

# Screams on Screens: Paradigms of Horror

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers a broad historical overview of the ideology and cultural roots of horror films. The genre of horror has been an important part of film history from the beginning and has never fallen from public popularity. It has also been a staple category of multiple national cinemas, and benefits from a most extensive network of extra-cinematic institutions.

Horror movies aim to rudely move us out of our complacency in the quotidian world, by way of negative emotions such as horror, fear, suspense, terror, and disgust. To do so, horror addresses fears that are both universally taboo and that also respond to historically and culturally specific anxieties. The ideology of horror has shifted historically according to contemporaneous cultural anxieties, including the fear of repressed animal desires, sexual difference, nuclear warfare and mass annihilation, lurking madness and violence hiding underneath the quotidian, and bodily decay. But whatever the particular fears exploited by particular horror films, they provide viewers with vicarious but controlled thrills, and thus offer a release, a catharsis, of our collective and individual fears.

## **Author Keywords**

Genre; taboo; ideology; mythology.

## **Introduction**

Insofar as both film and videogames are visual forms that unfold in time, there is no question that the latter take their primary inspiration from the former. In what follows, I will focus on horror films rather than games, with the aim of introducing video game scholars and gamers to the rich history of the genre in the cinema. I will touch on several issues central to horror and, I hope, will suggest some connections to videogames as well as hints for further reflection on some of their points of convergence. It is impossible to not acknowledge that horror videogames employ the iconography and conventions, visual strategies and narrative premises of the horror film. This is not to deny the importance of the literary tradition of horror, from Edgar Allan Poe and Bram Stoker to H.P. Lovecraft to Stephen King and Clive Barker.

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## The Horror Genre

Like all genre movies, horror films are today's equivalent of cultural myths. Traditionally, the term "myth" refers to a society's shared stories, usually involving gods and heroes, which explain the nature of the universe and the relation of the individual to it. In Western culture, myths, initially transmitted orally, then in print, and now in digitized images and sound, have been disseminated by mass culture since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Genre films, with their repetitions and variations of a few basic plots, are prime instances of mass-mediated contemporary myth. As film scholar Thomas Sobchack has written, "The Greeks knew the stories of the gods and the Trojan War in the same way we know about hoodlums and gangsters and G-men and the taming of the frontier and the never-ceasing struggle of the light of reason and the cross with the powers of darkness, not through first-hand experience but through the media" (Sobchack, 2003: 103). Stories of fear and the unknown are timeless, no doubt beginning around the prehistoric campfire, just as John Houseman dramatically recounts the scary legend of Antonio Bay to the engrossed children in the opening scene of John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1980). In mass-mediated society, we huddle around movie screens instead of campfires for our mythic tales.

Significantly, while other genres have cycled in and out of popularity, horror has been an important part of film history from the beginning. With roots in such pre-cinematic forms such as medieval woodcuts, Grand Guignol theatre and the Gothic novel, horror made a smooth transition to film in the one-reelers of Georges Méliès, the first pioneer of fantastic cinema. By 1903 Melies had made films with monsters, ghosts, devils, and other assorted spirits—all creatures that were to become central to the horror film as it would develop over time. Unlike such genres as the musical and the gangster film, which had to wait for the technological development of synchronized sound, horror movies were already an important genre in the silent era. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was filmed as early as 1910 by the Edison Company—and no less than 80 times since. By 1927, before the arrival of sound, audiences were familiar enough with horror conventions that they were being parodied in the first film adaptation of *The Cat and the Canary*.

The genre's history is rich enough that there have been numerous attempts—stabs, one might say—at identifying comprehensive but workable categories for the wide variety of horror films. To mention just two examples: Roy Huss and T. J. Ross offer the broad subgenres of Gothic Horror, Psychological Thriller, and Monster Terror (Huss and Ross, 1972: 1-10), while Will Rockett suggests The Slasher, Bad Science, Supernatural Horror, and Supranatural Horror (Rockett, 1988: 32-43). Still, regardless of the taxonomy, as Vivian Sobchack admits, "The creature film sits (awkwardly, for some) between horror and SF" (Sobchack, 1980: 47), depending in part on the film's attitude toward or treatment of the monsters. This is certainly true of the two schemes mentioned above, and a point to which I'll return shortly.

Horror has been a staple category not only of Hollywood production throughout its history, but of other national cinemas as well. For example, most familiar to North American audiences is probably Hammer Horror, named after Hammer Studios in the UK. Beginning with *The Curse of Frankenstein*, directed by Terence Fisher in 1957, Hammer went on through the 1960s to produce a substantial series of horror films that revisited the classic movie monsters, including Frankenstein's creature, Dracula, and the Mummy. The Hammer horror films revitalized the genre by reinterpreting

as well as updating its traditional gothic iconography with a bold use of colour and a modern dose of sexual content, including liberal attention to breasts and buttocks. This emphasis on sexuality only brought to the foreground material that before had been more subtextual than overt in the genre.

In Italy, the giallo, graphic thrillers and horror films, flourished in the 1950s and 1960s. Predating slasher films, the giallo (or “yellow” movie) took its name from the color of the covers of pulp detective novels published in Italy after World War 2. The giallo includes both police films (giallo-poliziesco) and horror films (giallo-fantastico), featuring an overtly expressionist stylization, as seen in the films of cult directors Mario Bava and Dario Argento. Japanese horror has a history that well precedes the current wave of J-Horror, beginning with silent films like *A Page of Madness* (1926) and including art films like Kenji Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu monogatari* (*Tales of Ugetsu*, 1953). And there is also a pronounced tradition of horror in other national cinemas including Holland, Russia, Thailand, Mexico, Spain, Australia and New Zealand<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, many of these national horror traditions have become more familiar to international audiences, due to the rise of global film distribution cartels, increased multinational film financing, and the geopolitical decline of rigid national boundaries.

