Horror versus Terror in the Body Genre

“[T]error is of violence, of the violence I might do or that might be done to me. I can be terrified of thunder, but not horrified by it” (Schneider, quoting Cavell; 2000:168).

1. Introduction

The horror film as a genre has always held a certain fascination for both audiences and scholars alike. The content of the horror film is often explicit, brutal and intimate; both repulsive and fascinating. Yet the genre is not well-defined and often serves as a blanket term to denote any film that contains gruesome violence, or causes fear and terror. It is therefore necessary to differentiate between films that merely deal with violence and terror, and ‘true’ horror films. As Devendra Varma (1966) indicates, horror and terror are not synonymous.

The difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse.

Horror [as] a genre of film and fiction…relies on horrifying images and situations to tell stories and prompt reactions in [its] audiences. In these films the moment of horrifying revelation is usually preceded by a terrifying build up…

The horror film has the ability to tap into man’s primal fears, thus eliciting the desired response through its use of ‘horrifying images and situations’.

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1 Linda Williams’ proposed notion of the Body Genre encapsulates three major genres that deal with excess and sensation – Pornography, Horror and the Melodrama.
2 Quoted on Reference.com
The audience’s reaction to the violence on the screen is testament to the horror film’s accurate portrayal of the beast within us all. The terror is experienced in the development of suspense and the fear of the unknown. The horror is manifested through the unknown becoming the ‘known’, and the fear being realised. The conventions of the horror film delve into our fears and bring to the surface the degeneracy of the human mind. We are confronted with images of violence and the ‘unnatural’; images that disgust us. Yet, we cannot turn our gaze from the screen. It is this tenuous balance between revulsion and fascination that is innate to the horror genre.

This article seeks to investigate this balance and to interrogate the difference between horror and terror in an attempt to contribute to the development of a systematic genre typology. A brief history of the genre will be given, after which the focus will fall on contemporary Horror film, paying specific attention to the relationship between violence and horror, the theme of sacrificial violence, and the transgression of ‘natural’ laws. An eclectic approach is followed, drawing from literary theory, theology, psychology, and, of course, film theory\(^3\).

Linda Williams has developed the notion of the ‘Body Genre’, a concept that encompasses three film genres, which are defined by their “promise to be sensational, to give [the body] an actual physical jolt” (1999:701). According to

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\(^3\) Film studies, being a young discipline with its roots in language departments at universities during the 1960’s, takes its theoretical base from many disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences.
her, the categories “gratuitous sex, gratuitous violence and terror, [and] gratuitous emotion are frequent epithets hurled at the phenomenon of the ‘sensational’ in pornography, horror, and melodrama”. She goes on to explain that the ‘sensational’ aspect depends on “… the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion (…) The body spectacle is featured more sensationally in pornography’s portrayal of orgasm, in horror’s portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama’s portrayal of weeping” (Williams, 1999:703). This notion of the body spectacle is inherently part of the Body Genre theory, and will be explored in an attempt to explain the fascination that the genre holds for “normal” audiences and scholars alike.

Three contemporary Horror films will be discussed, namely The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, 1974), A Nightmare on Elm Street (Craven, 1984), and Saw (Wan, 2004). In these discussions, the investigation into the relationship between violence, terror and horror, the transgression of “natural” law in terms of biological classification and ideology, and the concept of “sacrificial violence” will be of key importance. The importance of the role that the sacrificial ‘object’ – be it animate or inanimate – plays in the horror film shall also be discussed.

2. A Brief Historical Overview of the Horror Genre

The horror genre, according to Jordaan (1997:57-59), can be traced back more than two centuries, and has adapted and mutated along with man’s view of the

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4 Girard’s (1986) theory on sacrificial violence will be adapted in an attempt to explain audiences’ fascination with violence in the context of the horror genre, in particular regarding the notion of transgression of the “natural order” of things.
world and his place in the universe. During the time of the Ptolemaic system, man believed that the Earth was the centre of the universe, and that Heaven and Hell were concrete places that existed either above the Earth (Heaven), or below the crust (Hell), confined to the darkness that was the Earth’s core. Heaven (the ‘good’) could be allowed ‘into’ man’s soul; it could be internalised. Hell (the ‘evil’), on the other hand, had to remain external, not allowed ‘in’. Copernicus’s revolutionary theory that the Earth was, in fact, not the centre of the universe, and the Hell did not exist within the core, brought the concept of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, of Heaven and Hell, closer to ‘home’. Hell became, according to Jordaan (1997:57), more subjective and personal, and was experienced more ‘internally’. Hell became situated in the mind.

