. And in the movie the Ghostbusters act like overgrown boys for better and for worse.

And that summer, my friends and I were about to go into junior high. I think to me, Gozer was like a tall, stylish eighth grade girl who would see us in the hallway and cut us down with a single remark.

JR: You know that she's going to eat you, like one way or the other, she's going to embarrass you it's not going to end well for you.

It's a set up to humiliate you.

JR: Interesting.

It's a trick question, are you a god? And you're like, uh, no? It's like, uuuuuh, no! It's like damn it! Wrong answer!

WINSTON: Ray, when someone asks you if you're a god, you say yes!

Ghostbusters is not really scary, but it does make you uncomfortable in the way that it blends comedy with horror. In fact, all of the movies we're covering today blend horror and comedy.

JR: Because I think comedy and, and horror, the reason we get so many horror comedies or comedy horrors is because the two genres kind of do the same thing, right? They, they disrupt our norms.

The norm of 1984 is that while we were in the theater laughing at Ghostbusters, we could have all been vaporized before the movie was over. That was always in the back of my mind, and I know people had the same thoughts in 1954 and 1964. But after thirty something years of existential dread, by that point it had become existential comedy.

JR: When you can get wiped out at any point by this cosmic force, you know, this thing that you're not going to see coming and you can't stop and is unpredictable and all of that, it does things to our psyche, right? And I think these movies reflected that when you're in a bad place, you don't want to hold a mirror up to yourself and look at that. So make me laugh, like make me forget about it in a way that I, ironically then I can't quit thinking about.

There is a new Ghostbusters movie coming on in March, Ghostbusters Frozen Empire. It has original cast members along with newer characters, and I don't think it's a coincidence that the movie is going to use supernatural elements to deal with climate change.

BREAK

Our final villain needs no introduction. He haunts your dreams. He's the star of movies, TV shows and MTV videos.

CLIP: FREDDY RAPS IN VIDEO

Yannie says in the '80s, her mother was a preschool teacher.

YANNIE: And the kids who she taught, they would all know who Freddy Krueger was, and they thought he was just great, you know? There's something about him that's toy, like.

He's another great design. Shannon worked on one of the later Nightmare on Elm Street films. He says the special effect team felt so much creative freedom because of the premise that Freddy Krueger exists in dreams.

SHANNON: Every movie, they tried to top what they did before I mean from a guy wearing prosthetics to a giant snake.

SFX: SNAKE

SHANNON: I mean, we were building crazy stuff. There were people building Freddy bikes. There's a big Freddy Kruger motorcycle and all this stuff. It just, everything kept building. It kept building.

FREDDY: This boy feels the need for speed.

One thing that stayed fairly consistent was the makeup on Freddy's face. Shannon admired the work of the original makeup designer, Dave Miller.

SHANNON: There's something about that makeup with the way that the burns looked that there's something kind of rough and raw about it. You know, Freddy becomes a little more stylized as he moves along in some ways he gets, I don't want to say cleaner, but like the sculpting is cleaner, where Dave's is kind of like, it, there's something about it that this just looks like torn burned flesh to me. The blades on the hand that became iconic <laugh>. You know, I mean, it was genius. And I think that came from Wes Craven, I believe.

Yep. In fact, Wes Craven has said that his pet cat was one of the inspirations for the razor blades on Freddy's gloves. But there are other elements of his costume that are a little odd, like why is he wearing a fedora and why a green and red sweater?

SHANNON: You know, you wear sweaters when you're cold, but you know, Freddy Kruger, like, why is he wearing a sweater? Well, I guess it just hides all those souls in his chest, or whatever the heck it is. It's just weird. There's something just, you know, just kind of visually disturbing about this kind of dirty sweater that. You know, if it was bright green and red, you know, it'd be like, ooh, Christmas time, you know? And, and the fedora, and I don't know if that is a purposeful link to say like Indiana Jones, who really like owned the fedora, right? That was his thing. His fedora, his whip. There it is.

But now you have Freddy Krueger wearing a fedora, and his fedora is kind of dirty and beat up looking. So it's kind of like a soiling of this pure thing.

And Neil says, when it comes to the silhouette of Freddy Krueger as a character, we can't forget the performance of Robert Englund and his body language.

NEILL: And if you look, he nearly always kind of drops the shoulder, you know, hangs that back. So there's a very kind of nonchalance to him, even though he is doing these killing or, you know, and he's setting things up and, and he's playing games, you know.

There was an arms race of slasher films in the '80s. Michael Myers in the Halloween franchise. Jason Voorhees in the Friday the 13th movies. JR says they were silent killers. Not Freddy.

JR: He talks, I mean, he is, he is a Chatty Cathy <laugh>, right? Like, like you get the sense that, that Michael and Jason, there are, there are reasons ascribed to their motivations, but no one ever interviews them. No one ever talks to them. They don't speak, right? There's almost these like mindless killing machines. Freddy is not, he, he taunts his victims. He plays with them. And because he exists in dreams, uh, he stages these elaborate set pieces for deaths. Uh, you again get the sense that it's not about the kill for him, it's about the performance.

