

DIRECTOR STUDY: PETER JACKSON

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THE EARLY YEARS (– 1992)

Good Taste Made Bad Taste

City Associates 1988. Director Tony Hiles. Duration 23:39

(Bad Taste extracts – Classification Rating: R16)

Peter Jackson was born in Pukerua Bay just outside of Wellington, New Zealand on 31 October 1961, which was Halloween. Because he didn't have siblings he had to find ways of entertaining himself. He believes this developed his imagination. As a child Jackson made movies with his parent's 8 mm camera: Cold finger (a Bond spoof), The Dwarf Patrol, The Valley, Revenge of the Grave Walker (a zombie film) and World War One and Two epics.

At 17 he left school and tried to get a job in the New Zealand film industry. When he failed, he took a position at the Evening Post Newspaper as a typesetter, and bought a spring wound Boltex 16 mm camera. In his weekends he began making the short film Roast of the Day with his friends and work colleagues. Over the next four years the film evolved into what became the full length feature film Bad Taste.

Bad Taste would not have been completed if Jackson had not eventually received financial support from the New Zealand Film Commission who paid for the film's post production. While most of the commission were not impressed with Jackson's low culture splatter, Jim Booth, the commission's CEO encouraged him (he eventually left the commission to work for Jackson).

In this extract Jackson talks about the making of Bad Taste and extracts from his earlier films are also shown.

Bad Taste (trailer)

Wingnut Films 1988. Duration 2.10

(Bad Taste extracts – Classification Rating R16)

Giles is a charity collector who is attacked by humanoid aliens in a deserted rural town. Meanwhile Astro Investigation and Defence (the Boys) are sent by Internal Affairs in response to a distress call coming from the region. They find the entire town have been murdered and packed into cardboard boxes to be sent to the alien's planet and used in the fast food chain 'Crumb's Crunchy Delight'.

Bad Taste (extract)

Wingnut Films 1988. Duration 12.19

(Bad Taste extracts – Classification Rating R16)

Jackson uses amateur special effects to achieve graphic depictions of blood and guts, but never takes himself too seriously; Astro Investigation and Defence are referred to as "The Boys" and the aliens are mistaken for "Ministry of Works guys".

Note also Jackson's sweeping use of the camera as it pans back and forth across the landscape, and to and fro from victim to attacker.

Meet The Feebles (trailer)

Wingnut Films 1990. Duration 2.19

(Meet the Feebles extracts – Classification Rating R16)

The cast of Meet the Feebles Variety Hour are a motley crew: the nervous director Fox, the junkie knife thrower frog and Bletch, a cigar chomping walrus who thinks his lover Heidi the Hippo is having an affair with a Siamese cat Samantha.

Braindead (trailer)

Wingnut Films 1992. Duration 2.23

At the zoo Lionel's mother is bitten by a Sumatran rat monkey and turns into a zombie. Lionel tries to keep her safe and hide her condition from the world, but soon she starts to zombify others. Hiding the zombies in his house, he is able to control them temporarily with animal

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tranquillisers. When his Uncle discovers the corpses he blackmails Lionel into giving up his mother's estate and plans to hold a big party there for all of his friends. Lionel thinks everything is under control when he gives the zombies poison but the poison turns out to be animal stimulant and the zombies run amok.

Braindead (extract)

Wingnut Films. Duration 8.21

(Braindead extracts – Classification Rating R16)

Braindead's opening scene is essentially an early version of King Kong's capture on Skull Island, and interestingly it begins in exactly the same way as Bad Taste: with a picture of the Queen (Archival footage is also used in the opening sequence of Heavenly Creatures).

Jackson seems to have a particular pre-occupation with 1950's settings – perhaps this is because horror can be juxtaposed so perfectly with the conservative family values of this age.

This extract shows us how Jackson employs special effects to create over the top scenes of gore, and also illustrates how he uses energetic camera movement to sweep the viewer into his fantasy world.

THE WETA DIGITAL PHENOMENON

The Edge: Series 2 Programme 7 (extract)

Gibson Group 1994. Duration 4:27

Bad Taste was completed in 1987 and launched at Cannes. It became an instant cult classic. Jackson then secured a Hollywood lawyer and agent. Despite getting offers to move to LA., Jackson stayed in New Zealand and began working on the half hour puppet film Meet the Feebles with scriptwriters Fran Walsh, her then partner Stephen Sinclair, designer Richard Taylor and puppeteer George Port. A rough cut was taken to Cannes and a Japanese investor contributed \$250,000 to have the film completed.

Jackson then began working on Braindead, a zombie film which was released in 1991. It won 16 international science fiction awards including the prestigious Saturn Award.

To help with the special effects needed for his next film, Heavenly Creatures, Jackson formed WETA Digital with Port and Taylor in Miramar, Wellington. WETA stands for Wingnut Effects and Technical Allusions (interestingly it should be illusions, and was misspelt). This extract from the TV series The Edge outlines its formation.

