In the past few years, there has been a massive misunderstanding on the part of the bigger studios of what makes for a good horror movie. Especially with the advent of the found footage genre. it has become easier for studios churn out cheap, lazily written movies that usually feature obvious jump scares that tend to be less frightening and more like those obnoxious pieces of shocking gum.

Great horror is more than just jolting the audience at random moments. Most of the iconic horror movies that stand the test of time work because they keep the audience in the dark. You don’t know what’s terrorizing the Torrance family in *The Shining*. You don’t know what’s transforming Regan in *The Exorcist*. You can’t see the shark in *Jaws*.

Anyone can punch you in the face, but these are films that shock you to your core because they draw you into the movie with wonderful, sympathetic characters. But just when you become attached, they put those characters in chaotic, unpredictable situations that as a result make the audience feel completely helpless. When you watch a good horror movie, you should feel like you’re sinking deeper and deeper and the movie is clutching you so hard that you can’t escape its grasp.

With that in mind, a horror movie played last weekend at the Seattle International Film Festival called *Under the Shadow.* It’s an Iranian movie set in late-1980s Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war. Shideh is a mother living with her daughter in an apartment in the war-torn city while her husband is off giving medical attention in the war.

As the tenants begin to leave the apartment complex to seek shelter in less destructive areas of the country, Shideh finds that she and her daughter are being haunted by an evil presence that intends to tear the family apart.

While the movie may sound like a typical paranormal film and while it’s a damn good ghost story on its own merits, it’s more supernatural elements aren’t what makes *Under the Shadow* an excellent example of horror done properly. What makes Under the Shadow unique is the way that its real life elements become unsettling to watch.

Shideh’s life, regardless of the monster stalking her, is already hellish. She leads an empty, isolated existence in an extremely repressive time and place for women. She is living in a society that condemns women for speaking out, being independent or doing anything that isn’t subservient to men.

The movie gives you a ton of glimpses into how difficult it is for Shideh to be alive in this era.

When she was younger, she was on her way to becoming a doctor and it appears that she might’ve been the best in her class. But she took part in some protests during the Iranian revolution and has since been blacklisted from getting her medical degree.

Her husband doesn’t respect her free will and wants her to give up her hopes of ever getting the career that she desires. When she makes a bold choice later on in order to save her daughter, he becomes verbally abusive to her over the phone.

There’s a point later on in the movie where she escapes the apartment after being chased by the ghost and she’s almost immediately chastised by a group of men because she forgot to wear her hijab outside. Almost every male character she meets in the film talks down to her and tells her what to do.

And beyond that, she lives in constant fear of missile attacks.

Perhaps the scariest thing in the film involves these loud sirens that go off when bombs are about to hit. When the alert happens, the tenants have maybe a minute tops to get to the bunker before a bomb could potentially hit the apartment and kill them.

The true horror in this film ends up being not the fantastical elements, but real life.

By the third act, Shideh is trapped, not just by the ghosts that are haunting her, but by the shaky and unstable reality that’s suffocating her. She doesn’t know where she can go to protect her family from war and she has nowhere she can run to where she can become the doctor that her mom believed that she could be.

She tries to ignore everything and she tries to tell people that everything is okay, but the demon finally forces her to face all of the problems that are killing her inside. The ghosts symbolize all the things she’s managed to put away at the back of her head in order to live with what she’s going through.

Without spoiling the entire story, the film finds some sense of hope. While it may be too late for Shideh to become a doctor, she can put her ambitions and her dreams into her daughter with the hopes that someday, her daughter may be able to be whatever she wants to be.

Shideh’s own dreams may be a lost cause, but she can still give her heart and soul to someone who may have a fighting chance at changing the world. It’s bleak for sure, but at least it’s something.

Horror works by making the audience feel confused and trapped. *Under the Shadow* takes this lesson to heart by putting the film in the midst of a historical event where people were confused and trapped. Even if Shideh can get away from the literal ghosts that are haunting her, she still can’t get away from the real world surrounding her.

That is true terror.

While foreign films can be difficult to find, you should definitely search for *Under the Shadow.* If you’re a fan of horror movies, this is a thrilling example of the genre executed brilliantly.