

BLOOD MONEY

HORROR FILMS AND THE AMERICAN AUDIENCE, 1920-1985

By Michael Falletti

Adapted from a paper originally written for the
Graduate School of Arts and Science at New York University, December 2006
REVISED JANUARY 2009

It is Halloween night, 2006. The overhead lights are slowly dimming inside a packed theater at Manhattan's United Artists Union Square megaplex. The audience members, none of whom look older than 25, are about to be treated to a special screening of the classic 1978 slasher film, *Halloween*. They cheer as John Carpenter's brooding, thumping piano score begins playing mercilessly over the opening credits. It is clear that they are engrossed throughout the duration of the film. All sit tensely in their seats, jolting and screaming as they watch Michael Myers stalk and slay his victims. *Halloween*, one of the most original and effective horror films and a landmark of the genre, is still able to attract audiences, and their wallets, just as it did twenty-eight years ago. As I sit back in my chair, still shocked and delighted by this film which I first saw as a young teenager, I begin to wonder how and why *Halloween*, and the horror genre in general, has been so continuously attractive to audiences for nearly a century.

This article explores the phenomenon of the American horror film through analyzing how horror films have been sustained as a strong box office commodity by film companies over the past century, and why they are so tremendously popular with audiences after all these years. The focus of this paper is twofold. On one hand, it seeks to briefly chronicle the horror genre's status as one of the film industry's most reliable box office draws, and how stylistic changes and convention shifting have maintained this status for nearly a century. On the other hand, the paper intends to probe the horror film audience in an attempt to understand their affinity for the genre.

First, horror's longevity will be explained in relation to its extreme profitability. Horror films have been huge box office attractions throughout the twentieth century, and their monetary success alone is enough to explain their pervasiveness. The paper introduces this notion through a discussion of horror's fiscal history, looking at the impact of box office receipts on the genre and how culturally aware executives and producers have been able to sustain the horror film's prominence through marketing and advertising techniques. The discussion begins with the producers and distributors of the classic horror monsters and villains of the 1920s and carries through to the explosion of the slasher film onto the American movie scene in the late seventies and eighties.

The slasher subgenre receives particular attention in this paper. It is, without question, the most profitable, and, over the past quarter of a century, the most prevalent incarnation of cinematic horror. It is also the most uniquely American variation of the horror genre, as

Hollywood was known for releasing dozens of low-budget, yet highly lucrative, slasher films (many of which spawned sequels and multi-million dollar franchises) over the course of the 1980s. The slasher subgenre is also vital to this paper because it, perhaps more intensely than any other branch of horror, incited such tremendous controversy and became polarized between mainstream film critics, who saw it as the most execrable type of film, and younger audiences who were enthralled by its gory, exploitative elements. Therefore, slasher films most strongly present the question that is central to the success of the horror film: why are people attracted to such repulsive depictions of brutality on the screen? This paper seeks to provide an answer to this question by investigating how producers tap into their audiences' collective psychology to create horror films that resonate with broader cultural perspectives.

Ultimately, the horror genre is a distinct art world whose cultural products are produced and governed by its own tenets and aspirations, which are in turn motivated by capital and determined by convention. In explaining the phenomenon of the horror film, the material could be engaged with some art sociological thought. The benefit of doing so gives a more stable, secondary analysis of the horror film as a cultural product that can be understood through basic art sociological nodes, such as the following/rejection of conventions and the role of the producer in taking advantage of, and even creating, the habitus of an impressionable audience.

The driving force behind the horror genre's enduring presence in the American film industry is, quite obviously, money. There is no need to construct pretenses to explain the triumph of Hollywood horror; it is an unremarkable fact that it revealed itself as an extremely lucrative and popular genre at a very early stage. What is remarkable, however, is how Hollywood, through astute marketing and the manipulation of anticipated conventions, has been able to sustain the genre and keep the revenue pouring in from successive generations of horror film audiences over roughly the past century.

The profitability of the horror film has been exploited since the inception of the Hollywood film industry in the early twentieth century. Each of the "Big Five" movie studios of Tinseltown's heyday—Paramount, Loew's/MGM, Twentieth-Century Fox, Warner Brothers, and RKO—saw astounding revenues due to their reign over film production, distribution, and exhibition (a 1950s legislative measure eventually separated

filmmaking from theatrical exhibition, which effectively disbanded such monopolies).¹ These competing companies wanted to augment their already tremendous capital by seeking out screenplays that were easy and inexpensive to produce, yet simultaneously popular amongst filmgoers. Time and again, the companies looked to the horror genre to satisfy this initiative.

What was initially so appealing about producing horror films during these early years was that treatments and plotlines were drawn directly from literary sources that were royalty-free and generally well-known to audiences.² Early Hollywood tapped just about every possible horror resource, from werewolves to the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. As a result, six different versions of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* were filmed, released, and distributed to theaters before 1920.³ Film companies kept overheads at a minimum by using sets from previous films, employing contracted actors, and acquiring low-cost, workable scripts. However, despite the high feasibility of these ventures, Hollywood initially struggled to establish horror as a consistently popular genre, and did not truly succeed in doing so until the early 1930s, with the rise of Universal Pictures' famed monsters.⁴

By the mid-thirties, characters like Dracula, Frankenstein, and the Mummy had become some of Universal's biggest stars, as did the actors who played them. However, despite the star power of Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, and their contemporaries, the generally nominal pay scale of genre work assured that horror films would remain considerably inexpensive to produce. Even at the height of their stardom, Karloff and Lugosi never earned the salaries of the stars of other genres. Karloff, for example, was paid only about a tenth as much as musical luminary Betty Grable.⁵ And, as mentioned above, thousands of dollars were saved through the use of existing studio sets and screenplays that were inexpensively developed from non-copyrighted literary sources.

