Whither goest, "American Nightmare"?

As the 1980s came to a close, the American horror film seemed locked into an endless loop of formulaic repetition. Box office returns for once-profitable franchises like *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Halloween*, and other less prolific series began to flag due to growing audience disinterest, and most of these series did not seemingly survive beyond the early 1990s. The crossover success of many "art-horror" films (e.g., William Friedkin’s 1973 *The Exorcist*) seemed a thing of the past, and the raw exploitation edge of earlier shockers (e.g., Wes Craven’s 1972 *Last House on the Left*) was now subsumed by the horror film’s turn toward safe, almost self-mocking (and certainly audience-comforting) formulas in which even gory effects failed to register spectatorial bodily affect. It truly appeared that the much-touted horror renaissance of the 1970s was forever buried beneath uninspired sequels, and there were few "horror auteurs" left to fill the creative void. This is not to say that the end of the decade was entirely bereft of originality—see *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker, 1987), for example, although it too spawned a number of sequels—but the horror film in America had largely reverted back to niche consumption by its cultish fan base, no longer enjoying the wider audiences it had garnered during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Of course, this sort of periodization by decade is inherently flawed, and my selection of the dates 1991-2006 is rather arbitrary, but...
the last decade in American horror films has certainly seen a boom in interest, brought on by new social anxieties, increased postmodern influence, and retroactive production trends. Nineteen-ninety-one seems a prime year to begin a brief overview of this period because a very popular film, The Silence of the Lambs, swept the Oscars that year, awarded top honors by the Hollywood film industry—and yet, as Jancovich (2002) says, there was (and still is) debate over whether or not Lambs is a horror film. As he argues, critics were more likely to legitimize the film as a “thriller” or a “mystery,” while still “presen[t]ing the film as offering the pleasures associated with the horror movie” (p. 156), despite the many thematic motifs, visual devices, and plot functions identifying it as such. Indeed, the serial killer film has always presented a very blurred boundary between horror and other genres (like mysteries and thrillers), especially since films like Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) first located the “abnormal” mind as “the monster within.” This genre blur has continued over the past few decades with increasingly dark serial killer tales like Seven (David Fincher, 1995), From Hell (Hughes Brothers, 2001), The Cell (Tarsem Singh, 2000), and The Bone Collector (Phillip Noyce, 1999), not to mention three other Hannibal Lecter films: Manhunter (Michael Mann, 1986), Hannibal (Ridley Scott, 2001), and Red Dragon (Brett Ratner, 2002). Hence, a horror film like Silence of the Lambs could still be critically acclaimed by masquerading as anything other than horror, distanced (more or less) from the formulaic slasher films that had by then become synonymous with the genre.

Such was the state of American horror films as the 1990s began. Of course, it is difficult to see the horror genre as having a definite evolutionary course (not least because the monster, as the core device of the horror film, is frequently figured as somehow “devolved”), for genre production has always been profit-oriented, concerned with successful formulas, sequels, spin-offs, and imitators. [1] This has especially been true since the first big “blockbuster” movies of the 1970s (e.g., Steven Spielberg’s 1975 Jaws), for Hollywood now structures the strength of box-office returns upon a film’s opening weekend (via wide distribution) and a gradual recouping of costs via the home video and DVD market. As a result, huge production budgets are allocated for films that must cater to the broadest mass tastes and take the fewest creative risks, not being selectively distributed or expected to garner slowly building theatrical returns—especially now that past horror venues like grindhouses, drive-ins, midnight movies, and other specialty genre cinemas are a rarity (although much of the foreign, low-budget, and exploitation horror once frequenting these venues has now been shifted to the more profitable direct-to-video market). With the consolidation of a few giant media conglomerates owning both studios and theatres, a mainstreaming of genre products results in an effort to assure the utmost immediate profitability from a film—and thus every successful formula is repeated and given wide distribution, despite diminishing returns. Meanwhile, audiences of genre films are not mindless and passive consumers, but rather people actively trying to fulfill their particular desire, becoming less prone to accept increasingly inferior products—at least until some new generic revision comes along which revitalizes old formulas and gives birth to new ones.

One example of an interesting minor development in horror during the 1990s was the “race horror” films exemplified by Candyman (Bernard Rose, 1992), The People Under the Stairs (Wes Craven, 1992), Tales From the Hood (Rusty Cundieff, 1995), and Bones (Ernest Dickerson, 2001), which each took racial inequality as their basis, often using African-American characters as protagonists, and some directly targeted (however exploitatively, recalling the blaxploitation horror films of the 1970s) to African-American youth audiences through links to rap culture. Despite the somewhat progressive bent of this small sub-faction of recent horror, Hollywood producers have not been as sensitive to ethnic concerns in their appropriation of horror ideas from various (non-Western) countries. [2] The remaking of plots from the recent Asian horror craze, for example, has translated films like Ringu (Hideo Nakata, 1998), Ju-on (Takashi Shimizu, 2000), Dark Water (Hideo Nakata, 2002), and Pulse (Kiyoshi Kurosawa, 2001) into an American context, robbing much of their national specificity. Although import quotas (now fully incorporated under the rhetoric of globalization) still guarantee that American films dominate most foreign commercial film markets, recent American horror has arguably come to directly inspire fewer derivative films in foreign markets like Italy and Japan than in the past. In turn, American horror now looks to take aboard proven profit makers like foreign horror successes and remakes of its own pioneering back catalogue (e.g., 1970’s American horror), rather than drawing upon the same independent, low-budget tradition that spawned that back catalogue.