In fact, looking at this character, I find it amazing how campy he is compared to modern villains. And he wasn't shrouded in mystery. I mean, he hosted his own TV show in the '80s. You could call his 1-900 number just to hear him talk.

FREDDY: Once again foolish friends, Freddy Krueger is on your phone. Dial this number now. I've got some tales to tell, Freddy's favorite bedtime stories!

Now, earlier I mentioned The Dark Triad of criminal psychology which is narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. When it comes to Freddy Krueger, Yannie says:

YANNIE: He clearly has all three.

He hit the Dark Trifecta. That's why he's so compelling and repulsive.

YANNIE: Evil has always had a sexy problem because people who are not evil have always looked at people who do whatever they want with some admiration or some fascination. Everybody to a certain extent, often feels like that they would rather have

more of these traits. I'd rather be more confident. I'd rather have less doubt. I'd rather have more fun.

I think Freddy Krueger is tapping into another anxiety from the 1980s: Stranger Danger. Gen Xers were free range kids with keys to get in the house. When our parents were gone, it was great feeling independent fending for ourselves. At the same time, there were pictures of missing children on our milk cartons, and there were tons of public service announcements about not getting into cars with strangers.

But Yannie thinks:

YANNIE: The best villain is somebody who you don't see coming. You know, it's somebody who, again, you know, you let in, you give a certain amount of closeness to, and then when it's too late, that's when they reveal themselves. You know, the impossibility of escape for things like, you know, Freddy Krueger and things like that, Nightmare on Elm Street. The impossibility of escape comes from sort of a supernatural contingent. That kind of supernaturalness is something that is easier for us to dismiss as not being real.

You know, I just flashed on, and this is actually in a way, the perfect ending of the, of the '80s, 1991, Silence of Lambs. Jodie Foster goes down to the murderer's row, you see these scary looking guys that are like, arrrgh! Freddy Krueger could've been one of them. And then at the end is Anthony Hopkins, polite gentleman.

HANNIBAL: *Good morning.*

I feel like that was maybe the moment, that scene, when the '80s villain was over.

YANNIE: A hundred percent. Someone like that who people would actually not just, not necessarily see coming, but somebody who they would invite into their most intimate space, which is your mind, Freddy Krueger certainly under any circumstances you would not let in.

Yeah, I mean, I feel like in many ways we've made the argument why these villains should stay in the '80s. <laugh>

YANNIE: <laugh>. I think so.

Um, but is there anything, uh, that you kind of miss? You're like, you know, but one thing, those '84 villains had villains today just don't have whatever.

YANNIE: I don't know. I like a good slasher flick. I really do. Characters now, you know, there's, there's a hyperrealism trend and things like that that sort of precludes a lot of

that supernaturalness. But the problem is, is I haven't seen anything really original in that vein for a very long time.

Today villains tend to go into one direction or the other. They're either much more realistic in their appearance and methods, or they're completely CGI and fantastical. And they're not purely evil either. A lot of them have sympathetic backstories or noble goals gone awry. JR has noticed this.

JR: You know, in, in the wake of Game of Thrones and Breaking Bad and the, you know, the age of the anti-hero, uh, you can't have a villain that is just purely evil. I mean, honestly, unless you do something like The Dark Knight's Joker.

But after we saw Heath Ledger's Joker, we got Joaquin Phoenix's Joker, who starts out as a well-meaning character that is abused in a cruel and uncaring world. The villains of '84 were bad to the bone.

JR: You know, honestly, when I would look at someone like The Terminator or Freddy, I almost think of them more as a monster than a villain. I think especially The Terminator, I'll just use him because I think he's such a good example. He is, he functions more like the shark in Jaws than, you know, a Walter White character or, or even a Loki.

But I feel like it's interesting what you're saying because yes, when you think about it, all of them are monsters by that definition. And yet today I feel like monster immediately is sad, you know, sympathetic. No, Dr. Frankenstein is the real villain.

JR: <laughs>

The monster was misunderstood. You know, it's like now or In The Shape Of Water, you know, I feel like now in the Tim Burton and Guillermo del Toro, uh, world of genre, monsters immediately have to be seen as sympathetic.

JR: You're right. I think that that is a reflection of the desire to, again, I think rightfully critique our rush to demonize, but I do think a monster story is a different kind of, pardon the pun beast, than a story with a villain in it. There was something really refreshing about the conflict and the drama coming from, can we come together to defeat this? Not: can we understand that thing and work together with it? Because I think something like climate change, right? That is not a villain we can negotiate with. That is a thing that we have to come together to work against, to stop.

If only climate change had a cool costume and great quips.

That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Shannon Shea, Neill Gorton, Yannie ten Brooke and JR Forasteros. You can hear more of JR

Forasteros in a two-part episode we did in 2019 about why villains today are more nuanced. Those episodes are **My So Called Evil Plan** and **Can Villains Be Good?** If you'd like to hear more from Neill Gorton, I interviewed him in 2020 about his career as a creature makeup designer.

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