Furthermore, horror, rivalling only SF in this regard, has the most extensive network of extra-cinematic institutions devoted to it of any other genre. These institutions include fanzines, from Forrest J. Ackerman’s *Famous Monsters of Filmland* in the 1950s to *Rue Morgue* today; annual conventions in cities across North America; a proliferation of websites devoted to horror, including websites exclusively devoted to horror conventions; and social gatherings such as Halloween parties and annual zombie walks. The zombie walks, often sponsored for charity, included one in 2001 involving more than 1000 participants slouching toward Pittsburgh’s Monroeville Mall, which had served as the location for George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

### Conceptualizing Horror

Given the ubiquity of the genre across time and space, we might begin our overview by considering for a moment the nature of horror in horror films. Interestingly, horror is one of the few genres that are defined in terms of its intended affect. While some genres such as the crime film, science fiction, and the western are defined by setting and narrative content, others, such as pornography, comedy, suspense and horror, are defined or conceived around particular emotional responses. Thus Linda Williams has referred to melodrama, porn, and horror as “body genres”—not because of the phase of “body horror” movies, or movies focusing on the mutilation of the human body (Brophy, 1986: 8), but because of the strong physical response elicited by each: tears in the case of melodrama, sexual arousal in pornography, and fear in horror (Williams, 2003). The word “horror” itself derives, significantly, from the Latin “orur,” to describe the physical sensation of bristling, of one’s hair standing on end. So important are the physiological responses in these genres that the extent to which films produce them in viewers is commonly used as a determining factor in judging how good these movies are. A “good” porn film is one that succeeds in sexual stimulation, just as a “good” horror movie is, for many viewers, simply one that succeeds in scaring them; a bad one, conversely, is one that doesn’t.

But just what is this emotion called “horror”? It is, obviously, “Fear caused by the threat of violent disaster” (Rockett, 1988: 43) or death, but the term is often used interchangeably and confusingly with “terror.” Thus, for example, S.S. Praver (1980) describes terror as the “principal ingredient” of horror suggesting that terror is but one form of horror, while James B. Twitchell (1985) makes an ontological distinction by claiming that “the etiology of horror is always in dreams, while the basis of terror is in actuality” (14). Twitchell’s distinction suggests that imagination is involved in horror, while terror is produced by empirical perception; but this is virtually the opposite of dictionary definitions, which tend to identify horror with an almost physical loathing and terror with the more imaginative and anticipatory dread. Hence terror in the past was associated with the transcendent, the awesome, and the Romantic notion of the sublime, while horror was seen to involve mere loathing or repugnance (Rockett, 1988: 45). Certainly Stephen King distinguishes between the two in his book *Danse Macabre*, when he remarks that “I recognize terror as the finest emotion . . .and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I’ll go for the gross out. I’m not proud” (1981: 37).

We might go on to distinguish, in both movies and the real world, between such emotions as horror, fear, suspense, terror, and disgust, all of which involve somewhat different but overlapping sensations. But the more important point for our purposes here is to note that different horror movies aim to elicit all or any of these responses to varying degree. From the revulsion generated by the sight of a live sea turtle being dismantled in *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) to the terror of the unseen in *Poltergeist*, (1982), horror seeks to rudely move us out of our complacency in the quotidian world.

Now, if horror movies seek to evoke a wide range of unpleasant sensations in their spectators, what is horror’s object? What is it, exactly, that horrifies us, at least according to the movies? As a broad answer, we might say that horror addresses fears that are both universally taboo and that also respond to historically and culturally specific anxieties. Horror movies exploit timeless themes of sex and death, the self and the soul, and our own beastly inner nature – fears that exist within our collective unconscious – as well as more topical fears such as, for example, atomic radiation in the 1950s, environmental contamination in the 1970s and 1980s, or, more recently, post-911 tourist horror with films such as *Touristas* (2006), *The Ruins* (2008), and the two *Hostel* films (2005, 2007).

Throughout the history of the horror film, much of its imagery, whatever specific embodiment it may take in a particular movie, presents our fears in the form of transgressed boundaries. The creatures of horror are often undead, neither alive nor dead, or unnatural—mutation, the result of bad science, or originating from a world beyond ours. So the horror film features monsters that cannot be named: *The Thing* (1951, 1982), *Them!* (1954), *The Stuff* (1985), and *It: The Terror from Beyond Space* (1958). As Donald A. Wandrei wrote in his 1930 horror tale “Something from Above”: “It is not so much the things we know that terrify us as it is the things we do not know, the things that break all known laws and rules, the things that come upon us unaware and shatter the pleasant dream of our little world” (qtd. in Westfahl, 2005: 121).

More theoretically, Barbara Creed and others have applied philosopher Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection, from her book *Powers of Horror*, to the horror film. For Kristeva, abjection is “that which does not respect borders, positions, rules, that which disturbs identity, system, order” (1982: 4). As

Creed notes, “the ultimate in abjection is the corpse. The body protects itself from bodily wastes such as feces, blood, urine, and pus by ejecting these substances . . . The body extricates itself from the places where they fall, so that it might continue to live” (1996: 39). Thus, for Kristeva the corpse is “the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. ‘I’ is expelled” (1982: 3-4). The idea of abjection and the violation of borders are crucial to a wide range of horror films.