Like many other American industries, Hollywood began to change after World War II. The once loyal filmgoers of previous decades began to occupy themselves with other activities, such as starting families, moving to suburban neighborhoods, and buying cars and

¹Douglas Gomery, "The Economics of the Horror Film," in *Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions*, eds. James B. Weaver, III and Ron Tamborini (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1996), 52.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 56.

television sets.⁶ Theaters in the postwar era began to see much less of the general public, as their audiences began to consist largely of teenagers who were not interested in staying at home and watching television.⁷ By 1957, movie attendance by people over twenty-five drastically declined, and a poll conducted by Alfred Politz Research, Inc., found that over half of those who attended movies once a week or more were between ten and nineteen years of age.⁸ According to Thomas Doherty, who gives an explanation for this phenomenon in his book *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*, the fifties were the first time in America that teenagers had an income that was flexible enough for them to procure strictly cultural products such as comic books, rock and roll music, and movies.⁹ Film executives subsequently faced a period of adjustment as they began to produce, distribute, and exhibit films that would draw in teenagers.

Thus began the age of the drive-in, the double feature, and the experimentation with rapidly changing motion picture technology, leading to the 3-D wars of the mid-fifties. Film marketing became more aggressive and sensationalist than it had ever been before, and the fifties saw the maturation of the ad campaign, the sensationalized film title, and the creation of elaborate poster art taking precedence over the casting or even the scripting of the film.¹⁰ The dwindling population of older audience members led to crucial aesthetic changes to the horror film in the fifties and sixties. Films such as *Psycho* and Vincent Price's *The Tingler* began to challenge the limits of violence and gore. This stylistic metamorphosis maintained horror's box-office appeal, with films like 1957's *The Curse of Frankenstein*, budgeted at \$500,000, grossing over \$7 million in the United States. Soon, horror became a thing of spectacle, allegedly at the expense of narrative plausibility, character development, and solid acting.¹¹

With the huge success of Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* in 1975, Hollywood reached a new era: the age of the blockbuster. The ticket sales for *Jaws*, unprecedented for a summer release, spurred the motion picture industry to turn away from the low-budget, quickly-produced-

⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁷ Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 67.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1988), 51-63.

¹⁰ Heffernan, 64-65.

¹¹ Ibid., 68.

and-distributed horror flick and towards the “event film.”¹² And, after the marketing and box office spectacle that was 1978’s *Jaws 2*, the rapid rise of the film franchise began, with the new Hollywood of the late seventies and early eighties fervently creating sequels in hopes of turning them into multimillion-dollar pop-cultural behemoths. The slasher film, a new horror subgenre that had its naissance in 1978 with the release of *Halloween*, most notably represented the sequel craze. After the monumental financial and critical success of *Halloween*—a largely experimental project that simultaneously had one of the smallest budgets and largest profits in film history—cinemas across the United States became inundated with like-minded stalk-and-slash horror flicks.

Isabel C. Pinedo describes the general slasher film narrative as follows: “A masked or hidden (largely off-screen) psychotic male propelled by psychosexual fury stalks and kills a sizeable number of young women and men with a high level of violence. The killer’s rage derives from a traumatic childhood experience, which is recounted chronologically or in a flashback. The killer returns to the scene of the past event to reenact the violence. Although both women and men are killed, the stalking and killing of women is stressed. After a protracted struggle, a resourceful female usually subdues the killer, sometimes kills him, and survives.”¹³

Halloween, known popularly as “the granddaddy of all slasher films,” initiated all of the conventions that inform Pinedo’s definition. The film centers on an escaped mental patient who murdered his sister on Halloween night when he was six years old (the traumatic childhood experience) and returns to his hometown fifteen years later (returning to the scene) to carry out a murderous rampage, only to be finally stopped—at least, until the sequel—by a smart, virginal high school girl (the resourceful female). A countless number of slasher films relied upon this structure as a conventional template through which producers could create their own version of *Halloween* and, hopefully, accumulate their own version of its profits.

This cyclical (or, as mainstream critics of the day would say, “derivative”) formula worked, with audiences flocking to the perennially-released slasher films of the seventies and eighties. *Halloween* and other standout films, such as *Friday the 13th*, were turned into

¹² Gomery, 60.

¹³ Isabel C. Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 72.

enormous franchises. Since 1978, there have been nine *Halloween* films (including a 2007 remake of the original film) and twelve *Friday the 13th* films (including a 2009 remake of the original film). Combined, the *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th* series alone have grossed over \$600 million worldwide—a profit of about a half of a billion dollars after subtracting production and marketing costs.