“Gradually…[hell] came to be located in the mind; it was part of a state of consciousness. This was the beginning of the growth of the idea of a subjective, inner hell, a psychological hell; a personal and individual source of horror and terror, such as the chaos of a disturbed and tormented mind, the pandaemonium…of psychopathic conditions…” (Cuddon; 1991:419).

During the 16th and 17th Centuries, the focus of art and literature fell upon physical horror, with an emphasis on blood – hence this period was, according to Jordaan (1997) known as a ‘bleeding period’. The horror story, when conceived, focused on two specific directions, which Jordaan describes as:

“[D]ie profane drama waarin dit uitsluitlik om die mens teenoor ‘n wêreldlike mag gaan, en die martelaarsdrama waarin die gruwels en folteringe ‘n religieuse perspektief kry” (1997:58).
During the 18th Century, the horror genre seemed to disappear, perhaps due to the uprising of the neo-classic period, which, according to Jordaan (1997), was the ‘era of reason’. However, during the 19th Century, the horror genre resurfaced, due to the works of the ‘graveyard poets’, whose material focused on the dead, death, corpses and tombs. From the works of these poets, the notion of the Gothic Novel developed, which focused on the binary opposites of good and evil. This view was, needless to say, one-dimensional, and created a ‘dream state’, to which its readers could escape, and from where they could leave, thus returning to their ‘normal’ lives afterwards. This was the state of the classic horror films. According to Jordaan (1997), the development of the horror genre, after the conception of the Gothic Novel, has moved away from binary opposites, and finds itself within a grey area – neither good nor evil, neither dream nor reality. This is the current state of the contemporary horror film – the boundaries between the binary opposites have been skewed. There is no longer a distinction between dream and reality; between real and imagined; between good and evil.

3. The Contemporary Horror Film in Relation to ‘Classic’ Horror

When one is required to name a ‘Classic’ horror film, titles such as Dracula (Browning, 1931), Frankenstein (Whale, 1931), Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Robertson, 1920), and The Curse of the Werewolf (Fisher, 1961), are perhaps some the first to enter one’s mind. These films are modernist, pre-1960’s fare, which deal with universal horror topics such as the drinking of blood, sexuality; playing God; schizophrenia; and the blurring of the boundaries between human
and animal. Many of the themes that were common in the ‘Classic’ horror films are still prevalent in the contemporary Horror films of today. As John C. Lyden (2003:228) notes:

All horror films, classic and modern, wrestle with the continued existence of evil in the world and allow the viewer to wrestle with this fact as well.

Yet, there has been much change in the manner in which these themes are represented in contemporary horror, in particular regarding the portrayal of graphic, explicit violence in contrast to the suggested violence in the ‘Classic’ horror film.

Another marked difference exists in terms of the underlying world view, as Pinedo (1997:94) explains:

[In the classic horror film], [g]ood triumphs over evil; the social order is restored. In contrast, the [contemporary] paradigm blurs the boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle is at best ambiguous. Danger to the social order is endemic.

The classic horror film provides closure, the transgression of the ‘natural order’ is ‘corrected’, life resumes meaningfully. The end of the film provides resolution and audience satisfaction that the ‘horror’ has been dealt with; the Vampire shall not awaken again, Frankenstein’s Monster shall not rise from the grave. The audience is able to leave the cinema, comfortable with the notion that all is well.
The contemporary horror film, on the other hand, does not allow the audience the opportunity to escape into a world of horror, and then return to their normal lives within a ‘normal’ social order afterwards. Rather, it takes them into their own world, and “exposes the terror implicit in everyday life: the pain of loss, the enigma of death, the unpredictability of events, the inadequacy of intentions” (Pinedo; 1997:106). Regarding my notion that a changed world view underlies differences in modes of representation and themes vis-à-vis classic and contemporary horror genres, Pinedo (1997:87) argues that contemporary horror is a postmodernist project which is the result of “the cumulative repetitive historical stresses including the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Cold War, Vietnam, and antiwar movement, and the various liberation movements associated with the 1960s: civil rights, black power, feminism, and gay liberation”.