Meanwhile, many of the “classical” horror stories (e.g., vampires, werewolves, etc.) have met with apathy and mixed results during the last fifteen years, some attempting serious dramatic effect and literary pretensions to elevate their status to “art-horror,” while others typically finding greater success when combined with other genres (such as the action movie). Examples of the former include Bram Stoker’s Dracula (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992), Interview with the Vampire (Neil Jordan, 1994), Wolf (Mike Nichols, 1994), Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh, 1994), and Mary Reilly (Stephen Frears, 1996), while examples of the latter include The Mummy (Stephen Sommers, 1999), Blade (Stephen Norrington, 1998), Underworld (Len Wiseman, 2003), and Van Helsing (Stephen Sommers, 2004). As the genre-mixing qualities of such action/horror movies attest, the influence of postmodernism was a major factor in resurrecting the American horror film during the last decade, and it continues to play a vital (and controversial) role.

2. How “new” is this “New Nightmare”? Since the early 1980s, there has been a growing body of theoretical work and critical reappraisal of the horror genre. As in past genres like the Western and the film noir, perhaps the increasingly formulaic nature of American horror during the 1980s helped give rise to some of these academic theories (many of them overly reductive in scope) because the genre was now easier to “pin down.” An academic interest in cult cinema and other “low” cultural forms was also developing during this period [3], no doubt linked as much to cultural studies as to postmodernism’s leveling of all hitherto stratified cultural objects. Since the 1990s, the full force of postmodernity
Several films that exemplify the horror film’s newfound surge of self-reflexivity are Wes Craven’s New Nightmare (Wes Craven, 1994) and Scream (Wes Craven, 1996), two of the more notable American horror entries from the 1990s. Foregrounding the narrative patterns of the Nightmare on Elm Street series and of 1980s slasher movies in general (respectively), these two films effectively announced the vacuity of 1980s horror formulas while nevertheless relying upon many of the same suspense- and shock-generating sequences used by those earlier genre products. New Nightmare finds the real-life actors and filmmakers associated with the then-dead Elm Street series being assaulted by an ancient entity that has previously taken the form of Freddy Kruger, having been contained within the Nightmare films through the ritualistic power of story. Speaking within the diegesis, Craven himself explains that the entity is attempting to break into the real world because the Elm Street story has become too familiar to people (and hence not affective enough) and “watered down to make it an easier sell.” As the diegetic Craven writes out a new Elm Street screenplay to re-capture the entity, the filmic events he writes begin happening to the real people around him, leading to a delirious case of mise-en-abyme whereby the film-within-a-film and diegetic reality become indistinguishable from one another. New Nightmare speaks to the mythic, culturally universal role that horror texts serve in society—a role at odds with the homogenized, tongue-in-cheek sequels that began positioning Freddy as a sort of wisecracking anti-hero. Although New Nightmare is itself a sort of sequel (however self-reflexive) and a compendium of ideas from throughout the Elm Street series, Craven seems to be strongly distancing himself from what has become of his original concept, insisting upon a sophisticated return to “adult” horror [5] (over formulaic juvenilia) by virtue of its appeals to self-reflexivity.

Scream appeared several years later and became a huge box-office success, not least because it appeared to parody films like the Elm Street, Halloween, and Friday the 13th series. As apparent to any fan of horror since Halloween (John Carpenter, 1978), the predictable “rules” (many of which were incorporated into Clover’s (1996) famous analysis of the “Final Girl”) of who survives and who dies in slasher films are here announced by a young horror buff. Regardless of this advice, a bevy of teenagers are killed off by a masked killer obsessed with horror movie trivia. The killer is revealed to be two maladjusted youths on a revenge spree who claim that watching horror films have not triggered their actions and motives, but have simply made their methods “more creative.” Playing as much upon horror clichés as upon frequent conservative outrages over the purported power of horror films to inspire copycat crimes, Scream may foreground the rules by which it operates, but it still loyally adheres to them. In fact, one ironic source of viewing pleasure derives from the plot’s surprising obedience to the very rules and narrative conventions so explicitly spelled out mid-film; though we may predict that the self-aware film will change the course of its own actions, we are rather pleased to find the rules standing solid after so much play, as self-reflexivity operates to reinforce rather than subvert conventions. This makes the film more of a parody than a complicated critique of banal horror formulas—borne out by the fact that Scream inspired two sequels, the Scary Movie comedy series (parodies of a parody, ironically), and set the tone for many subsequent slick, teen-oriented horror films (many featuring young TV stars) with far less imagination and self-reflexive awareness (e.g., I Know What You Did Last Summer (Jim Gillespie, 1997)). If New Nightmare had seemed the nail in the coffin for 1980s slasher formulas, Scream merely served as an unlikely conduit for the recycling of those formulas for a new generation during the late-1990s and beyond. [6]