The enormous financial success of the slasher film is almost absurd when one takes even a cursory glance at just about any mainstream film critic's review of any one of the eighties' slasher offerings. Giving the film an abysmal rating of "one-half star," Roger Ebert says in his review of 1981's *Friday the 13th Part 2*, "I remembered the movie fantasies when I was a kid. They involved teenagers who fell in love, made out with each other, customized their cars, listened to rock and roll, and were rebels without causes. Neither the kids in those movies nor the kids watching them would have understood a world view in which the primary function of teenagers is to be hacked to death."¹⁴ Ebert's comments hit upon the profoundly negative and subversive philosophies that were informing the slasher subgenre and caused it to incite so much controversy among the mainstream media and the moral majority alike. However, neither of these groups represented the faction that was targeted by slasher film producers. Rather, producers wanted to reach out and appeal to the wallets of millions of teenagers—teenagers just like the ones they were slaughtering on the screen.

Ebert seems to realize that there *is* an audience who understands, and is attracted to, the worldview of the slasher film, but never explicitly acknowledges it: "The late show was half-filled with high school and college students ... It is a tradition to be loud during these movies, I guess. After a batch of young counselors turns up for training at a summer camp, a girl goes out walking alone at night. Everybody in the audience imitated hoot-owls and hyenas. Another girl went to her room and started to undress. Five guys sitting together started a chant: 'We want boobs!'"¹⁵ It was this type of rowdy, boisterous, and carefree crowd of youths that would flood movie theaters throughout the rest of the eighties, eager for the latest batch of bloody, mindless entertainment.

Easily one of the most hated, but most lucrative, film typologies in history, the slasher film begs the question, "Why?" Noël Carroll, in his book, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*, asks, "why would anyone be interested in the [horror] genre to begin

¹⁴ Roger Ebert, "Friday the 13th, Part 2," *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 1, 1981.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

with?” and, “if horror necessarily has something repulsive about it, how can audiences possibly be attracted to it?”¹⁶ In exploring what gives horror its appeal, one is faced with analyzing horror audiences through multiple modes of inquiry. Psychoanalytically, one could probe the audience’s instinctual sadism, repressed aggression, or preoccupation with fear. Sociologically, one may point to urban decay and the real-life murders, disasters, and accidents that infiltrate nightly news programs.¹⁷ Marvin Zuckerman, in his essay “Sensation Seeking and the Taste for Vicarious Horror,” prefers to avoid looking at the individual’s interest in horror as a sign of psychopathology, and instead examines the sources of individuals’ interests in macabre events and spectacles through the standard variation between personalities.¹⁸

Horror films certainly have an impact on the audience member on an individual basis. Each of us experiences a film in our own way, and our different tastes in films indicate how unique we are as audience members. However, the more general question of culture also exists. What about those films that seem to have tapped into the collective fears of an entire generation of audiences?¹⁹ Horror films, because of their often-unforgettable imagery and the intense, albeit fabricated, duress they incite, can indelibly imprint themselves on the minds of all viewers.

In his book *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*, Kendall R. Phillips says that the horror genre is a powerful cultural entity, and that its success is due to the fact that many horror films have been able to hit upon broad cultural anxieties.²⁰ He notes that the truly landmark horror films, such as 1931’s *Dracula* and *Halloween*, attained their success because they were entirely relevant to the cultural climates into which they were released. While he acknowledges the financial success of the horror genre, Phillips notes that box-office success is not enough to classify a film as “important.”²¹ The horror films that are able to achieve the status of “cultural moments” overshadow their own profitability, and

¹⁶ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 158.

¹⁷ Marvin Zuckerman, “Sensation Seeking and the Taste for Vicarious Horror,” in *Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions*, eds. James B. Weaver, III and Ron Tamborini (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1996), 147.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Kendall R. Phillips, *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 3.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 4.

Phillips argues that they reach the level of cultural significance almost instantly.²² They have the capacity to connect to an entire culture's fears and worldview in such a uniquely powerful way that they can become regarded as "true." This does not mean, of course, that audiences leave these films fearing zombies or ghosts as if they were real. Rather, they emerge knowing that, somehow, what they just witnessed on the screen was an accurate, if metaphorical, depiction of their collective fears and concerns.²³

Metaphor, or allegory, however, is not necessarily an appropriate device to apply to the understanding of the impact horror films have on culture. It implies too much intention on the part of the producers (especially when one considers their largely profit-driven motives) and too much awareness on the part of the audience. While allegory is a powerful tool in creating fiction, it is generally unsuccessful in producing horror. If the allegory is too blatantly exposed in the story, the film fails to produce its primary commodity—fear. Edward J. Ingebretsen, in his article, "Monster-Making: A Politics of Persuasion," declares that every monster is, essentially, a political representation and that our production of monsters reflects and is informed by our general political understanding of the world and the notions of good and evil.²⁴ However, if the politics are too blatantly portrayed in the finished product of the film, the monster becomes a symbol rather than a threatening being.²⁵ Allegory excises the literal—and ultimately visceral—reading of a monster or a fantastic event and, thus, removes the potential for the film to create fear or suspense. In other words, utilizing a political symbol as the source of fright is not a realistic premise for a horror film.

