

SHOCKER

SPECIAL FEATURE



RIDE THE LIGHTNING

by Adam Frazier

In *Shocker*, Wes Craven's 1989 follow-up to *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, a serial killer on death row becomes a virtual phantom, wielding the airwaves to extend his murderous rampage.

When the State flips the switch, Pinker doesn't die. Instead, he becomes a supernatural slayer composed of pure electricity; an amalgam of Electro and Freddy Krueger. Horace Pinker

(Mitch Pileggi) transfers his consciousness to the prison doctor (Janne K. Peters) and escapes to continue his murderous ways – entering his victims' living rooms through their television sets.

In many ways, *Shocker* is the B-side to *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Horace Pinker and Freddy Krueger are both slashers of suburbia. Jonathan Parker and Nancy Thompson are teenagers who have weird dreams about deranged killers, and their non-believing fathers – both police officers – are directly connected



to the boogeyman's supernatural "death."

Jonathan (Peter Berg) is a combination of *Elm Street's* "Final Girls." Like Heather Langenkamp's Nancy and fellow Dream Warriors Kristen (Patricia Arquette) and Alice (Lisa Wilcox), Jonathan can pull things out of his dreams. He also uses an elaborate set of snares and booby traps to bring his supernatural adversary into the real world, where Pinker's powers are bound to the limitations of reality.

There are several scenes that – whether intentionally or accidentally – reference the *Elm Street* series. For starters, Pinker's first victim is played by Heather Langenkamp herself! Later in the film, when Pinker sells his soul to the devil, the staging of the scene is reminiscent of Jennifer's death in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*. Freddy transforms into a television set (mounted on the wall, just like the TV in Pinker's cell) and slams the girl's head into the screen, electrocuting her.

In one of his dreams, Jonathan has a vision of his dead girlfriend covered in blood, like Tina in *Elm Street*. The dream ends with him falling back into his waterbed, which has become an actual pool of water. The scene recalls Joey's death in *A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master*, minus the bikini babe and a one-liner about wet dreams.

According to John Wooley's *Wes Craven: The Man and his Nightmares*, the genesis of *Shocker* began with an idea for a television series Craven pitched to the Fox network.

Titled *Dream Stalker* (C'MON WES!), the show would feature a young psychic who could track murderers through his dreams, and a killer who could take over other people's bodies.

While Fox passed on the series, elements from *Dream Stalker* would be recycled for *Shocker*, as well as Craven's 1990 made-for-TV-movie *Night Visions*, which aired on NBC and also starred Mitch Pileggi.

The idea of media manipulation – that watching TV can kill you – makes *Shocker* rather unique, despite all the countless similarities to the *Elm Street* series. After Pinker's spirit is pulled out of its host body, he "recharges" using an electrical outlet and is sucked into the circuitry of Jonathan's house. He re-emerges later for a rooftop battle with Lt. Parker and Jonathan, where he evades arrest by transmitting himself into a satellite dish.

While Pinker continues his killing spree, Jonathan and his friends devise a plan to capture the virtual phantom and cancel his broadcast. As Jonathan sleeps, Pinker climbs out of the television (like Samara in *The Ring*) and possesses the teenager's Vibro-O-Matic massage chair. When Jonathan awakens and sits in the chair, the armrests wrap around him, and Pinker delivers yet another Freddy-esque zinger, "This Barcalounger's gonna kick your ass, boy!"

From there, *Shocker* flies completely off the rails. Jonathan and Pinker dive inside the television to do battle, where they crash the regularly

scheduled programming. First Pinker chases Jonathan through World War II newsreel footage. The channel changes and they're smack-dab in the middle of an Alice Cooper music video, which quickly changes to James Whales' 1931 film, *Frankenstein*. Jonathan and Pinker fight up and down the entire lineup, inserting themselves into

(literally) and no longer fears the supernatural slayer.

Jonathan places his dead girlfriend's magical necklace - that he pulled out of a dream - over the news camera and dives through the lens. He flies through space and time before getting spit out back into his bedroom. When Pinker tries to follow, his electro-charged soul

(\$16 million at the box office) and poor reception from critics and audiences alike, no sequel was made.

Shocker never turned into the successful franchise Craven hoped it would be. Instead, he went on to reinvent the slasher genre with 1996's *Scream*, which has since spawned three theatrical sequels and



historical events such as the Hindenburg disaster and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Hell, they even end up in an episode of *Leave It to Beaver*!

The chase leads Pinker right into Jonathan's trap - a room where a television news camera waits to capture the killer. Jonathan uses the remote control to fast-forward and rewind Pinker, making the once threatening maniac bounce around the room like a Looney Tunes character. Like Nancy in *Elm Street*, Jonathan takes away the boogeyman's power - he is in control

is trapped in the camera. The film ends rather abruptly, with Pinker threatening that he will find a way out of this prison, and as Jonathan walks off into the sunset, his neighborhood suffers a blackout.

Craven and Universal Pictures had hoped the film would become a successful franchise like the *Elm Street* series. Craven would have creative control over sequels and a bigger cut of the profits, which he missed out on with the *Elm Street* films. Unfortunately, due to an unremarkable commercial performance (*Shocker* grossed

an upcoming MTV television series.

Recently, both Craven and Peter Berg have expressed interest in a *Shocker* remake. A 21st century take on media manipulation - with Horace Pinker using WiFi, YouTube, and social media to kill text-happy teens - could actually be pretty interesting. Whether Pinker ever makes it to Snapchat or not, we'll always have 1989's *Shocker*, a film with strong ideas but a weak signal.