As the slasher movie soldiered on blandly, two other monstrous subgenres found new life during this period: ghosts and zombies. A phenomenal box-office success, The Sixth Sense (1999) tells the story of a psychologist who, after befriending a young boy who can see dead people, discovers that he has himself been killed and become a ghost. Though the plot was nothing terribly new (e.g., see Carnival of Souls (Herk Harvey, 1962) and Siesta (Mary Lambert, 1987)), the film works as an effective horror piece that builds a strong atmosphere in place of gore. However, in light of its much-touted twist ending, it is tempting to read the film’s success as partly inspired by a further reaction against the formulaic patterns of 1980s horror. Often compared to the well-kept secret of Psycho’s climax, the ending of The Sixth Sense served to bring a sense of genuine surprise and a splash of pseudo-artistic auteur vision back to the horror genre in a form palatable (i.e., non-exploitative) enough for mass audiences and mainstream critics alike. Its success spawned a long string of imitators and fellow travelers of ghostly territory (including demonic possession films), such as The Others (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001), Identity (James Mangold, 2003), a 2000 theatrical re-release of The Exorcist, a number of remakes (to be discussed further shortly), and Shyamalan’s own subsequent forays into horror (Signs, 2002; The Village, 2004). Several years after The Sixth Sense, Danny Boyle’s British 2002 zombie hit 28 Days Later was imported to America, opening to critical acclaim and strong...
ticket sales. As indebted to George Romero’s Dead trilogy as to various Italian films (notably Umberto Lenzi’s 1980 action/horror Nightmare City, which also featured fast-moving zombies), 28 Days Later is one of the strongest, most effective (if somewhat unoriginal) horror films of recent years. But, like The Sixth Sense, its success inspired a string of other movies, including a remake of Dawn of the Dead (Zack Snyder, 2004), the zombie parody Shaun of the Dead (Edgar Wright, 2004), and Romero’s own intelligent return to the zombie film, Land of the Dead (George Romero, 2005).

3. Which nightmare do people want?

As noted earlier, sequels and spin-offs are nothing new to horror films and other genre products, but in the post-Scream era, the creative void in American horror has seen Hollywood embracing a greater willingness to repeat past formulas through updated remakes instead of simply more sequels of franchise films. Scream highlighted the kitschy predictability of those past formulas, but nonetheless served as a feature-length homage to them. It should be little surprise then that Hollywood’s next move would be to remake well-known American horror films from the 1970s and 1980s, repackaging the same formulas for a new youth audience unlikely to have actually seen the originals. These remakes attempt to capitalize upon the notoriety of the originals (often referring to the originals as canonical texts), invoking the name-of-the-genre as author-function. The low-budget origins of the original versions are erased, updated by high production values to make them seem less campy and dated. These remakes flaunt their supposed slickness and modernity, hiding their absence of originality beneath pretty veneers and rapid editing, making horror seem like a less accessible route for young low-budget filmmakers. Two prime examples of this are the remakes of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Marcus Nispel, 2003) and Dawn of the Dead (Zack Snyder, 2004). Each invokes the reputation of the original film, but each also lacks the progressive subtext that made the originals so notable and enduring. For example, in Romero’s Dawn of the Dead, cannibalism becomes a metaphor for consumerism, with one character remarking that the dead are returning to the shopping mall out of instinct—but in the remake, only bits of this dialogue remain and consumerism is far less critiqued in other ways. Like its revamped kin, the Dawn remake is the very sort of consumer commodity that Romero detested in the first place. Although other recent remakes include several plots taken from somewhat earlier films (The Haunting, Thirteen Ghosts, House on Haunted Hill, House of Wax, The Island of Dr. Moreau), most take films from the 1970s and 1980s as their basis. These include The Fog, When a Stranger Calls, The Hills Have Eyes, The Amityville Horror, The Omen, Dawn of the Dead, Day of the Dead, The Hitcher, and so on. Other recent remakes include the Japanese horror films noted earlier, plus Gus Van Sant’s 1998 ill-fated remake of Psycho. [7] While the originals that inspired these remakes are all genre products (and hence commodities of some kind) and do not necessarily foster progressive readings, the fact that sequels to several of these remakes have also begun appearing testifies to the further commoditization of the original ideas.

One of the most frequent complaints about these remakes (and recent American horror in general) is the overuse of visual and aural shock cuts to continually startle the viewer. Though shock cuts have always been part of the modern horror film’s repertoire, they are generally seen as responsible for mere “cheap shocks,” not for generating a strong sense of atmosphere. Indeed, both critics and horror fans often privilege suspense and unrelenting tension over the desensitizing effect of too many shock cuts that merely impede the narrative, covering up for poor storytelling. Some have remarked that the abundance of shock cuts may be due to the influence of frenetic music video editing or the higher speed of absorbable input in this so-called Information Age. While these causes may indeed be somewhat true, it seems more likely that today’s youth horror audience is simply no longer frightened by the sort of horror filmmaking that worked so well on 1970s audiences (thus opening the opportunity to remake those films in newer, more commercially viable ways for new audiences). Just as 1930s horror no longer has the capacity to frighten viewers today, today’s youth are more likely to laugh or yawn at the low-budget horror fare of the 1970s and 1980s, especially after being essentially primed to do so by self-parodic films like Scream. While the backlash overuse of shock cuts continues, it may just be the case that critics and audiences accustomed to the output of the 1970s horror renaissance are simply facing a growing generation gap in horror consumption as a younger generation of moviegoers becomes the primary horror audience—an audience unable to truly appreciate what made those earlier films so groundbreaking and terrifying. In this way, the recent spate of remakes does little to provoke positive reevaluation of just what made the originals so effective, instead (falsely) equating newer technology and higher production values with vast improvements upon the originals, all the while lacking the verve and affect of the parent films. [8]

Another complaint leveled at these remakes is a “mainstreaming” of bodily destruction (often seen as originating with the 1980s horror franchise and formula pieces) that empties gore of its visceral affect, more likely inspiring laughs and disdain for the victimized characters than genuine disgust and discomfort. [9] As Wells (2000) notes, when monsters exist within horror formulas merely to
explore the legend of the eponymous witch. Made on a shoestring budget, the film brought horror back to the tradition of low-budget new and inexpensive digital video format to create a “mockumentary” about three young filmmakers who vanished while trying to execute their project. What comprises the nightmare of today…and tomorrow?