The typological elements of contemporary Horror can be theorised to have originated in our postmodern society that is characterized by “frustration, dissatisfaction, anxiety, greed, possessiveness, jealousy, [and] neuroticism” (Wood, 2002:25). And, one would add, the pervading sense of meaninglessness, the lack of a master narrative.

4. The Difference between Terror and Horror

Pinedo’s themes of death, loss and unpredictability are evident in the three contemporary horror films under discussion, especially in the film Saw (Wan,

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5 Pinedo does not adequately differentiate between terror and horror. In the context of the argument that I shall develop, terror should be interpreted as “horror” in this quote.
Herein, the ‘victims’ or captives of the vigilante serial killer, known only as ‘Jigsaw’, are abducted against their will and placed within impossible situations where they need to ‘redeem’ themselves from the wrongs that they have committed, according to Jigsaw. He sets out a series of tasks that need to be completed, yet these tasks are virtually impossible to complete, and therefore lead, in most cases, to the death of the victim. The victims are exposed to the ‘pain of loss’ and the ‘enigma of death’ – the loss of their own lives (or of those close to them), and the enigma of their own impending death. *Saw* highlights the difference between terror and horror in the sense that the victims are aware; they are *terrified* of what they are about to do, or what is about to be done to them. Real danger is imminent, and there are, indeed, fatal consequences for them. The *horror* is the realization that they have no choice; the victim who realizes that he has to saw off his own foot in order to escape the shackles, embodies the sense of horror in its purest form: he has to commit a violent act upon himself, in order to prevent further violence from occurring, and he has to sacrifice a part of his body – a part of *himself* – in order for the rest of his body to survive. The audience also experiences a sense of horror, in the sense that, although they cannot be harmed by what is happening on the cinema screen, there is the belief that such degeneracy is possible in the postmodern society in which they find themselves. Horror resides in the transgression of the ‘natural order’ of things. Since the ‘natural order’ is circumscribed by ideology, it stands to reason that it has
metaphysical as well physical dimensions. Hopper (2001) distinguishes between supernatual and “natural” horror:

“Two types of horror exist - supernatural horror, and a horror which is not supernatural, but based around the horrors of our real world – hate, murder, cruelty”.

This is certainly true of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, 1974) which deals with very real, very tangible acts of depravity committed by humans on other humans. A family of redneck cannibals commits unspeakable acts of violence and depravity on a group of teenagers who stumble upon their house. The backwaters cannibal family once ran a swine abattoir, until it went bankrupt; now, instead of butchering pigs, they butcher people. The characters experience terror when Leatherface chases after them; the audience experiences rising apprehension and fear that culminates in loathing and horror when he amputates, decapitates, and/or eviscerates the young adults in gratuitously violent scenes, filled with gushing blood and manic screaming – of both the victims and the chainsaw, grinding through their bones. The horror resides in the depravity of the acts, the transgression of the moral order of society, and the realization that it is a potential reality, given the realities of contemporary society.

The ‘Classic’ horror film emphasized the importance of appealing to its audience’s imagination. There was hardly any gratuitous, explicit violence in either Dracula (Browning, 1931) or Frankenstein (Whale, 1931). The violence was implied, the audience was not ‘shown’ what happened; they were, in a way, ‘told’. Curtis Harrington (1952:15) states that, with reference to the ‘Classic’
horror film, “you must only suggest horror; you cannot show it, or at least, if you do, it must only be momentarily, for you cannot sustain it. It is the audience’s own imagination, skillfully probed, that provides, out of its well of unconscious fear, all the horror necessary”.

