Horror Film and Psychoanalysis

In recent years, psychoanalytic theory has been the subject of attacks from philosophers, cultural critics, and scientists who have questioned the cogency of its reasoning as well as the soundness of its premises. Nevertheless, when used to shed light on horror cinema, psychoanalysis in its various forms has proven to be a fruitful and provocative interpretative tool. This volume seeks to find the proper place of psychoanalytic thought in critical discussion of cinema in a series of essays that debate its legitimacy, utility, and validity as applied to the horror genre. It distinguishes itself from previous work in this area through the self-consciousness with which psychoanalytic concepts are employed and the theorization that coexists with interpretations of particular horror films and subgenres.

Steven Jay Schneider is a scholar of cinema and philosophy. He is the author of *Designing Fear: Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror* and editor of *New Hollywood Violence*, among other publications.

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FREUD'S WORST NIGHTMARE

Edited by

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For Mom and Dad, with love

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ROBIN WOOD

Foreword: "What Lies Beneath?"

In 1979, Richard Lippe and I organized and hosted a retrospective of the (primarily) American horror film at the Toronto International Film Festival, then known as the "Festival of Festivals." We invited a number of filmmakers to give seminars, and Brian de Palma, George Romero, Wes Craven, and Stephanie Rothman all made public appearances and answered questions, Richard and I interviewing each on stage before turning the questioning over to the audience. As part of this event, we produced a small booklet, to which Andrew Britton and Tony Williams also contributed essays, entitled (like the retrospective) *The American Nightmare*. My sections were subsequently included in my book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, with an extension dealing with the genre's development – "degeneration" would be a more appropriate term – in the 1980s.

Looking back, it seems to me that our primary motivation was what Howard Hawks always claimed for making his movies – "having fun" – though I would add that, like Hawks, we wanted to make as good a professional job of it as possible and we took our work very seriously. Of course, we would never have done it had we not believed that we had something to say, at the root of which was our sense that this most despised and ridiculed of genres deserved serious attention. I don't think it occurred to us that what we were doing would come to assume the historic importance that seems to be the case. We never asserted (or believed) that ours was the only way of looking at horror films or that our theories explained every horror film that had ever been made, although much of what has been written since appears to accuse us of exactly that.

At the core of our ideas was the belief (which I doubt anyone is likely to dispute) that a genre's evolution is strongly influenced by cultural-political evolution at least as much as by the genre's internal evolution

(the fact that later films in a given cycle are nourished by and grow out of their predecessors). How else could one account for the astonishingly abrupt shift in the American horror film from the progressive, exploratory, often radical late 1960s–70s to the reactionary and repressive 1980s? Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger – they did not develop out of the characteristic monsters of the 1970s, but represent a refusal of everything embodied earlier.

What was crucially determinant of *The American Nightmare* was our political commitment – leftist, radical, and with at least an interest in Marxist ideology and especially the confluence of Marx and Freud in 1970s thought. That commitment was vastly more important to us than any desire to tell "the whole truth and nothing but the truth" about the horror film. Here I must acknowledge the key importance of Andrew Britton: his contributions to our booklet were relatively brief but his influence pervaded the entire enterprise. For myself, Andrew has been for many years the most important film critic writing in English; his neglect within academic circles seems to me disgraceful.

If one approaches the American horror film from a radical perspective one must inevitably find great positive interest in the achievements of the late 1960s–70s and reject almost everything that has followed. My social-political position has not changed essentially since that time, though in honesty I must admit that two decades of reaction and conservatism have somewhat dulled its edges. In the 1970s one felt supported by, at the least, a general disquiet and dissatisfaction, and at best, a widespread desire for change, which came to a focus in the period's great social movements – radical feminism, the black movement, gay rights, environmentalism. Those movements still exist but have lost much of their momentum, perhaps because of the advances they made: advances that have, to some degree, been recuperated into the establishment at the cost of losing their dangerousness. Perhaps the new administration will goad people into a new sense of outrage and fury, but it may take the equivalent of the Vietnam War.