In addition to the various influences of postmodernity and generic legacy noted above, the rapid explosion of consumer technology during the 1990s, exemplified by the spread of the Internet and other global media/communication sources, has provided the horror genre with considerable material. Fear of electronic media and the interaction of bodies with technology is not a wholly new source of horror, but it has become a much more pervasive social anxiety during the last decade with so much widespread unease about the state of safety, privacy, security, and morality in the Information Age. Movies like Ringu, Pulse, White Noise (Geoffrey Sax, 2005), Fear Dot Com (William Malone, 2002), and Stay Alive (William Brent Bell, 2006) reflect this sort of fear; as several of those examples suggest, similar concerns are currently present within Japanese horror films (which have spawned American remakes), perhaps because Japanese society is also very preoccupied with technological advances. Moving the other direction, narratives originating from within these new media are also inspiring the genre, as in video game plots being translated into horror movies: Resident Evil (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2002), Silent Hill (Christophe Gans, 2006), Alone in the Dark (Uwe Boll, 2005), and Castlevania (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2007).

Alongside this fearful preoccupation with mass media, new technologies have also inspired voyeurism on a mass scale (as the success of reality TV clearly attests), feeding back into horror’s exploitative axis. One of the more notable (and culturally familiar) specters haunting this media obsession in the horror genre is that of the “snuff film.” With the Internet providing new, anonymous sources of video from around the world (e.g., websites that offer footage of actual death), of the sort previously found in mondo movies like Sheldon Renan’s 1981 The Killing of America, the urban legend of the snuff film has resurfaced in various horror films like Ringu, Fear Dot Com, and The Last Horror Movie (Julian Richards, 2003). [11]

The best example of this voyeuristic media obsession in horror came with The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sanchez, 1999), which allegedly became the most financially successful independent film ever made (wrestling that honor from John Carpenter’s Halloween). Though it shamelessly borrowed its premise from Ruggero Deodato’s 1979 shocker Cannibal Holocaust (not to mention from The Last Broadcast, a virtually identical horror film made a year earlier by Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler), Blair Witch used the new and inexpensive digital video format to create a “mockumentary” about three young filmmakers who vanished while trying to explore the legend of the eponymous witch. Made on a shoestring budget, the film brought horror back to the tradition of low-budget
forces of law and order either too fearful or inept to respond appropriately) seemed to echo widespread paranoia about chemical and
to utilize only the sort of makeup gore effects available during the 1970s, but time constraints forced

Of course, gore has been harnessed for exploitation of a very different variety in America’s current neoconservative political climate, as a film like The Passion of the Christ (which one particularly astute critic dubbed “The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre”) proves once and for all. Blood-drenched violence is all relative, it seems, and only the horror genre is still worthy of causing a genuine moral panic. But what does it mean for the horror film in a post-9/11 America so paralyzed by a climate of fear? How do Americans respond to these images of destruction and terror? With several Hollywood films about the events of 9/11 now appearing in 2006, there are fears that a
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Although these mockumentaries are primarily low-budget affairs (often applauded by horror fans for their place in the low-budget horror tradition), hyperreal effects have increasingly changed the treatment of more horror films on the opposite end of the economic spectrum. As CGI effects allow for greater simulated bodily destruction than ever before, the body has become a far less “real” site of violence in horror films. The contested authenticity of gore has led many purists to pride traditional makeup effects and appliances over digitally composed imagery. The body as referent of the Real becomes lost in this new technology, violating the genre’s traditional low-budget aesthetic. As a “low” cultural form, horror films are continually linked to (and consumed by) lower economic classes—and hence the reaction against these new CGI effects represents not just a man/machine opposition, but an economic opposition between low-budget human ingenuity (artisanal work) and high-budget computer trickery (mass production). [12] This contestation also feeds back into the potential generation gap between older and younger horror fans; for example, Rob Zombie reportedly wanted his neo-exploitation film The Devil’s Rejects to utilize only the sort of makeup gore effects available during the 1970s, but time constraints forced him to turn to CGI instead; while Alexandre Aja hired Giannetto De Rossi (who designed many of the most memorable gore effects for Lucio Fulci) for High Tension.

The Passion of the Christ

35mm stock) like Texas Chainsaw Massacre and the simulated footage in Cannibal Holocaust so gritty and unforgiving. However, Blair Witch is very different from those films because it uses suggestion alone to achieve its scares—not once is the witch ever captured on camera—and therein lies the significance of the film: its power of suggestion (and, more broadly, its financial success) was due in large part to the advance promotion of the film online. The apparent veracity of the film’s footage was claimed through its website, accompanied by a detailed mythology of the Blair Witch legend and a supplementary documentary (Curse of the Blair Witch, Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sanchez, 1999). The film’s phenomenal success was largely due to its extratextual interplay with online media and rumor mills, causing the “truth” of the film’s constructedness to be continually debated (or downright lost) within the online realm. Arguably the first great success of a film effectively launched via the Internet, The Blair Witch Project seems to perfectly fit Wells’ (2000) discussion of the urban legend in postmodern horror: the monster of the urban legend may be grounded in some real event, but in the Information Age, there are no more hidden secrets underlying the dangers of that danger, only a “relentless proliferation of open secrets which serve to mask any one dominant paradigm of significance, stability, and security. Everything appears to be a lie, and the truth seemingly unknowable” (p. 86-87).