## Ideology of Horror

The first significant cycle of horror films appeared in German expressionist cinema, a movement that began with the influential *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene in 1920. Its plot involves an evil mesmerist, the Caligari of the film’s title, who forces a somnambulist to go forth under hypnosis and do his bidding by committing murder. The film contains almost no right angles, with distorted buildings, streets, and doorways; shadows were painted directly on the walls and floors rather than created by lighting; and the make-up and acting are highly stylized. The film’s striking design visualizes the madness of the inmate in the insane asylum who narrates the story to a visitor (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920)

*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was a significant international hit, and it inspired many films to follow. Characteristic techniques of German expressionist cinema include an emphasis on extreme angles, chiaroscuro lighting and heavy shadows, distorting lenses or sets, and stylized acting and makeup. The films were shot mostly within the confines of the studio, with an artificial look that deliberately sought to exclude the natural world and thus lent the films an eerie, claustrophobic ambience. A specific period or movement of German silent cinema in the 1920s, German expressionism eschewed realism in favour of projecting onto the exterior world abstract representations of intense inner emotion, whether of characters in the narrative or of the artists themselves. Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), for example, one of the first films to present a convincing portrait of a serial killer, repeatedly shows images characterized by rigid geometrical patterns, suggesting both how Beckert, memorably played by Peter Lorre in the role that launched him to international stardom, is both entrapped within his own murderous psyche and by a society that will mercilessly seek to eliminate him.

German expressionism was a style ideally suited to the horror film, and many of the films dealt with the popular horror themes of madness and the supernatural, including *Der Golem* (1920), two versions of *The Student of Prague* (1926) - a doppelganger story in the manner of Poe’s “William Wilson”, *Nosferatu* (1922), the first adaptation of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1898), and *Faust* (1926), both directed by F.W. Murnau. Production of expressionist films in Germany peaked in the mid-1920s, and the movement dissipated in the early 1930s with the coming of sound, the rise to power of the Nazi party, and the emigration of many German directors, cinematographers, actors, and other film workers to the United States. Integrating into the Hollywood studio system, they contributed significantly to the development and look of film noir in the 1940s, but before that, the horror film in

the 1930s. Their influence is especially pronounced in the cycle of horror movies produced at Universal Studios, including James Whale's 1931 version of *Frankenstein*, starring Boris Karloff, and Tod Browning's *Dracula*, starring Bela Lugosi in the same year. The Universal films were heavily influenced by the *mise-en-scène* of German expressionism. *The Mummy* (1932), another Universal Karloff vehicle, was directed by German cinematographer Karl Freund, who had photographed *Der Golem* and Fritz Lang's classic science fiction opus *Metropolis* (1926), among others, before coming to Hollywood in 1929. Universal was run by Carl Laemmle, himself born in Germany, and many of the studio's horror films were produced by his son, Carl Jr.

For the German film scholar Siegfried Kracauer, writing shortly after the end of WW2, German expressionist cinema was both a harbinger and a cause of the rise of fascism in Germany. Kracauer's analysis is premised on the idea that movies are a reflection, an embodiment, of a country's national character because films are not the product of individuals but are collective work, and because, as he puts it, "films address themselves, and appeal, to the anonymous multitude. Popular films—or to be more precise, popular screen motifs—can therefore be supposed to satisfy existing mass desires" (1947: 5). As Kracauer goes on to argue, the avoidance of the real world in German expressionist cinema, both visually in the use of stylized studio sets, and narratively in the frequent appearance of monstrous figures like Caligari and Nosferatu, was symptomatic of the German people's turning away from political responsibility, from facing the real problems of the nation during a time of rampant inflation and social unrest, and instead embracing a powerful *ubermensch* who promised to solve those problems. Just as Caligari and Dracula drain their victims of their own will, Kracauer argued, so Hitler mesmerized the German people. Although today Kracauer's interpretations are likely to seem rather reductive, and his premise of a national character questioned as essentialist, his insights share with all subsequent critical analyses of the genre the fundamental assumption that horror films, like most genre movies, are more about the time and place in which they were made than when their plots are set, and that they reflect the values and ideology of the culture that produced them.

Less rooted in history and more on bourgeois ideology, British film critic Robin Wood published a number of essays in the late 1970s that set the critical agenda for much of the theory and analysis of horror that has seen print since. Wood follows upon the cultural semiology of French theorist Roland Barthes, who noted that "the petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other." (Barthes, 1972: 151) Applying this insight to horror, Wood claims that the genre's "true subject is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses" (Wood, 1979: 10, emphasis in the original). Wood argues that horror films repress desire within the self and disavow it by projecting it outward as a monstrous Other. Thus, the monster usually may be understood as a "return of the repressed," representing the re-emergence of that which we've sought to deny in disguised horrific form, like a neurotic symptom for Freud. This interpretation applies particularly well to horror stories and movies featuring the premise of the beast within, like *The Wolf Man* (1941) or the various versions of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. According to such a reading, the monster inevitably represents a challenge to dominant bourgeois values of capitalism and heterosexual monogamy, and so must be defeated by the male hero in order for him to take his proper place within patriarchy. As he does so, he successfully pairs with the inevitable female love interest, typically represented as the attractive daughter of the scientist or lovely lab assistant. Horror films such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954) follow this narrative pattern particularly well.

