Modern horror films rely on computers to provide the terror. But Michael Hewitt isn't scared.

I want my mummy

When, aged eight or nine, I saw my first horror films on late night television, my best defence against an advancing werewolf or mummy was to hide behind the settee. This served me well for some years, until I began watching these films in the cinema. Today, however, there's no need. Thanks largely to computer-generated special effects, so-called 'horror' films are no longer frightening.

For initial compare-and-contrast purposes, let's take the 1931 and the 1999 versions of *The Mummy*. In both cases, said embalmee is an Egyptian high priest, Imhotep, who's been buried alive for 3,000 years. Understandably, the whole business has miffed him exceedingly, so when, by accident, he gets resurrected, he goes off on a killing spree. The 1931 film has, basically, just one special effect: Boris Karloff swathed in latex bandages, tottering around rather sedately. The modern day mummy, though, is a highly gooey, computer-animated corpse with bits dropping off, afflicted by

> **The modern day mummy, though, is a highly gooey COMPUTER-ANIMATED CORPSE with bits dropping off, afflicted by flesh-eating beetles**

flesh-eating beetles. He moves at a fair lick, too, and can transform himself into sandstorms and so forth. Which is impressive. But frightening?

OK, you probably wouldn't want to be stuck in a lift with him, but there's no real sense of threat or danger. Not to those of us in the audience, anyhow. (It doesn't help matters that, over the course of the film he gradually metamorphosizes into Israeli actor, Arnold Vosloo, who looks more than a little like a chubby version of Billy Zane.) Karloff, by contrast, is genuinely creepy from the start, and exudes menace throughout, until he crumbles into a satisfying pile of dust.

Let's now take another example: the 1981 film *An American Werewolf in London* and its 1997 sequel, *An American Werewolf in Paris*. The first has special effects by top makeup artist, Rick Baker. He used a series of highly-sophisticated, inflatable prosthetics to achieve the werewolf transformations. You really can imagine the end product wanting to chew your leg off. Indeed, Baker

got an Oscar for his efforts. Unfortunately, the CGI werewolves in the later film, for all their hi-tech wizardry, are rather tame. They look — inasmuch as one can gauge this sort of thing without actually having been introduced to the genuine article — highly realistic in a cross-breed, canine way. However, as long as I wasn't a lamp post or a tree, I wouldn't feel at all likely to be inconvenienced by them.

So what is it with the technology that's taking away the element of horror?

There are a couple of things happening. First off, in days of yore, special effects were expensive and difficult, and therefore had to be used sparingly. Consequently, lots of the essential action happened off camera. This meant that the audience had to engage their imaginations to fill in the gaps. And imagination, of course, correctly manipulated, is one of the most frightening things going. But with CGI technology, the special effects are relatively inexpensive and easy to produce, and so tend to be more in-your-face. Whereas Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* would give you a quick nip on the neck before the action cut to Dr Van Helsing sharpening a stake, the vampires in last year's *Blade* actually crunch, in close-up, into the carotid artery, and the camera lingers as the ensuing blood spray takes out the ceiling light fixtures. Nothing is left to the imagination, so there's nothing left for the imagination to do.

But the most important element of any horror film is suspension of disbelief. Rick Baker's werewolf transformations, though impressive, are obviously artificial. King Kong is obviously an animated puppet. Godzilla of the 1950s is obviously a man in a lizard suit. However, the audience enters into a tacit agreement with the film maker: Yes, I can see it isn't real, but for the next 90 minutes I will accept that it is. And because I accept that, I will accept any other absurdity you throw at me as being real. Result: the audience is engaged, thrilled, and, as they should be, scared.

Today's CGI effects, by contrast, are too realistic. When I see the mummy's internal organs pulsing away through his rotting flesh, or a skeleton popping out of its own flesh, my feeling isn't 'Yikes!' but 'Very clever — I wonder how that was done.' They've engrossed me in a text book sort of way, but failed to capture my imagination. Computers aren't necessarily the answer to everything.

Mike.hewitt@mjh1.demon.co.uk