The Last Horror Movie

The last time to be able to separate themselves from the narrative by saying “It’s only a movie.” If snuff films represent the ultimate validation of the horror film’s crossover into real life, these hyperreal horror mockumentaries (which are, in effect, simulated snuff films) embody one of the creative limits of the horror film. As The Last Horror Movie suggests, the only place for the genre to go from here is into the actual snuff territory of real murder.

The Last Horror Movie

The horror film has always had to contend with the problem of how to present fantastic events within the context of diegetic verisimilitude, but The Blair Witch Project’s use of documentary form sidesteps this issue, supposedly locating its horrors within the real, extra-diegetic world. In films like Blair Witch and The Last Horror Movie, the documentary’s traditional ties to external reality are simulated, moving beyond the narrative boundaries of the traditional horror film; if the simulation of reality is effective enough, viewers will no longer be able to separate themselves from the narrative by saying “It’s only a movie.” If snuff films represent the ultimate validation of the horror film’s crossover into real life, these hyperreal horror mockumentaries (which are, in effect, simulated snuff films) embody one of the creative limits of the horror film. As The Last Horror Movie suggests, the only place for the genre to go from here is into the actual snuff territory of real murder.

The Blair Witch Project

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Of course, gore has been harnessed for exploitation of a very different variety in America’s current neoconservative political climate, as a film like The Passion of the Christ (which one particularly astute critic dubbed “The Jesus Chainsaw Massacre”) proves once and for all. Blood-drenched violence is all relative, it seems, and only the horror genre is still worthy of causing a genuine moral panic. But what does it mean for the horror film in a post-9/11 America so paralyzed by a climate of fear? How do Americans respond to these images of destruction and terror? With several Hollywood films about the events of 9/11 now appearing in 2006, there are fears that a
biological warfare (e.g., anthrax). [13] Roth’s next film, Hostel (2005), plays upon post-9/11 fears about the dangers for Americans traveling in “hostile” countries as international relations with the United States break down. Recalling reports of American secret prisons for torture in Eastern Europe and the torture of suspected terrorists at other American prisons, it centers on young American backpackers seduced by the lure of a hedonistic Europe, then kidnapped and sold for rich businessmen to brutalize and kill. Clover’s (1992) discussion of the revenge of impoverished and disempowered rural residents upon bourgeois city folk in films like Texas Chainsaw Massacre and The Hills Have Eyes (p. 124-36) bears consideration here, with the still-impoverished citizens of Eastern Europe revenging against forces of American globalization that have introduced capitalism (albeit taking the form of a black market in murder) to the former Eastern Bloc, but have also left them to their own devices. Just as the American (male) tourists treat Europe and its (female) denizens as so much tantalizing meat, they are themselves reduced to the level of fleshy commodity.

As Williams (2005) says, George Romero’s Land of the Dead “resurrects key elements of the ‘70s political horror genre for a new era, by revealing the relevance of a past tradition disavowed by trivial, postmodernist horror films such as Scream.” Filled with subtle references to George W. Bush’s disastrous “War on Terror,” Romero’s film is a complex and biting allegory for a contemporary America still stratified by race and class differences between the masses and those in power. Key differences between the living and the walking dead are all but erased in this entry. Recalling their employment as symbols of Vietnam War victims in Night of the Living Dead (1968), Romero’s zombies are no longer reduced to the bumbling symbols of mindless consumerism that they were in Dawn of the Dead, but are now an organized revolutionary force out to topple the highest reaches of economic and governmental power. Fiercely embodying Wood’s (1986) concept of the progressive horror text (and quite unlike the monsters of recent Hollywood horror, such as the zombies of the remade Dawn of the Dead), the (anti)heroes of this film are the zombies themselves, suggesting both a cultural and political mobilization against the forces of dominant American society, violating the popular overvaluation of bourgeois affluence, patriotic rhetoric, and even religious zealotry (given that these supposedly “evil” creatures cross metaphysical boundaries). [14]

With the accumulation of post-9/11 rhetoric about “evil empires,” nuclear propagation, and war against an invisible global enemy, paranoid fears about “the enemy within” have begun to reappear in the horror genre. With a new Cold War emerging (the phrase “communist” now replaced with “terrorist”), it may come as no surprise to soon see social anxieties about paranoia, war, weaponry, and racial tension translate themselves into horror films in ways similar to 1950s horror narratives. Meanwhile, cycles of retro-fashion may continue to make glossy remakes and postmodern revisions of earlier horror films a popular trend. But as younger audiences are reintroduced to films from the 1980s and 1990s, where will the cycle end? It is hard to imagine self-reflexive postmodernist films like Scream, New Nightmare, or The Blair Witch Project being remake several decades from now. Will remakes of films from the 1930s-1960s ensue in large number? Will “classic” monsters come back into style? Despite the current appearance of sequels to 1970s remakes, there are already signs that perhaps mainstream audiences will grow just as apathetic toward the current 1970s-1980s remake cycle as they did toward the endless sequels of 1980s horror franchises. What kinds of fresh horrors will become popular with new, younger generations of moviegoers? Indeed, can the genre really break out of its cyclical repetition and move anywhere new and progressive from here?