Criticism of *The American Nightmare*'s approach has in fact concentrated not on politics but on psychoanalysis, which to us was a valuable weapon that could be used politically. Relatively speaking, our radical political commitment has been generally ignored, despite the fact that it embodies the foundation of our arguments. I would agree today that building an analysis of the horror genre on Freudian theory made it readily vulnerable to attack by those uneasy with our politics. The (supposed) demolition and repudiation of Freud is another 1980s phenomenon, again (I would

claim) strongly influenced by the social-political climate. Part of the problem lies in that distressingly common tendency either to totally accept or totally reject, as opposed to the principle of *examining critically*. Few today appear to read Freud or Marx with a view to sorting out what is still valid, what can be cast off, and what needs to be rethought.

Freudian theory is vulnerable to attack on many points, but not, in my opinion, on the one that formed *The American Nightmare*'s psychoanalytic basis: the theory of repression and the "return of the repressed." We can all trace the workings of this, surely, in our own personal histories and daily lives; it continues to have great resonance in relation to the horror film, but only insofar as it is melded with a political awareness. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1921), made in the very shadow of Freud, strikes me as almost textbook Freudianism – the monster as "return of the repressed" (and its ultimate re-repression) in almost diagrammatic (yet extremely powerful) form. The Freudian analogy holds good for Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), but here, in Karloff's make-up, clothing, gestures, and performance, his threats and pleadings, we can also see the working class, the poor, the homeless, and the dispossessed, suggesting a parallel between psychological *re*pression and social *op*pression. The possibility that the monster (hence, "the repressed") might be seen as sympathetic or pitiable as well as horrifying was perhaps inherent in the genre from the outset (it is clearly there in Whale's two *Frankenstein* movies). But it is in the 1970s, with the development of radicalism and protest, that the figure of the monster develops a widespread tendency to become (though never unambiguously) the emotional center of many horror films.

That the "return of the repressed" formula does not exhaustively explain all horror movies was demonstrated already in the 1970s/1980s by what seems in retrospect the period's greatest achievement, George Romero's *Living Dead* trilogy. It has not, I think, been sufficiently recognized that the meaning and function of the zombies changes radically from film to film. It is consistent, in fact, in only one way – that the zombies constitute a challenge to the humans, not merely to survive but to *change*. But the nature of the challenge differs from film to film.

Of the three, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) corresponds most closely to the psychoanalytic formula – the first zombie emerges not merely from a graveyard but from the precariously repressed familial tensions between brother and sister, tensions derived directly and explicitly from the structures of the nuclear family. Having established this in the first few minutes, however, Romero relegates the zombies to a subservient and functional position; though powerful because they are so numerous, they

quite lack the dynamic, rebellious energy of other, more characteristic, monsters of the period – the baby of *It's Alive* (1974), Danielle (Margot Kidder) of *Sisters* (1973), Regan (Linda Blair) of *The Exorcist* (1973), or, going farther back, the Irena (Simone Simon) of *Cat People* (1942), the Tootie (Margaret O'Brien) of *Meet Me in St Louis* (1944), or the Erlking of Goethe and Schubert – whose function is *to demand recognition*. The zombies destroy all the main characters (the existing nuclear family, the "young couple" who represent the future nuclear family) but one, simply because they are incapable of change and will merely repeat the repressive patterns of the past. The exception, the film's hero and sole black character, hence an outsider, survives the zombies but, in the film's final irony, is shot down by the sheriff's posse.

The theme is carried over into *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), but with an important difference: the zombies of the shopping mall are the products of consumer capitalism, drawn back to the mall that embodies their utmost desires, the pitiful non-satisfactions of material possessions by which their culture has taught them to live. The totally passive (literally traumatized) woman of *Night* is here transformed into an active and increasingly resourceful heroine who eventually learns to free herself from male domination and all the social formations (marriage, traditional family, dependency) that support it, taking over the film's primary symbol of masculine power, the helicopter. Finally, in *Day of the Dead* (1985), the trilogy's lamentably unrecognized crown ("Easily the least of the series," according to the lamentably influential Leonard Maltin) – at once the darkest, most desperate, and ultimately most exhilarating of the three films – the woman becomes the central figure, the heart of sanity in a world of masculinity gone mad.

I suspect that the almost total incomprehension (more precisely, *refusal* of comprehension) with which *Day of the Dead* has been received is simply the result of its late date: by 1985 we had already entered the era of hysterical masculinity that countered the radical feminism of the 1970s, Stallone and Schwarzenegger were already major presences, and the reactionary horror movie had already fully established itself. No one wanted to hear about how science and militarism were male-dominated, masculinist institutions threatening to destroy life on the planet (*Day*'s essential theme, even more timely today than it was then, though no one seems willing to pay attention any more). Though made by a man, it stands (and will probably be recognized as, when it is too late) one of the great feminist movies. It is also, for me, the last great American horror film.