Interview With Matt Aitken at Weta Digital (extracts)

New Zealand Film Archive 1998. Duration 4:14

Heavenly Creatures released in 1994, was a departure from Jackson's splatter films and a move into the thriller genre. It told the true story of Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme who were tried and convicted in Christchurch during the 1950's for the murder of Pauline's mother, Honora Parker. This was the film that made Jackson respectable in the eyes of the New Zealand Film Commission. It won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival. It also won Jackson a nomination for best screenplay at the Academy Awards.

It is interesting to note that if Jackson had been lured away from New Zealand by the pull of Hollywood, his special effects would have been too expensive to produce in the United States. Perhaps if this had happened Jackson would have faded into obscurity.

Jackson moved on to make his first big budget film, *The Frighteners*, which was backed by Universal.

Weta Digital Showreel

Weta Visual Effects Ltd. 199- . Duration 3:56

This backing also helped Jackson invest in the growth of WETA.

The following show reel illustrates the use of computer generated images and traditional special effects including examples used in Hollywood features, television and other New Zealand productions.

FEATURE FILM MAKING AFTER 1992

The Frighteners (trailer)

Wingnut Films 1996. Duration 2.02

Frank discovers he is psychic after a car accident and befriends three ghosts who help him in his exorcism business by haunting wealthy people's homes. When a series of murders take place Frank discovers he is able to foretell the next victim by seeing a number on their forehead. Increasingly under the police's suspicion, Frank must hunt down the real killer and clear his name.

The Frighteners (extract)

Wingnut Films 1996. Duration 8.15

The Frighteners opens with a camera sweeping in through the night window of a haunted house: a homage to the opening scene in Hitchcock's Psycho. Again the fast moving camera invites us into Jackson's world of make believe.

His use of special effects is still the predominant feature of his work with the ghost's form visible as it slides in and out of the wallpaper and linoleum. It has now become considerably more sophisticated through the use of Weta Digital.

Again Jackson uses the convention of archival footage, but here, unlike his other feature films, the footage is fabricated. A pre-cursor to Forgotten Silver.

Heavenly Creatures (extracts)

Wingnut Films 1994. Duration 10.38

Jackson begins the film with archival footage of 1950s Christchurch, and while these idyllic shots give authenticity to the narrative they are then contrasted starkly with brutality: a sweeping camera carries us through

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the bush with the girls as they run from the scene of their crime. Again Jackson blurs the lines between fantasy and reality.

This line is reiterated throughout the film as we are seduced by the use of special effects, intense colour and camera movement to cross over into the girls intense relationship and fantasy world Borovnia.

Behind the Bull: Forgotten Silver

Costa Botes 2001. Duration 22:00

The following clip is a documentary about the making of the 1995 mockumentary *Forgotten Silver*, completed before Jackson began production on *The Frighteners*. When *Forgotten Silver* screened in New Zealand many people were convinced that its subject, New Zealand filmmaker Colin Mackenzie, truly existed even though the content was ridiculous. The programme claimed for example that MacKenzie made the first feature

length 'talkie' (accidentally in Chinese). He built an entire city by himself in the West Coast bush to film a biblical epic, *Salome*, which was funded by the Communists and had to have all references to the bible taken out of it.

Holmes – Lord of the Rings Special (extract)

Television New Zealand 2003. Duration 9.43

The Frighteners was not the box office success that had been hoped for (post production had to be rushed to meet a release date and publicity promised a much different film from the one delivered). But it gave Jackson the experience to move on to an even more ambitious project :*The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy, a film adaptation of the Tolkien classic, backed by NewLine Productions. Jackson was interested in the project because he believed the fantasy genre had been let down by cinema and he wanted to correct this. He was the first director ever to direct three major feature films simultaneously.

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring was released in 2001 and received Academy Award nominations for Best Director and Best Film. The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers was released in 2002 and received an Academy Award nomination for Best Film. The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King was released in 2003. It won 11 Academy Awards and Jackson himself won Best Picture, Best Director and Best Adapted Screenplay securing his place in cinematic history. Return of the Kings also won the prestigious American Film Institute's Best Film Award, the Golden Globe Award and the David Lean Award for direction. It won 12 awards from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts.

In December of 2005 Jackson released a remake of the 1933 King Kong by Merian C. Cooper. This project, which was first discussed during the early 90s, was delayed because Godzilla and Mighty Joe Young were also in production. King Kong has always been one of Jackson's favourite films (along with the Bond films, The General, Goodfellas, Nightmare before Christmas and Dawn of the Dead).

Jackson's next project is a film adaptation of Alice Selbold's novel The Lovely Bones which is to set be released in 2008. It is another thriller about a murdered teenager who watches down from heaven as the lives of her loved ones unravel after her death.

In May 2005 Premier magazine named Peter Jackson the most powerful man in Hollywood.