The following ideas are several suggestions for the future of American horror. Following Hollywood’s current overuse of shock cuts, a move toward non-narrative horror could preserve the attraction of exploitative moments of violence and sex, interrupt suspenseful sequences with non-signifying visual and aural shock cuts, and employ violent camera movement to produce an altogether Artaudian effect upon the spectator. For example, a graphic scene of nudity and gore could be followed by a dizzying series of pans, then a stalking sequence in which the ambient noise is suddenly interrupted by a bright flash of red and a shrieking metallic sound, none of which directly motivate or even refer to the film’s plot. This type of strategy would move the source of horror away from narrative and toward the sensory bombardment made possible by the apparatus itself. Of course, this would be a surrealist sort of horror film that defies traditional conventions and formulas, so it may be too avant-garde for mass audiences and too close to bodily affect for high-minded critics. Another potential source of (non-fantastic) horror could follow in the steps of films like The Blair Witch Project and The Last Horror Movie, only by simulating documentary footage based around a real historical event. If the events could be verified by unbiased media accounts, this would help shore up the supposed authenticity of the footage—plus it could provide an opportunity for critiques of the sociopolitical forces that enabled such historical events to occur in the first place. For example, a horrific mockumentary about government-sanctioned murder could be effective—but without fantastic elements and obvious horror conventions, it would run the risk of being seen as agitprop. Nevertheless, the mockumentary presents a form whose full parameters have not yet fully been explored within the horror genre.

Other options for reinvigorating the genre include more progressive treatments of minority protagonists, as in the case of 1990s “race horror” or the opportunity for more challenging examples of “queer horror.” Presenting horror films in “real time” is also a yet neglected strategy that could make for very grueling and claustrophobic horror; for example, two hours of diegetic time in a slasher or zombie plot could be presented in full during a film’s 2-hour duration, documenting the repeatedly thwarted efforts of the survivors to find shelter or escape. Finally, the filmmaking strategy that seems most obviously absent in horror films is a continual use of the protagonist’s I-camera POV. Framing a film entirely through the vision of a single protagonist, without cutaways to other action, would complicate the traditional killer’s I-camera so often used to sadistic effect in horror films. It would also place the spectator in a completely powerless and claustrophobic position, forced to see and know only that which the protagonist perceives—a powerfully masochistic and suspenseful
viewing position of identification which would fly in the face of so much theorizing of the horror film’s sadistic pleasures. This position could be further linked to a progressive subject position if the protagonist with whom the viewer is forced to identify belongs to a minority group.

No matter which way the horror film moves in coming years, there is a sense that change is coming. American horror’s renaissance in the 1970s remains a largely romanticized period now and the short-lived resurgence of postmodern energy in the 1990s seems quite past. With a reversion to countless remakes and tired formulas, conservatism seems to have established itself in the genre in recent years. Though it is a consistent moneymaker, the horror film’s creative pulse seems to rise and fall periodically from one decade to the next, and it appears to be in a trough at the moment. Meanwhile, a generation gap between film-savvy purists and a more inexperienced youth audience widens—but the recent films of directors like Romero and Roth remind us of the progressive potential that is still very possible beneath so much gore and exploitative mayhem in popular films consumed by people on all sides of the divide. In a time when officially propagated fears bring Americans together in politically disempowering ways in everyday life, at least in the darkened theatre can fantasies of horror promise a pleasure that liberates fear from its ideological uses and perhaps even point to a better world where cinematic terror is the only thing that brings the masses together in trembling.

Editorial Addendum

A few points of interest to develop or add to some of Church’s observations:

1) It is interesting to note that the shock cuts which Church rightly points to as a source of annoyance for horror purists when overused (‘cheap shocks’) at the expense of atmosphere, was in fact pioneered by producer Val Lewton in his 1942 Jacques Tourneur directed The Cat People. Ironic since Lewton’s 9 horror films are now canonized for their subtlety and atmosphere.

2) The ‘snuff film’ aesthetics Church points to which attempts to short circuit the spectator’s ability to hide behind the “It’s only a movie” defense is featured in many of the underground ‘survivalist’ horror films and directly addressed in the documentary S&Man. For a discussion of this read the Documenting the Horror Genre essay in this issue.

3) With respect to the direction of the post-9/11 horror movie, there is one recent film which, as its title bluntly suggests, is a clear cut product of post 9/11 paranoia, the tense thriller Right at Your Door. Released in 2006 and directed and written by former art director Chris Gorak, Right at Your Door is in the tradition of the ‘virus’ horror film: The Crazies, Outbreak, Virus, Infection. A dirty bomb attack in Los Angeles sets the city in chaos and traps a man and his neighbor inside a house; meanwhile the man’s wife, who left for work before the attack and has been exposed to the bomb, returns home and pleads with her husband to let her inside. The majority of the film plays off the emotional tension of this situation, as the husband must decide whether to risk contamination by letting his wife into the house.

4) It may be either evidence of prophecy or coincidence, but Church’s first suggestion for a possible direction for future horror filmmakers – “a move toward non-narrative horror… with non-signifying visual and aural shock cuts, and employing violent camera movement to produce an altogether Artaudian effect upon the spectator” – is already in evidence in the striking 2006 French film Ils, directed by David Moreau and Xavier Palud. For an excellent discussion of this film within the form-over-story/style for style’s sake discourse I recommend Randolph Jordan’s essay from last month’s issue, Fantasia 2006: A Strange Circus Indeed.