A stronger way of thinking about the relationship between horror films and culture is the contention that works of horror *resonate* with elements of a particular culture, rather than symbolize them. An important horror film does not necessarily enact a certain mode of anxiety or fear within a culture. Instead, assorted elements within the film resonate—or connect in some emotional manner—to the culture's trends and tendencies. Rather than

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 5.

²⁴ Edward J. Ingebretsen, "Monster-Making: A Politics of Persuasion," *Journal of American Culture* 21 (1998):

25.

²⁵ Phillips, 6.

taking an entirely allegorical approach and reflecting cultural fears as an outside agent, the horror film can become influential from *inside* the culture.²⁶

While this “resonance approach” is a more constructive way of referring to the influence of the horror film, it is not sufficient enough to stand on its own. If resonance were enough to captivate the filmgoer, audiences would be satisfied with watching the same films over and over again.²⁷ Films cannot continuously offer audiences only that which is familiar to their culture. **If it is to appeal to our collective imagination, it must also offer something new that will shock, surprise, and terrify the viewer.** By taking their knowledge of what the audience is familiar with, in respect to film and social conventions alike, producers create films that deny or rebel against that which is traditionally accepted and expected in order to get the audience to think, “What will they think of next?” Thus, the successful horror film makes itself accessible to the audience by containing familiar themes or situations that resonate with broad cultural anxieties, thereby making an impact on the audience through this breeding of familiarity, and achieves its desired effect of shock through violating conventions. This is precisely what the slasher film achieved; it changed the art world of the horror genre by its unconventional handling of its narratives and effects, such as introducing characters (teenagers, at that) solely for the purpose of killing them off. The success of a film within a broader culture depends upon the balance the work maintains between, first, the resonance it creates through taking advantage of familiar cultural elements and, second, its violation of conventions through including unfamiliar and shocking elements that create a sense of wonder within its audience.²⁸

The horror genre, like any art world, is intimately tied to conventions. These conventions are both adhered to and challenged in order to produce films that follow a comprehensible narrative structure, yet have enough liberty to throw in unexpected plot twists and unprecedented special effects. Howard Becker’s writings on artistic conventions can be almost uniformly applied to horror films, though there is at least one exception that must be introduced first. Unlike Becker’s conclusion to his inquiry into why artworks in such realms as photography and painting rebel against conventions, horror films do not defy

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 7.

²⁸ Ibid.

convention in order to break away from an established formalism.²⁹ The conventional elements of the horror film, in respect to plot, musical cues, length, special effects, and so on have not been established by any “classical” traditions. Rather, these nodes are part of an archetypal method of production that has been formed by waves of profit-driven imitation amongst horror films. The slasher films of the seventies and eighties are prime representations of this cycle of imitation. Even *Halloween*, the seminal slasher film, had its influences, most notably the Alfred Hitchcock classic *Psycho* (1960). Norman Bates, the eerily calm and mentally disturbed hotel proprietor at the center of Hitchcock’s film, provided many of the traits that were applied to *Halloween*’s psychotic killer, Michael Myers. Norman’s voyeurism (resulting in *Halloween*’s heavy emulation of the killer’s point-of-view in its camerawork), sexual ambiguousness (subverting sexual desires into violence), and use of a “disguise” while killing can all be seen in the character of Michael.³⁰ *Halloween* was additionally influenced, on a stylistic basis, by a distinct set of horror films from Italy, known as *gialli*, whose plots often centered on darkly-clad killers stalking and viciously murdering groups of young women. In many ways, the influence of *Psycho* and *giallo* yielded *Halloween*’s sorocide-committing, babysitter-stalking, white-mask-and-dark-coveralls-wearing maniac slasher.

Halloween was a creatively-minded synthesis of successful precedents and conventions that resulted in the genesis of the slasher film. All artistic merit aside, however, what makes *Halloween* truly memorable is its tremendous financial success. Produced on a budget of about \$320,000, the film went on to gross over \$80 million worldwide.³¹ It is a masterful, terrifying, and groundbreaking film—Ebert even rated it “four stars”—however, its foundational elements were largely derived from previous films that were notable for their financial success. It is therefore no surprise that many subsequent slashers were profit-driven business ventures on a blatant, unapologetic level. The establishment of convention within the slasher subgenre was not born out of any “lengthy tradition of formalization,” to use Becker’s terms.³² Rather, it emerged through a sudden and intense period of imitation because producers thought that giving film audiences more killers like Michael Myers would

²⁹ Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 49-50.

³⁰ Jim Harper, *Legacy of Blood: A Comprehensive Guide to Slasher Movies* (Manchester, England: Critical Vision, 2004), 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 49.

yield the same box office profits as *Halloween*, which was, at the time, the most successful independent film ever made. The *Friday the 13th* films, with their white-mask-and-dark-coveralls-wearing, camp-counselor-stalking killer, Jason Voorhees, are the most high-profile examples of such imitations. However, literally dozens of slasher films featuring killers in the vein of Michael Myers were created immediately in *Halloween*'s wake. *Terror Train* (1980), *Night School* (1980), *The Prowler* (1981), *My Bloody Valentine* (1981), *Curtains* (1983), and countless others "clones" all featured killers who wear masks over dark clothing. Furthermore, these films also relied heavily on the point-of-view camerawork and musical stings purveyed by *Halloween* (by way of *Psycho*).