Wood goes on to offer a structural model of horror, informed by Freudian theory, built around a fundamental binary opposition of the normal and monstrous<sup>2</sup>. For Wood, the manner in which any given horror narrative resolves this conflict reveals its ideological orientation—whether it is conservative, endorsing dominant values, or progressive, challenging those values. As Wood writes, “In so far as horror films are typical manifestations of our culture, the dominant designation of the monster must necessarily be evil: what is repressed (in the individual, in the culture) must always return as a threat . . . ugly, terrible, obscene. Horror films, it might be said, are progressive precisely to the degree that they refuse to be satisfied with this simple designation—to the degree that, whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, they modify, question, challenge, seek to invert it” (1979: 23).

On the one hand, for example, there is a conservative horror film like Tod Browning’s *Dracula*. In the film, as in Bram Stoker’s source novel, the vampiric Count clearly represents an unleashed and frightening sexual energy that was strongly repressed during the Victorian era, when the novel was published (see Figure 2). Van Helsing, far from the superhero makeover he received for the 2004 film *Van Helsing*, is an avuncular paternal figure of benevolent patriarchy. A man of science, he uses deductive logic to determine that a vampire is at work, and combines it with action, enlisting the young hero, Jonathan Harker, to help destroy the threat of the vampire by tracking him to his own lair. The creature is destroyed and sexual desire effectively channelled into monogamous heterosexuality. In the film’s final shot, with Dracula now finally able to rest in peace, the young couple, Jonathan and Mina, ascend a long staircase to the heavenly light of day, accompanied by the promise of wedding bells on the soundtrack as the final fade-out suggests they will live happily ever after.

On the other hand consider *Freaks* (1932), another horror film directed by Browning that is quite progressive, made the following year for, astonishingly, MGM, a decidedly more “glossy” studio. The plot involves a travelling circus sideshow and the beautiful but cruel woman trapeze artist, Cleopatra, who exploits one of them for her own selfish purposes. She marries Hans, a midget, when she learns of his large inheritance, and then flaunts an affair with Hercules the strongman as she begins to slowly poison Hans. The “freaks,” who initially had accepted her, now unite as a group and, in the climax, they pursue Cleopatra in the rain, mud, and lightning to seek revenge. In the film’s coda, we are back at the circus midway, where a new attraction featuring Cleopatra, now horribly mutilated and without legs, is billed as “the human chicken.” Browning used a group of people with actual physical oddities to play the “freaks,” who despite being physically deformed, are inherently trusting and honorable people, while the real monsters are two of the “normal” members of the circus who conspire to murder for money. In their depiction as more humane than the physically normal characters, the so-called “freaks” anticipated the reinterpretation of the monstrous that would characterize many horror films from the 1960s onward (see Figure 3). At the time, though, this was a radical reversal which offered a social critique that was difficult for many viewers to accept: as a result, the film was severely cut for its American release, banned for thirty years in the UK, and



Figure 2. *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931).

virtually ended Browning's career, just as the release of *Peeping Tom* (1960) would do for Michael Powell in the UK almost thirty years later.

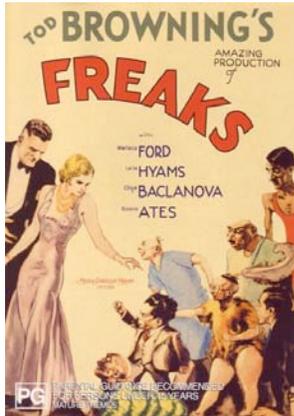


Figure 3. *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932).

Wood provides a list of specific Others that have informed the horror genre, including women, the proletariat, other cultures, ethnic groups, alternative ideologies or political systems, children, and deviations from sexual norms (1979: 9-11). All of these categories have been taken up by critics of horror over the last two decades in varying degree. For example, Mark Jancovich has persuasively linked the development of horror to the rise of the bourgeoisie and the dialectic of class. As Jancovich reminds us, Marx himself had used the vampire metaphor to discuss the workings of capital when he wrote that “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (qtd. Jancovich, 1992: 48). Jancovich goes on to downplay the story's sexual implications to interpret Stoker's *Dracula* as representing a middle-class fear of monopoly capitalism, against whom only a new ideology of collective action will provide

protection. Class conflict is taken up explicitly in *Andy Warhol's Dracula* (1974), and other class differences and struggles can be found in other horror films such as *The Stepford Wives* (1975, 2004), with its braindead trophy wives of rich executives, and *Candyman* (1992), in which the white researchers descend into the nether world of inner city Chicago, the Cabrini Green housing projects, where they encounter the eponymous monster (see Figure 4).

*Candyman*, of course, also translates American culture's racial fears and anxieties into the terms of horror. A classic horror film like *King Kong* (1933) evokes the fear of racial miscegenation in the figure of the dark ape, the beast in love with the (white) beauty, and Val Lewton's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) exploited the threat of the black men for white spectators. But explicit questions of race in horror emerged with the casting of a black actor as the hero in *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968: killed by redneck vigilantes at the end of the film, his body is unceremoniously tossed onto a bonfire in images that evoke the contemporary racial violence then erupting across America. Since then, a few other horror films, such as *Blacula* (1972), *The People Under the Stairs* (1991) and *Tales from the Hood* (1995), have rooted their horror in terms of racial difference and oppression with varying degrees of explicitness.

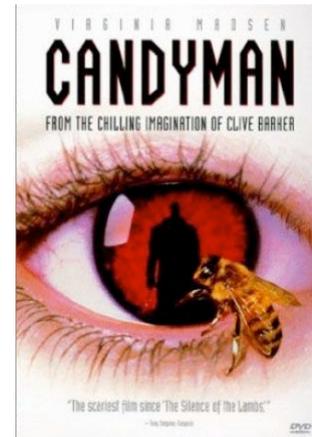


Figure 4. *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992).