5) One of Church’s other ideas —presenting horror films in “real time”— was used by director Maurice Deveraux in the Canadian ‘reality horror’ film Slashers, made in 2001. For a brief discussion of the film search for the title in the accompanying essay Documenting the Horror Genre. A variation on Church’s other idea of “framing a film entirely through the vision of a single protagonist,” is played out in the excellent Eric Nicholas film Alone With Her, also discussed in “Documenting the Horror Genre.” [ed. Donato Totaro]

Endnotes

1 Imitation may not be the greatest form of flattery where generic production is concerned, but it can possibly be indicative of larger cultural trends. However, it is often difficult to pinpoint just why one film inspires or follows another. The Sixth Sense (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), for example, was a huge box-office hit, inspiring a legion of other ghost-related movies—but was the success of The Sixth Sense due to textual factors (e.g., its actual quality as a film), economic factors (e.g., its marketing), or cultural factors (e.g., its repression of repressed social anxieties)? Likewise, are its followers and imitators exploiting The Sixth Sense’s economic success, are they tapping into a suddenly exposed cultural concern about the supernatural, or are they merely creating a feedback loop whereby an economic trend is mistaken for a cultural trend (as one film creates an appetite for others like it, without a renewed interest in the supernatural necessarily reflecting the social anxieties of a given historical moment)?

2 By “Hollywood,” I do not necessarily mean major Hollywood studios in a literal sense, but rather the widespread distribution
practices typically associated with Hollywood studios. With a focus on distribution instead of production, my limited consideration of the American horror film includes smaller production and distribution companies (e.g., New Line Cinema, Lion’s Gate Films, Dimension Films, and other minor groups with a considerable horror output) that can still get films into the common suburban multiplex. I also include several non-American horror films that nevertheless received widespread distribution, such as 28 Days Later (Danny Boyle, UK, 2002) and High Tension (Alexandre Aja, France, 2003). My intention, then, is not to focus so much upon all available horror films (such as direct-to-video films, or foreign films shown at independent and specialty theatres), but rather the films that have received wide theatrical distribution in most areas of the United States, not just metropolitan areas.

3 With the growth of cult film theory during the 1990s, perhaps it is not surprising that celebrations of cult films began to pop up on screen as well. Films like Ed Wood (Tim Burton, 1994) and Gods and Monsters (Bill Condon, 1998) looked at the lives of two cult movie auteurs, while films like Matinee (Joe Dante, 1993) and Tremors (Ron Underwood, 1990) were tongue-in-cheek homages to the golden age of “creature features” and schlock impresarios like William Castle. It seems little coincidence that these appreciations of campy cult cinema, both inside and outside the academy, appeared during the time of continued debates over postmodernism. In this context, there indeed seems to be an element of truth in Medhurst’s (1991) claim that “postmodernism is only heterosexuals catching up with camp” (p. 206).

4 Wood (1986) argues that progressive horror texts figure the monster as sympathetic and not wholly evil, especially when symbolizing certain social anxieties that can open narrative space for subversive readings to emerge. Wood’s now-popular concept of horror films as a symbolic “return of the repressed” anxieties preoccupying society at a given historical moment informs many of my readings in this article.

5 Wells (2000) terms formulaic, predictable, and mechanistic horror as a “highly conservative and reassuring” playing out of adolescent issues and preoccupations. However, “adult” horror “still carries with it the complex psychological, emotional, physical, and ideological charges of ancient folklore, fairytale, and myth” (p. 35). While I would argue that this is a somewhat simplistic viewpoint that could seemingly deny many of horror’s less reputable pleasures as “juvenile” and overly exploitative, the difference between New Nightmare and most of the sequels preceding it seems to fit Wells’ differentiation nicely.

6 True to form, several of the biggest horror franchises of the 1980s were resurrected soon afterward. Halloween: H20 (Steve Miner, 1998) brought Jamie Lee Curtis back to her screen origins, with Scream writer Kevin Williamson as co-executive producer. Jason X (Jim Isaac, 2002), Freddy vs. Jason (Ronny Yu, 2003), and Halloween: Resurrection (Rick Rosenthal, 2002) followed, with plans for more sequels currently in the works. Lacking any degree of self-reflexivity, these sequels drag out the same tired formulas that turned their predecessors into exemplars of unintentional self-parody.

7 Van Sant has stated in several interviews that when a Hollywood studio offered him the chance to direct a remake from its back catalogue, he deliberately chose a classic of tremendous cachet because it would draw the most critical fire. He reconstructed Psycho shot by shot to protest Hollywood’s knack for routinely recycling old movie plots without giving proper credit to those responsible for the original films. Regardless of Van Sant’s hidden intent, most critics savaged the film, unable to see past their own disgust that anyone would dare remake a Hitchcock masterpiece. Similar reactions have been voiced from the horror film community about other Hollywood remakes, but mainstream critics are far less likely to express outrage when a threadbare 1970s shocker like The Hills Have Eyes gets a high-budget makeover. Subversive aims did not succeed in differentiating the Psycho replication from less ingenious remakes.

8 Another considerable impetus for the recent rash of horror remakes is the explosion of CGI effects since the mid-1990s. The ability for high-budget productions to now achieve “more convincing” special effects using computer technology has affected virtually all genres and has led to other, non-horror remakes in recent years. Many purists decry the use of CGI in horror (especially in the simulation of gore effects), but it appears very often now, especially in films about ghosts and the paranormal. As these hyperreal effects become increasingly commonplace (and perhaps even expected) in the genre, the difficulty in financing such technologically advanced effects may spell trouble for the commercial future of low-budget horror. This has already been the case in international markets such as Italy, where the domestic fantasy-horror industry has lost much ground to higher budgeted Hollywood imports through an inability to compete on a technological level.