Becker notes that the personnel involved in producing a work of art usually do not make all the upfront decisions anew, and that such initial matters are typically settled on the basis of precedents set by previous endeavors.³³ This statement could not be truer in the case of slasher films, whose plot structures and methods of creating suspense became so conventionalized in such a short amount of time that studios would often greenlight a project without ever having seen a script.³⁴ This practice of "blind greenlighting" became more and more commonplace as the eighties progressed, and as the slasher film proved to be a consistently lucrative enterprise. The films that were produced after *Halloween* did not follow their progenitor's conventions in homage; they imitated out of the hope that they could replicate its revenue. Rather than being legitimized through honor and praise, the conventions of the slasher film were legitimized by the profit generated by *Halloween*.

Becker also states that conventions control the relationship between art producers and their audience.³⁵ This facet of convention also rings true in the case of the slasher film, and in light of the slightly detrimental analysis of the slasher film's utilization of/reliance upon conventions above, perhaps approaching the slasher film from its obligations to its audience will yield a more favorable discussion of its interaction with convention. As, according to Becker, artistic conventions are at the heart of an artwork's ability to evoke an emotional response from the audience, the ideal horror film deftly and pragmatically engages itself

³³ Becker, 29.

³⁴ Sean S. Cunningham, who directed and co-produced the original *Friday the 13th*, has stated on several occasions that Paramount Pictures, his production company and domestic distributor, contacted him over the weekend of *Friday the 13th*'s release and requested the immediate production of *Friday the 13th Part 2*, even though Cunningham had never planned or intended for there to be a sequel. However, with the proposal teeming with lucrative potential, the second film was released in just under a year.

³⁵ Becker, 29.

with convention to shock and frighten audience members and bring them into its fictional world.³⁶ Oftentimes, the greatest audience reactions are produced when a widely-accepted and expected convention is astutely and cunningly defied. To be horrific, and therefore to resonate with the audience's collective fears, horror films must be shocking. Shock value is often attained by trying new things and offering something new. The truly groundbreaking horror films of American history attained a level of shock not only through the introduction of a new monster (whether it be a variation on invading aliens or a version of the killer in the woods), but also through an almost methodical violation of previously established conventions or "rules." The truly shocking—and, thus, successful—horror films are the ones that startle the viewer and make them want to cry out, "Hey, you can't do that!"³⁷ In a sense, audiences come to horror films with a general sense of what a horror film is supposed to look like, what its topics are, what its narrative structure is, and what sort of direction one expects it to take (this was especially true during the eighties, when the latest slasher film released in theaters was essentially a subtle variation on the slasher film that was released just a month or so before). However, the truly groundbreaking films take advantage of these expectations and set audiences up for new and unexpected things. Just as the audience has finally become comfortable with the way that horror films generally tend to operate, a film comes along that so violates expectations that it sets horror on an entirely different path.

The initial post-*Halloween* slasher films, starting with *Friday the 13th*, were innovative in at least one aspect when it came to defying film conventions: their unprecedented use of gore effects. The slasher craze of the eighties launched a competitive gambit of films that pushed the limits of the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings system in a struggle to "out-gore" each other (the mentality being that more blood equals more ticket sales). Though a majority of the films created during this period were, in respect to narrative conventions, hopelessly derivative and predictable, many of them still had the ability to shock audiences through gore effects that defied expectations.

1981's *The Burning* centers around a former summer camp director, horribly burned from a prank gone awry, who lurks around an upstate New York summer camp bent on murdering the teenagers responsible for his disfigurement. The story, with its revenge-based plot set within an idyllic lakeside summer camp, is virtually the same as *Friday the 13th*,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Phillips, 7.

which was released the previous year—one poster even used the slapdash tagline, “Today is not Friday the 13th. But if you see this movie alone ... you’ll never be the same again!”. But, while the gore featured in *Friday the 13th* caused an outrage of its own, *The Burning* is exponentially more intense than its progenitor. Its effects were so shocking—in one particularly brutal scene, the killer, using a pair of hedge clippers, rapidly murders five young people on a raft in broad daylight—that the film was banned in the United Kingdom for twenty years.³⁸ This may initially appear to be a case where defying convention put the artistic product in jeopardy, potentially limiting its exposure and accessibility (as Becker says, “You can always do things differently if you are prepared to pay the price in increased effort or decreased circulation of your work”).³⁹ However, the furor that erupted over *The Burning* had a converse effect, giving the otherwise formulaically-produced film a cult status, which certainly allowed it to recoup its \$1.5 million budget and then some.⁴⁰

Thus, films like *The Burning*, whose gruesome murder sequences have retained their shock value over the years and are still cringe-worthy today, violated the preexisting conventions that maintained a level of restraint in respect to the extent of gore that was depicted on film. The slasher subgenre, which began with the virtually bloodless *Halloween*, was permanently altered by the shock value of the omnipresent gore in later films like *Friday the 13th* and *The Burning*. By the mid-eighties, films with titles like *Slumber Party Massacre* and *The Dorm That Dripped Blood* were being released on an almost monthly basis, and millions of filmgoers lined up at theaters all across America for the latest bloodbath.