As an example of “deviations from the sexual norm,” Harry Benshoff finds in the genre a consistently monstrous representation of queerness and challenges to normative masculinity. Benshoff argues that dominant ideology has depicted homosexuality in such a monstrous fashion that gay desire is seen inevitably as existing within people like an evil Mr Hyde or the Wolfman, striving to get out and run rampant across the countryside. When shown in movies, gays are often filtered through the iconography of the horror film. In *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958), for example, Benshoff notes that “a newly-wed husband, secretly a monster queer, finds it

preferable to meet other strange men in the public park rather than stay at home with his wife” (1997: 130-31). Benshoff views the husband as a fearful example of what he calls the threat of the “invisible homosexual,” which was a trope of popular discourse in the late 1950s.

Critics have given the most attention to the representation of women and to gender difference in the horror film. Some feminist critics have shown how horror monsters may be read as projections of masculine desire and anxiety over gender difference. As an example, consider the first version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, directed by Don Siegel in 1956. The film is typically discussed in relation to American contemporary culture in the 1950s. At a time when Americans felt particularly threatened from within as well as without, the film expresses both a fear of Communist infiltration and of creeping conformism. In the film’s narrative, as Miles and Becky, both recently divorced, struggle against the alien pod invasion that turns people in emotionless zombies, they fall in love. Miles is immediately attracted to Becky, but he is also threatened by her independence and self-assured sexuality. Miles defines Becky largely through her sexuality, which explains his remarkable voice-over comment after she turns into a pod person in the mineshaft and responds to his kiss with a cold, dispassionate stare, that “I never knew the meaning of fear until I kissed Becky.” As a pod, she refuses to be seduced by Miles’s kiss, making her sexual independence a threat to men and a monstrous embodiment of more independent women in postwar America. For similar reasons, women are often depicted as monstrous in horror movies, whether as *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), a *Frankenhooker* (1990), or a *She-Creature* (1956, 2001)—all variations on what Barbara Creed calls “the monstrous-feminine.”

In 1975, Laura Mulvey set the groundwork for feminist film theory in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she identified the gaze of the camera in classic narrative (essentially, Hollywood) film as gendered masculine. Embodying a male perspective, the camera, Mulvey argued, subjected women to male control and scrutiny, fetishizing their image or submitting them to a sadistic voyeurism or scopophilia (Mulvey, 1985). Her analysis would seem to apply particularly well to horror, where women are typically assaulted by both monster and camera. Even in *Alien* (1979) Sigourney Weaver’s Ripley, often described as “the most badass woman in film,” is nonetheless subjected to a voyeuristic gaze when the camera tilts along her body as she strips down to her improbably flimsy space underwear (see Figure 5). This happens, it seems, for no reason other than to punish her for her appropriation of masculine heroism and reposition her as an object of the male gaze.

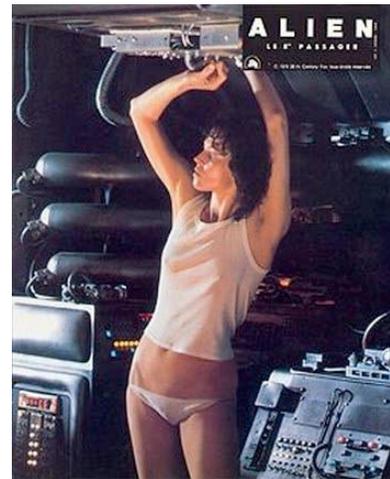


Figure 5. *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979).

Following from Wood’s perspective, many horror films are about anxieties over masculine performance, with women as the victims of male aggression. Mulvey’s theory is literalized in Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom*, which focuses on a male serial killer who uses a motion picture camera to capture on film the death of women by a knife that emerges from one of the camera’s tripod legs (see Figure 6). Two decades later, John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) spawned a cycle of slasher films in which, typically, psychotic males set about systematically killing an isolated group

of people, usually female teenagers. Often the killer is motivated by a past sexual trauma activated by the promiscuity of the victims he stalks, and the killings often seem to be a punishment for being sexually active or precocious, as is the case in the famous opening tracking shot of *Halloween*. Commonly a handheld camera is used to signify the male killer's point of view, again enacting Mulvey's idea of the camera as articulating a sadistic voyeurism.

Yet to what extent this use of the subjective camera encourages a seemingly male identification on the part of the viewer with the murderer rather than his victims has been a subject of much critical debate. As Carol J. Clover notes, abject fear in horror movies may tend to be gendered feminine (1992: 35), but that doesn't necessarily mean that horror movies cannot be reclaimed by a feminist reading. Clover argues that horror, and specifically the slasher film, is potentially empowering for women. For Clover, sadism is actually the lesser part of the horror experience in these films; rather, the movies work mainly to engage the viewer in the plight of the victim-hero, the figure who suffers pain and fright but eventually rises to vanquish the killer. Her emphasis is on this one female, or "final girl" as Clover calls her, typified by Ripley in *Alien* and Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* et al, who often survives the killer's rampage, transformed from terrified screamer to active heroine in the process (see Figure 7). Clover's approach raises interesting questions regarding the nature of spectator identification in horror, a debate which continues today. And perhaps it is because horror tends to raise questions about gender and its "natural" boundaries that women have been relatively active in the genre, first as consumers of gothic novels and later as makers of horror films<sup>3</sup>.

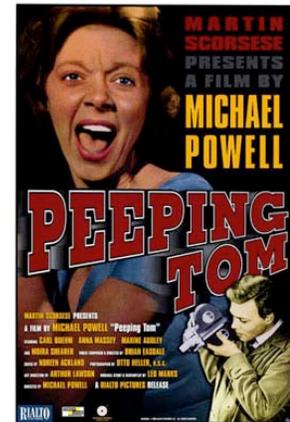


Figure 6. *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1960).