9 This is not to say that one treatment of gore is more voyeuristic or exploitative than another, for all gore tends to elicit a voyeuristic (and often exploitative) fascination with corporeal annihilation amongst many horror fans, but the spectatorial affect of gory visuals is typically tied to a narrative’s treatment of character sympathies. Characters become mere devices for enabling the attractions of bloodshed, but in mainstream treatments of gore (especially since the 1980s), victimized characters are often killed very quickly (in brief moments of gore, not extended sequences), with little attention paid to the actual pain of bodily mutilation. Spectators exercise a purely sadistic drive in pleasurably watching this “clean” slaughter, maintaining a position of superiority over the formulaic narrative and its victims. However, in many exploitation films, there are greater appeals to bodily affect, producing a mixture of sadistic pleasure and masochistic displeasure linked to the sight of bodies very painfully destroyed. There is thus a greater opportunity for split sympathies
10 With the recent emergence of a discourse based around a supposed “crisis of masculinity” for straight white males, these latest films’ decided appeals to political incorrectness vis-à-vis cinematic violence (especially towards women) may be indicative of a wider remasculinization throughout American cinema that can be read as a backlash against feminism (and other liberation movements). Because mass consumerism is frequently gendered as feminine, neo-exploitation horror films present themselves as a more selective viewing choice (i.e., more masculine and cultish, especially given the use of pastiche and in-jokes for horror buffs) than mainstream Hollywood remakes of 1970s horror, and a choice that only the most hardened (male) stomachs can handle.

11 “Snuff films,” the existence of which has never been accurately proven, supposedly show a real murder committed specifically for a viewing audience (often in the context of the horror film)—not just an actual death that has happened to be captured on film, as in the footage found in mondo movies. Drawing upon these ideas, The Last Horror Movie stands as one of the most important and intelligent (if overlooked) horror films in recent years. Heavily indebted to films like Man Bites Dog (Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, Benôt Poelvoorde, 1992) and Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (John McNaughton, 1990), it begins as a standard slasher movie that is then taped over by a clever documentary put together by a serial killer. (As a British film, this is particularly apropos, given that country’s scandals over “video nasties” and purported snuff films during the last few decades.) As he murders his victims, the killer explores the reasons that people watch horror, making viewers complicit in the voyeuristic act of viewing death. He explains that the difficulty of doing something interesting, original, and shocking on film has finally led to its logical conclusion: actual murder. Of course, The Last Horror Movie is only a “mockumentary” with staged deaths, but it reaches perhaps the utmost limit of self-reflexivity for any horror film, emerging as one of the best “meta-horror” films ever made.

12 There is arguably a gendered aspect to this contestation as well, siding traditional makeup effects with masculinities and CGI effects with femininity. Because the cultish selectivity (masculine) of horror purists is often considered more active than the supposed passive consumerism (feminine) of more mainstream, often younger moviegoers, purists privilege the hands-on workman ship of skilled makeup artists to the computerized effects of CGI designers—especially given widespread stereotypes of the masculine, oversexualized working man and the feminine, desexualized computer nerd. Repudiation of the nerdy aspects of cultdom through an overinvestment in masculine pleasures (e.g., the spectacle of gore in exploitation horror, especially when it stems from violence toward women and is meant for only the strongest stomachs) is a drive aptly examined by Hollows (2003) and Read (2003).

13 Such fears of contagion also play out in 28 Days Later (2002), in which a biological weapon escapes (ironically, through the actions of “eco-terrorists”) and decimates an entire population. The inability for governments or the military to offer a reasonable solution to a problem of their own causing is not a new theme in horror films (especially zombie films), but it acquires a certain political resonance in the post-9/11 era when duct tape and bottled water are the government’s prescribed defense against terrorist attacks upon civilians. This is borne out in the film by the military’s cold logic to lure female survivors to their fortification in order to forcibly impregnate them and thus repopulate the country. When the only safe zones in society are controlled by those with a militaristic mentality that cannot appreciate the human cost of catastrophe, an individualistic self-determination becomes the only chance for survival. Given the state of the nation in the United States and Britain, this seems now more true than ever.

14 Like Bob Clark’s 1974 film Deathdream, zombies as returning war dead have figured into several anti-war horror films. Most recently, Joe Dante’s blatantly political 2005 TV movie Homecoming (from the Masters of Horror series) features American soldiers killed in Iraq who return to vote President George W. Bush out of office before finding their eternal slumber. Bill Paxton’s 2002 horror film Frailty is especially noteworthy in the context of the resurgent bigotries of religious (Christian) fundamentalism in both domestic and international affairs. The story of a devout Christian who may or may not have been told by God to kill people revealed to him as demons, and who also indoctrinates his young sons into the holy mission, Frailty serves as a statement about the disturbing depths of religious zealotry, especially in an age where a conservative Christian/Muslim culture clash has emerged and where there is growing intolerance towards secular ideals within the U.S.

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One of the most traumatizing horror movies of the era (especially if you were (un)lucky enough to see it at an early age), this scuzzy slasher film concerns a young boy who witnesses his parents' brutal murder at the hands of a lunatic in a Santa Claus costume, and then years later turns into a likeminded killer. Further emphasizing The Texas Chainsaw Massacre's point that picking up strangers on the side of the road is a very bad idea, Robert Harmon's 1986 thriller offers up Rutger Hauer as a psycho hitchhiker who makes life a living hell for nice-guy driver C. Thomas Howell. Associated Film Distribution. 29. The Changeling (1980). A list of horror films released in 2006. Horror films released in 2006. Title. Director. Cast. Country. Notes. The 8th Plague. Franklin Guerrero Jr. However, films that combine hard-core sex with graphic violence, such as Porn of the Dead (2006), BoneSaw (2006), and XXXorcist (2006) move beyond parody and generic 'borrowing' to a point where the audience may become uncertain as to exactly what genre of film they are watching â€” the film being at once 'too horrific' to be porn, and too.