Gore effects became so popular that they launched its own horror subgenre altogether: the splatter film. Though the splatter film is often confused with the slasher film—and indeed there is often a great deal of overlap between the two—a slasher film like *Halloween* does not feature enough on-screen gore effects to fall under the “splatter” category. Michael A. Arnzen defines the splatter film as “a filmic text that promotes itself in the marketplace as one of ‘horror,’ and self-consciously revels in the special effects of gore as an artform.”⁴¹

³⁸ Harper, 73.

³⁹ Becker, 33.

⁴⁰ Adam Rockoff, *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002), 113.

⁴¹ Michael A. Arnzen, “Who’s Laughing Now? The Postmodern Splatter Film,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21 (1994): 179.

What precedents will a film follow in order to adhere to a pattern that the audience is familiar with? Conversely, what expectations will it defy in order to shock and horrify the audience? The horror film depicts the threat of violence and the spectacle of the imaginative death. The genre's ability to shock is granted by its violation of conventions. But when the violation itself becomes conventionalized through repetition, the shock of the horror film is neutralized.⁴² The inevitability of neutralization enforces the constant need to revitalize the genre by investigating other taboos to challenge and new methods of violation to employ. It is the violation of convention that initiated new forms of horror like the splatter film, and kept audiences coming back for more.

However, just as a film's resonance alone would engage the audience with too much familiarity and become boring and predictable, processes of violation on their own would yield nothing but helpless exasperation for the viewers. Therefore, the most crucial element for a horror film to possess is a combination of familiarity and shock which Phillips has termed "resonant violation."⁴³ Phillips asserts that the concept of resonant violation suggests that the horror film has a twofold importance to the broader culture. First, the horror film achieves resonance through drawing from our collective anxieties and projecting them onto the screen.⁴⁴ Secondly, the horror film's systematic violation of narrative conventions forces the audience to think differently about those anxieties, or, at least, to think about the ways in which we deal with those anxieties.⁴⁵ S. S. Prawer reinforces this relationship between resonance and violation by observing, "If the terror film is thus connected to our social concerns, it also, paradoxically, helps us to cope with our ordinary life by jolting us out of it."⁴⁶

Moments of resonant violation demonstrate to audiences that the typical ways of thinking about the world can be dangerous and that they must find new approaches.⁴⁷ Some evidence for this claim can be found in the popular observation that horror films achieve their greatest levels of popularity during times of social upheaval. Paul Wells contends, "the

⁴² Pinedo, 109.

⁴³ Phillips, 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ S. S. Prawer, *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 69.

⁴⁷ Phillips, 9.

history of the horror film is essentially a history of anxiety in the twentieth century.”⁴⁸ For whatever reason, **when culture is in a state of turmoil, audiences flock to the horror film.** Perhaps this is because, as Praver says, the horror film has the ability to shock the audience out of their anxieties. Anxiety tends to cause a sense of helplessness, while fear provides an impetus for change.⁴⁹

One key example of a horror film that achieved far-reaching resonance during a time of cultural anxiety is the 1972 proto-slasher *Last House on the Left*. The directorial debut of Wes Craven (creator of the 1984 slasher juggernaut *A Nightmare on Elm Street* who later revived the slasher film for Generation-Y in 1996 with *Scream*), and produced by Sean S. Cunningham (*Friday the 13th*), the film contains many referential moments that gave it a powerful cinematic and cultural significance during America’s traumatic Vietnam War era.

The opening scenes of *Last House* find two teenage girls leaving a wealthy suburb to go to a rock concert in New York City. En route to the concert, they are abducted, raped, and murdered by a group of escaped convicts. Soon after the murders, the convicts’ car breaks down, forcing them to unwittingly seek shelter at the home of one of the girls’ parents. The parents eventually discover what their guests have done and carry out a gruesome, chainsaw-wielding revenge that rivals the intensity of the violence experienced by their daughter.

While *Last House* contains a great deal of symbolism without ever directly mentioning Vietnam, its marketing campaign was anything but allegorical. Posters for the film (Fig. 1) featured the disclaimer: “The movie makes a plea for an end to all the senseless violence and inhuman cruelty that has become so much a part of the times in which we live. WE DON’T THINK ANY MOVIE CAN GO *TOO FAR* IN MAKING THIS MESSAGE HEARD AND FELT!”⁵⁰ The disclaimer’s accompanying image, a still from the film, heightens the political resonance of the poster.⁵¹ The still recalls one of the most famous photographs of the Vietnam era, John Filo’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph (Fig. 2) of

⁴⁸ Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London: Wallflower, 2000), 3.

⁴⁹ Phillips, 9.