Figure 7. *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978).

While it is not true that the audience for horror is exclusively male, it is largely so; and it is the case that the demographic for horror films, as for the movies generally and also for videogames, is primarily young people, anywhere from pre-adolescence to mid-30s. This youth audience became dominant in the 1950s, when the youth or postwar baby-boomers emerged as a significant consumer group. Thomas Doherty notes that in postwar America, "the teen years became a unique transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, in some senses an autonomous and in most cases a privileged period in an individual's life," and that "their social position as teenagers was carefully nurtured and vigorously reinforced by the adult institutions around them" (1988: 44, 46) – including the cinema, which now sought to cater to them. Many horror films, from *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (1957) and *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) to *The Horror of Party Beach* (1964), were produced with the aim of appealing to teenage adolescents (see Figure 8). American International Pictures (AIP),

a distribution and production company founded in 1954, specialized in B movies – teen pics, exploitation films, and horror films such as *The She-Creature* (1956), *Terror from the Year 5000* (1958), and *Attack of the Puppet People* (1958). A few of these, including the campy *A Bucket of Blood* (1959) and *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), were directed by Roger Corman, who boasted

that he made one hundred movies in Hollywood and never lost a dime. One of the independent companies that showed the way in the 1950s toward the strategy of targeting market segments, AIP moved from distribution into production and eventually began making movies with higher production values, beginning in 1960 with Corman's *House of Usher*, a loose adaptation of Poe's short story, which starred Vincent Price and was shot in colour and Cinemascope.

There have been numerous horror movies focusing on terrorized teenagers, such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974, 2003), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and *The Faculty* (1998), all coming long after the graying of the boomer generation. For some critics, this continued adolescent emphasis of the horror film is explicable in terms of the monster's metaphorical significance. So, for example, Walter Evans has argued that horror films are particularly enjoyed by adolescent boys because in their awkwardness they can easily empathize with the monsters, who are also awkward social outcasts, and because they express in metaphoric form the physical changes involving secondary sex characteristics that occur with the onset of puberty. As Evans notes of the typical male adolescent, "Mysterious feelings and urges begin to develop and he finds himself strangely fascinated with disturbing new physical characteristics—emerging hair, budding breasts, and others—which, given the forbidding texture of the X-rated American mentality, he associated with mystery, darkness, secrecy, and evil" (1996: 54). The wolfman, for example, "sprouts a heavy coat of hair, can hardly be contained within his clothing, and when wholly a wolf is, of course, wholly naked" (Ibid.). Evans also points out that the wolfman's hairy palms (often featured prominently in transformation scenes) suggest the fate, foretold in folklore, for boys who masturbate (56). As for the vampire, Freudian disciple Ernest Jones wrote in his essay "On the Nightmare of Bloodsucking" that "a nightly visit from a beautiful or frightful being, who first exhausts the sleeper with passionate embraces and then withdraws from him a vital fluid: all this can point only to a natural and common process, namely to nocturnal emissions accompanied with dreams of a more or less erotic nature. In the unconscious mind blood is commonly an equivalent for semen..." (1972: 59). Certainly horror films do function as adolescent rites of passage and socialization, although such theories alone clearly do not account for the appeal of all horror films.

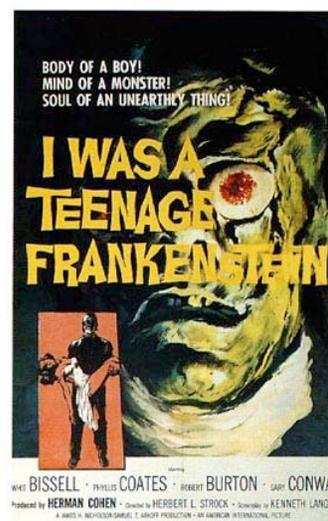


Figure 8. *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (Herbert L. Strock, 1957).

## Techniques of Horror

By the 1960s, and the real horrors of the Vietnam War and civil rights violence on the nightly news in the nation's living rooms, the classic movie monsters began to seem more campy than creepy. As already mentioned, Universal kept its undead alive through the 1940s in a series of loose sequels and spinoffs, including *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943), and *House of Frankenstein* (1944), but in its final cycle in the 1950s revived them once more only to be in parodies featuring Abbott and Costello, another important Universal asset. The sad fate of every

horror creature, it seemed, was to meet the comedy team. No longer frightening, these monsters were now funny, the stuff of sight gags. In the same decade the two great horror icons of the past, Lugosi and Karloff, suffered further indignity by becoming merchandized as models by the Revell plastic model kit company, and by being reduced to caricatures on the boxes of children's breakfast cereal, now more cuddly than chilling. By 1983 Robin Wood was moved to suggest that in today's more sexually liberal society the conventional vampire should be discarded as an anachronism, and that more appropriate to the terror of potential nuclear and biological annihilation were apocalyptic visions of undead legions, as in *Night of the Living Dead* (Wood 1996: 378). Such horror films exploited Stoker's association of Dracula with the plague or contagion, but imagine the infection on a national or even global scale rather than an individual one.