Are significant horror films being made outside America? in the East? in Italy? I am not qualified to answer this question, although it seems necessary to raise it. The Italian horror films of Bava and Argento have their defenders; the few I have seen struck me as obsessively preoccupied with violence against women, dramatized in particularly grotesque images. One European film perhaps qualifies, though it must be seen as marginal to the genre: Michael Haneke's profoundly disturbing and troubling *Funny Games* (1997). Although it barely evokes the supernatural, its relationship to the horror film becomes apparent quite early on.

Two young men enter a bourgeois household on a pretext, then swiftly proceed to make prisoners of the family (father, mother, young son) and subsequently humiliate, torment, and finally kill all three before going off cheerfully to visit the nearest neighbors for the same purpose. No obvious "explanation" of the young men is offered: they are not noticeably impoverished or underprivileged (rather the contrary); we learn nothing of their background and so cannot see them as victims of the conventional nuclear family structure; they appear to humiliate, torment, and kill just for the pleasure of it. One is clearly dominant and he is credited with the film's only hint of supernatural powers – the ability to rewind the film when things go wrong and replay a scene to his own specifications. Are they "the return of the repressed"? The worst the bourgeois couple can be accused of is complacency, which is what Hitchcock said *The Birds* (1963) is about, and the couple's punishment (if that is how it is to be read) is only a step worse than that meted out to Melanie Daniels (Tippie Hedren).

Funny Games can also be read (and this links it thematically to Haneke's other work) as suggesting that our civilization, by dehumanizing its inhabitants, intrinsically produces psychopaths who therefore require no further explanation. This is one of the most disturbing films I have ever seen (no surprise, really, that it is probably the most widely hated film in modern cinema – critics react to it with such an intense resentment of what it does to them that it becomes a tribute to the film's power). Haneke allows his chief "monster" an intimate relationship with the audience, inviting us into the film with his knowing look into camera, and implicating us in the violence (which is for the most part more psychological than physical): do we *want* to punish this affluent and complacent, yet generally pleasant and harmless, couple? But, simultaneously, we are implicated in an opposed violence, the deliberate tormenting of helpless people reaching a point where we would like to leap into the movie and kill the two young men with our own hands. The film's great danger,

it seems to me, is that it might (given that the tormentors appear inexplicable and therefore unreformable) be read as advocating capital punishment.

Aside from *Day of the Dead*, is there *any* American horror movie made since 1980 that could be championed as any sort of radical statement about our impossible (so-called) civilization? I ask the question seriously, hoping it may get answered in this anthology (for myself, the only possible candidate is Neil Jordan's fascinating and underrated *In Dreams* [1998]). Or is the genre as "living dead" as Romero's zombies who, while immensely powerful, have nothing to offer but a kind of subhuman nothingness and survive without any real life? The genre's deterioration is easy to chart. Around 1980 it moves crucially from the release of repressed (and therefore terrifying) energies to "teenagers endlessly punished for having sex." And why has this perversion of the genre been so popular with teenagers? Presumably because, while it is exactly what, at their age, they ought to be doing (besides protesting vigorously about almost everything happening in the dominant culture), their parents make them feel guilty.

From there to the spoof is an easy leap (about two inches), stupidity (of the characters, of the films themselves) being already generically inherent. Actually, the "spoof" horror film (unnecessary to give titles, I think) simply carries the "slaughter of sexual teenagers" 1980s subdivision of the genre one step further: all those naughty teenagers can now enjoy themselves without taking their punishment seriously. There is just one small problem: in all the films I can recall (and they have fused themselves into one horrible confused image of sex and slaughter) the teenagers hardly ever achieve orgasm. The popularity of these films with teenagers is vastly more interesting, and even more depressing, than the films themselves ever are. Given that all these films operate on a very low level of artistic or thematic interest, it is (I suppose) still possible to make certain distinctions. The original *Halloween*, which had the dubious distinction of initiating the entire cycle, and is therefore of historic interest, was a well-made and effective film; the entire *Friday the 13th* series fully deserves to go, with Jason, to hell; the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films have a marginally more interesting monster and (especially in the first) a certain flair in invention and design. What more can one say?