⁵⁰ Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 111.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the tragedy that occurred when Ohio National Guardsmen opened fire on student antiwar protestors at Kent State University on May 4, 1970.⁵²

In Filo's photograph, fourteen-year-old runaway Mary Vecchio is kneeling over the body of Jeffrey Miller, one of four students shot and killed by the Ohio Guardsmen on that day. The image of Mari, one of the convicts' victims in *Last House*, shares many affinities with the image of Vecchio (similar kneeling positions, outstretched arm, long dark hair, open-mouthed, terrified expressions, and the two women even have similar names). By calling Mary Vecchio to mind in the same context as Mari from *Last House*, the poster directly connects the film to the sociopolitical trauma of the time.⁵³

Furthermore, David Whitten, the film's publicist, notes that the title *Last House on the Left* (a phrase that is never uttered in the film) was appealing and evocative because "the use of the word 'left' had a certain significance, because that was back in the hippie days, when so many young people thought of themselves as 'leftists.'" ⁵⁴ The use of the word "last" in the title was also significant, since at this time America was beginning to see the collapse of the New Left, which was plummeting into cultural oblivion.⁵⁵ *Last House's* evocation of Kent State suggests that the film was attempting to tap into the fears and frustrations that had formed after the downfall of the New Left as the antiwar movement was shattered by the realization that not only was the government a physical threat abroad, but it was also a threat at home, ready and willing to shoot any zealous detractor.⁵⁶ The film directs the consequences of these social upheavals—what the disclaimer refers to as "the senseless violence and inhuman cruelty that has become so much a part of the times in which we live"—on Mari and her friend. The girls, depicted as innocent yet unavoidably exposed to rape and violence, serve as a focal point for the anxieties that were concerning the nation at the time.⁵⁷ The poster's warning that the film should not be seen by people over thirty years old demonstrates that the producers knew exactly who was receiving the brunt of this upheaval.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ David A. Szulkin, *Wes Craven's "Last House on the Left": The Making of a Cult Classic* (Guildford, England: FAB Press, 1997), 125.

⁵⁵ Lowenstein, 114.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Of course, anxiety and tension are not present exclusively during times of turmoil. The horror film is a vehicle through which one can reflect on their anxieties, whether they are implicit or explicit. The strange relationship between the resonant and the shocking is summed up by James Ursini, who states, “Horror is based on recognizing in the unfamiliar something familiar.”⁵⁸ Throughout the horror genre’s history, it has achieved innovation and has introduced new forms of violation. More often than not, these periods of innovation were met with outrage. Since the fifties, horror films have largely been marketed towards teenagers and young people in their early twenties, as this population is the one most likely to have expendable dollars and a willingness to experiment with viewing innovative films that turn convention upside down.

The horror genre’s most innovative and landmark films, such as *The Curse of Frankenstein*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and *Friday the 13th*, were all accused of going “too far” or being “too violent,” but they were all enormously successful because of the masses of generally youthful audience members who attended them.⁵⁹ Young audiences are attracted to horror films because they contain themes that resonate with fears that largely, and perhaps solely, concern them. When he wrote his scathing review of *Friday the 13th Part 2*, Roger Ebert was thirty-nine years old—beyond the desired/intended age range of the slasher film by over a decade and a half. One could cull from the theories of cultural production formulated by Pierre Bourdieu in explaining Ebert’s hatred of the slasher subgenre. Ebert illustrates in his review that his experience with films created during the era of James Dean and Marlon Brando factored strongly into his habitus—in other words, they directly influenced his taste in and expectations for teen-oriented films. As Ebert was greatly predisposed to the worldview expressed in films like *Rebel Without a Cause*, he already had, to use Bourdieu’s words, a “tactical position in the field,” and thus could not reconcile his habitus with the drastically different worldview presented in *Friday the 13th Part 2* et al.⁶⁰ On the other hand, while the teen-oriented films of the eighties certainly included upbeat comedic fare, such as *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, the slasher film dominated the decade, and greatly added to the collective habitus of millions of American youths who were already

⁵⁸ James Ursini, “Introduction,” in *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 162.

being bombarded with Coca-Cola, Alice Cooper, and MTV against the backdrop of Cold War woes and Reaganomics. The slasher subgenre, easily one of the most rebellious types of film in history, deeply resonated with the equally rebellious youths of 1980s America. This may explain why some horror fans of the eighties, as familiar with decapitations and evisceration as Ebert was with Dean's motorcycle, find older horror films—even those of *Psycho*'s caliber—too tame in their special effects and too slow in their pacing.

Since teens have consistently been and always will be the target audience for horror films, producers are consistently faced with the challenge of innovating and violating conventions that will draw in the latest batch of youths, which usually comes with the consequence of alienating the former batch, whose habitus—and gag reflexes—have already been well established and pushed to the limit by the previous wave of innovation. The irony behind critics who decry the violence in the most recent phases of horror is that they tend to consider the earlier products of the genre innocuous, even though they incited just as much outrage in their own time. Thus, it can be concluded that, as the horror genre evolves through a continuous supplanting of the past in order to maintain its profitability, it yields the paradox of the cadre of middle-aged critics who are outraged at its transgression against their own habitus, and the latest generation of teens who fall in love with it because they are, like teens in the past, being treated to the next great wave of horror that has been specifically tailored to them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnzen, Michael A. "Who's Laughing Now? The Postmodern Splatter Film." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21 (1994). 176-184.
- Becker, Howard S. *Art Worlds*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Doherty, Thomas. *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1988.