These changes in the imagery of horror suggest the extent to which genre conventions are connected to cultural and historical contexts, particularly at the time of such drastic social change as occurred in the 1960s and 70s. As a consequence, there were particularly profound changes during this time across all genres, including horror. During the era dramatic shifts took place in the film industry, including the demise of the Hays Office in 1968 and the continuing break-up of the traditional studio system, allowing directors greater freedom in a more disillusioned and cynical era. A new, younger generation of directors such as Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, Robert Altman, Francis Ford Coppola, Brian de Palma and John Carpenter, collectively known as "the movie brats," chose to make genre movies because they had grown up watching them on television and studying them in academic film programs. Films such as *The Godfather* (1972) by Coppola (who began his career with a horror film, *Dementia 13* (1963), Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973), Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), and *Nashville* (1975), and—most relevant here, de Palma's *Sisters* (1973), *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), and *Carrie* (1976) all were aware of themselves as genre movies. For genre theorist John Cawelti, the genre movies of the time responded to their self-awareness in four distinct ways: by emphasizing parody or burlesque, a heightened sense of nostalgia, demythologization, or reaffirmation (2003, 251ff). Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* (1974) was an example of burlesque within the horror genre; while many of de Palma's horror films, as well as those of Carpenter and other directors such as Wes Craven and Larry Cohen, responded with demythologization. Their horror films tended to subvert the genre's traditional distinctions between good and evil, normal and monstrous, by critiquing the horrors of mainstream society rather than by projecting the monstrous onto the exotic "other." Horror films were thus a significant part of the overall re-examination of genre movies that took place in American cinema in the 1970s.

Cawelti was insightful in cataloguing the genre's profound changes at this time, but he was probably a bit late in doing so. *Peeping Tom* and Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, both released in 1960, already had radically reconfigured the genre by focusing on psychologically disturbed characters in mundane contexts rather than on supernatural situations in Gothic settings. *Psycho*, adapted from Robert Bloch's 1959 novel, which in turn was based in part on the real-life exploits of multiple murderer Ed Gein, has proven to be perhaps the most influential horror film ever made. Set in contemporary business offices, motel rooms, gleaming porcelain bathrooms, hardware stores, and used car lots, Hitchcock's film imagined the site of horror in the quotidian world of the viewer, showing that horrifying violence was an integral part of middle-class America, repressed beneath its seemingly placid exterior. *Psycho* begins with an establishing shot of the Phoenix skyline, the camera selecting

one particular window and moving towards it, as if it were one of innumerable possibilities. The blinds are drawn (purposefully, because a pair of lovers are meeting secretly), but the camera comes through the window, penetrating the darkened room as the lens aperture is widened to let in more light. This opening movement encapsulates and rehearses the movement of the entire film and, indeed, of the genre itself, which takes us from the exterior world to a hidden deeper world of dark secrets and so reveals them by bringing them to light. As the narrative unfolds, the protagonist Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is suddenly and brutally murdered, eliminated from the narrative, in a scene that is justly one of the most famous in film history. By killing off the main character in the middle, *Psycho* committed a sudden and brutal act upon the audience, matching the random, crazy violence embedded in Norman Bates and, increasingly, in the decade to come, with its numerous mass murders, assassinations, and violent civil confrontations with state power. Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) continued in the same direction, depicting Satanism in contemporary New York and Washington, respectively.

Toward the end of the decade, in 1968, came the phenomenal box-office success of Romero's independent *Night of the Living Dead*, one of the first midnight cult movies. Its low-budget aesthetic, combined with a new graphic representation of bodily violation in the close-ups of zombies eating steaming entrails, set a new bar for graphic representation. The film's grainy black-and-white cinematography looked like the photojournalism of the day, and its uncompromising violations of numerous horror conventions resulted in the film's powerful effect on viewers (see Figure 9). Ten years later, Romero's sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*, again took graphic violence to a new level, and instituted a cycle of so-called splatter films that focused on bodily violation. Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg, at one time nicknamed the King of Venereal Horror, made several horror films concerned with bodily invasion, including *Shivers* (also known as *They Came from Within*, 1975), with its repulsive slug-like parasites that enter the body through the range of human orifices; *The Brood* (1979), featuring scenes of monstrous parturition; *Scanners* (1981), in which heads explode in a spray of gristle and blood; and his version of *The Fly* (1986), in which a scientist's body slowly falls away as he metamorphoses into an insect, a process that at the time some saw as a metaphor for AIDS. Splatter itself was taken in turn to new extremes in Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1981), Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987), and to its logical conclusion in the comic excess of Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (also known as *Dead Alive*, 1992), which spawned a new subgenre Jackson dubbed splatstick. This explicit representation of bodily violation and other horrors has increased significantly in recent years with the development of digital FX.

By contrast, the figure most associated with the more suggestive approach is Val Lewton, a producer at RKO Studios from 1942 to 1946, who during that period made a series of nine horror films with several directors, including *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), directed by Jacques Tourneur, and *The Body Snatcher* (1945), directed by Robert Wise, that exploited horror and violence through suggestion and other indirect means. In part Lewton's approach was determined by the small budgets his films were given, but his techniques were as inventive as to be found in any

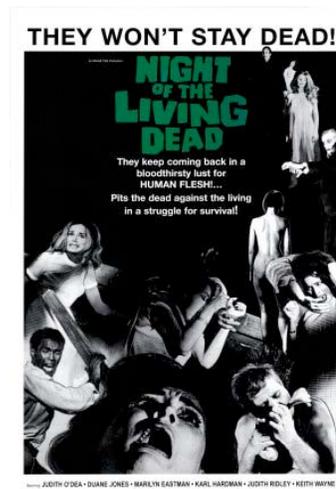


Figure 9. *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968).

horror film. In *Cat People* (1942), directed by Jacques Tourneur, for example, a young woman believes the superstition of her Old World village upbringing that she will turn into a dangerous



Figure 10. *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942).

leopard when emotionally or sexually aroused; but there is no transformation scene, as in a werewolf movie or, indeed, as in Paul Schrader's graphic 1983 remake, in which such scenes serve as visual centrepieces (see Figure 10). In one scene a woman flees through a park, thinking she might be being pursued by—something. The scene is silent but for leaves rustling ominously, and suddenly a bus—the arrival of which should elicit a response of relief—instead frightens us by suddenly appearing in the tightly framed shot and releasing a hiss from its brakes that at first sounds like an animal's growl.

Similarly, in *The Leopard Man* (1943), also directed by Tourneur, after a lengthy sequence building suspense we hear the violent death of a teenage girl attacked by the title creature, but all we see is her blood oozing under the locked door of her house, and then the horrified expression on her mother's face when she realizes what's happened and that her daughter wasn't pretending to be frightened after returning home past her curfew.

### Extending the Horror Experience

Already in the late 1950s, filmmakers were seeking to extend the horror experience within the film medium. In *The Eyes of Hell* (aka *The Mask*, 1961), for instance, an ancient Aztec mask causes its wearer to hallucinate and murder. The donning of the mask by a character in the film was always shown from the first person perspective as viewers were exhorted extra-diegetically to put their own 3-D viewer mask on at the same time. As well, the exploitation master William Castle, a flamboyant producer and promoter known as “The Abominable Showman,” made a series of gimmicky horror films that from our vantage point today may be seen as crude attempts at creating an interactive horror cinema before it was conceptualized as such. The original *House on Haunted Hill* (1959) featured “Emergo,” in which at appropriate moments a skeleton on wires came out from above the screen and flew above the audience. Spectators watching *Thirteen Ghosts* (1960) were treated to the process of “Illusion-O,” which required them to don a pair of special glasses in order to see the ghosts on the screen. In *Mr. Sardonicus* (1961), Castle himself interrupts the plot just before the climax to ask the audience to vote on whether Mr. Sardonicus, who was forced to live by drinking the blood of virgins, should receive a merciful fate or not.

Corman's *The Tingler* (1959) is about a lobster-like parasite that actually lives in the base of the human spine, and is dissipated only when we scream in fright—otherwise it would snap our spine and we would die (see Figure 11). Vincent Price plays a scientist who clues into the existence of the tingler, and he manages to extract one alive from a mute woman who has just died, deliberately scared to death by Price because of her inability to scream. But the creature escapes into a movie theatre, and during this scene, first-run theatres featured “Percept-O,” which involved mild electrical shocks in randomly chosen seats, giving a slight tingle to the legs of some patrons (Brottman, 2004:

268).

In addition to being interactive, *The Tingler* offers a clever metaphor for the therapeutic function of horror, which provides a release, a catharsis, of our collective and individual fears. We cannot forget, after all, that horror is for some people pleasurable. Whether horror films exploit our fears of death and decay, either of the physical body or the body politic; whether they address our psychological need to come to terms with mortality and sexuality; whether they help us accept the natural order of things, including our inherently evil natures; whether they allow us to channel our own aggression and anger; or whether they provide lessons about the consequences of deviating from social norms – whatever the particular fears exploited by particular horror films, they provide viewers with vicarious but controlled thrills, like the fright one gets from an amusement park ride. It is no accident that so many theme park rides, like Universal’s Mummy ride, are horror-oriented. Indeed, the Eddie Murphy film *The Haunted Mansion* (2003) is even based on a theme park ride. Because horror provides us with manageable experiences of fear, it is one of the most sustained of genres, as popular today as it has ever been, as indicated by the steady stream of new horror films that continue to appear in our cinema houses with predictable regularity.



Figure 11. *The Tingler* (William Castle, 1959).

At the end of this walkthrough, it is easy to understand how horror video games fall within the scope of filmic horror. For Bruce Kawin, “A good horror film takes you down into the depths and shows you something about the landscape” (2003). Like Charon, who in Greek mythology ferries the souls of the dead, the horror film takes you on “a visit to the land of the dead, with the difference that this Charon will eventually take you home, or at least drop you off at the borders of the underworld” (325). Horror videogames may do this too, but crucially, they also allow you to go off on your own to explore the space on your own as part of the journey. The game space that the player must explore can incorporate both graphic and subtle horror, but needs to be connected to the game’s design and theme, otherwise it becomes merely an interactive version of the proverbial hand suddenly reaching into the frame and grabbing the shoulder of a character shown in a tight close-up. Further, because game space is not infinite, games also exploit the horrific potential of this limitation by emphasizing the enclosed, hence entrapping, aspect of its space. If there is one new medium that can extend the “bound experience of fear”, it is well and truly the video game.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams, eds., *Horror International* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The idea of binary opposition in genre study derives from the structural anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss. Its application to film genre analysis was pioneered by such critics as Jim Kitses in his study of the western, *Horizons West*, first published in 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Significantly, although women have found it difficult throughout film history to become directors, they are noticeably prominent in horror film production, as evidenced by, for example, Stephanie Rothman's *The Velvet Vampire* (1971) and *Terminal Island* (1973); Amy Jones's take on the slasher film, *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982), written by Rita Mae Brown; Katt Shea Rubin's two *Stripped to Kill* movies (1987, 1989) and *Poison Ivy* (1992); Mary Lambert's two *Pet Sematary* movies (1989, 1992); Kristine Peterson's *Body Chemistry* (1990); Fran Rubel Kuzui's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992); Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* (1987); and Mary Harron's adaptation of Brett Easton Ellis' novel, *American Psycho* (2000).