- Ebert, Roger. "Friday the 13th, Part 2." *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 1, 1981.
- Gomery, Douglas. "The Economics of the Horror Film." In *Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions*, eds. James B. Weaver, III and Ron Tamborini, 49-62. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1996.
- Harper, Jim. *Legacy of Blood: A Comprehensive Guide to Slasher Movies*. Manchester, England: Critical Vision, 2004.
- Heffernan, Kevin. *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Ingebretsen, Edward J. "Monster-Making: A Politics of Persuasion." *Journal of American Culture* 21 (1998). 25-34.
- Lowenstein, Adam. *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Phillips, Kendall R. *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005.
- Pinedo, Isabel C. *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.
- Prawer, S. S. *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Rockoff, Adam. *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film, 1978-1986*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002.
- Szulkin, David A. *Wes Craven's "Last House on the Left": The Making of a Cult Classic*. Guildford, England: FAB Press, 1997.
- Ursini, James. "Introduction." In *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini, 3-8. New York: Limelight Editions, 2000.
- Wells, Paul. *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch*. London: Wallflower, 2000.
- Zuckerman, Marvin. "Sensation Seeking and the Taste for Vicarious Horror." In *Horror Films: Current Research on Audience Preferences and Reactions*, eds. James B. Weaver, III and Ron Tamborini, 147-160. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1996.

ILLUSTRATIONS

**LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT—
CAN A MOVIE GO TOO FAR?**

Many people who have gone to see the movie LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT and many public officials contacted by outraged moviegoers believe the answer to this question is YES! Demands have been made to terminate the engagement of this movie immediately. WHY? LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT relates to a problem and a situation that practically every teenage girl is vulnerable to and every parent lives in dread of. (Note: The movie is, in fact, a retelling of Ingmar Bergman's Academy Award Winner "The Virgin Spring" in 1972 terms.) A young girl savagely brutalized, killed by a madman band of degenerates. Revenge of the most horrible kind exacted by the parents of the dead girl — the killers are themselves killed.

Yes, you will hate the people who perpetrate these outrages — you should! But, if a movie — and it is only a movie — can arouse you to such extreme emotion then the film director has succeeded.

Violence and brutality are not condoned in LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT — far from it! The movie makes a plea for an end to all the senseless violence and inhuman cruelty that has become so much a part of the times in which we live. WE DON'T THINK ANY MOVIE CAN GO TOO FAR IN MAKING THIS MESSAGE HEARD AND FELT!

This fact is already borne out by the number of parents who have taken their daughters to see the film. These parents regard this movie as a perfect deterrent to this type of behavior.

**MARI, SEVENTEEN,
IS DYING. EVEN FOR HER
THE WORST IS YET
TO COME!**

**LAST HOUSE
ON THE LEFT**

**TO AVOID
FAINTING
KEEP REPEATING
IT'S ONLY A MOVIE
... ONLY A MOVIE
... ONLY A MOVIE
... ONLY A MOVIE
... ONLY A MOVIE
... ONLY A MOVIE**

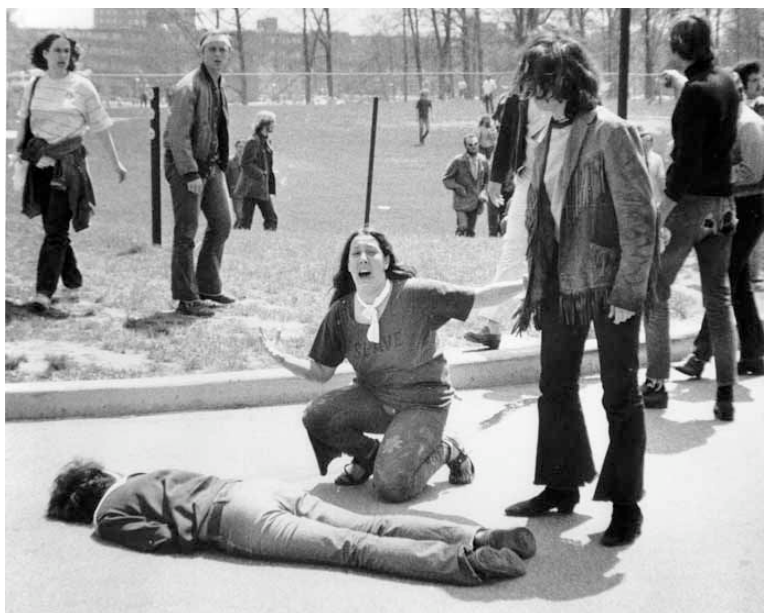
**... IT'S
JUST
ACROSS
THE
STREET
FROM
"JOE"!**

**WARNING!
NOT RECOMMENDED
FOR PERIODS
OVER 30!**

HELD OVER!

© 1970 COMMUNICATIONS FILMS LTD. Produced by "THE LEFT HOUSE ON THE LEFT"
Screenplay: JAMES HILL + GARY SHAPIRO + GARDNER LARSEN + ROBERT SHAPIRO
+ and JAMES HILL AND ROBERT SHAPIRO + Produced by GARY L. COMMUNICATIONS
Written and Directed by MICHAEL CURRIE, COLOR BY NIKELUX

R RESTRICTED (Under 17 Inadvisable
Without Parental Accompanyment)

1 Poster for *Last House on the Left* (Lowenstein, 112)

2 John Filo, Kent State University, May 4, 1970 (Lowenstein, 115)