The appeal of the ‘Classic’ horror film was (and still is) its power to allow its audience members ‘free reign’ within their imaginations. “Everyone harbours a host of weird and wonderful images in his or her private mental dreams of anxiety. Maybe the uncanny, intriguing power of horror films helps exorcise what William Blake called ‘these specters around us, night and day’” (Hill, 1958:52).

The contemporary horror film seems to take those thoughts and images from our imaginations and represent them in gruesomely explicit detail. No longer are we prevented from looking into the abyss of human psychopathology by social mores and censure, instead we are encouraged to explore it in detailed graphic representation. In this regard Robin Wood (2002:30) notes:

[Horror films] are our collective nightmares, (…) the conditions under which a dream becomes a nightmare are that the repressed wish is, from the point of view of consciousness, so terrible that it must be repudiated as loathsome, and that it is so strong and powerful as to constitute a serious threat.

Our imaginations are most active during our dreams, and when our dreams revert to nightmares, we experience terror and horror. We awake, and are still haunted by the images that invaded our private dreams. We are unable to control what we dream, and unable to prevent images and thoughts from the id to
enter our consciousness. The postmodern horror film exploits this, and its horror is rooted in this: true horror is waking up in the middle of a scream and realizing that the nightmare did, in fact, occur. The cinema is similar to a dream-like state, plunging the audience into darkness, and dominating their senses with its images and sounds:

The moment you put out the light, man reverts to the primitive. What is the cinema? It’s the place where the lights are put out. Enjoyment of horror is one of the deepest things. Electric light can’t kill horror any more than it can kill a nightmare. And do you know what the worst horror is? It’s when you switch on the electric light and the ghost is still there. (Fisher; 1964:67).

As previously noted, the contemporary horror film does not allow its audience the satisfaction of a ‘happy’ ending, or any closure at all. “[N]ot only do [Horror] films tend to be increasingly open-ended in order to allow for the possibility of countless sequels, but they also often delight in thwarting the audience’s expectations of closure” (Modleski, 2000:289). Isabel Pinedo (1997:99-100) echoes Modleski’s sentiment:

(...) violating narrative closure has become the rigueur for the genre. The film may come to an end, but it is an open ending...Although in the end the monster appears to be vanquished, the film concludes with signs of a new unleashing; the apparent triumph over the monster is temporary at best. Evil prevails as the monster continues to disrupt the normative order.
The audience leaves the theatre feeling unsatisfied; they have not received closure, the nightmare is still haunting them. Except, this nightmare is experienced during the waking hours, not during sleep, echoing the premise of the postmodernist horror film that dream is no longer discernable from reality; more, that dreamed objects can attain a physical presence in the real world. One then needs to ask: How do you wake up from a nightmare when you are not asleep?

Jordaan (1997) explores this postmodernist aspect of the contemporary horror film in an article that traces the concept back to Apuleius’ The Golden Ass (1566) and shows how A Nightmare on Elm Street (Craven, 1984), considered to be one of the first of a string of postmodern horror films that exploit the blurring of the boundaries between dream and reality. In the Golden Ass, the main character, Aristomenes, and his friend, Socrates, spent the night in an inn after a long journey. They spent the evening discussing Socrates’ experiences with a witch, and practitioner of black magic; a woman named Meroe. Aristomenes made the dreadful mistake of insulting the witch, to which Socrates chastised him: “Peace, peace, I pray you…Take heed of what you say against so venerable a woman as she is, lest by your intemperate tongue you catch some harm” (1566:15).

Consequently Socrates fell asleep, but Aristomenes was frightened by his remark, and had difficulty falling asleep due to the “great fear which was in [his]

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6 Many so-called postmodernist characteristics of contemporary texts can actually be traced to classic texts. For example, Laurence Sterne, in The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (1759), uses many ‘postmodernist’ ploys, such as blank pages, entirely black pages, etc.
heart” (1566:21). He closed his eyes for a moment at approximately midnight, but was awakened by the violent entrance of Meroe, and her sister Panthia, bursting open the doors of the inn and causing Aristomenes and his bed to turn over, resulting in him lying under the overturned bed, “like unto a tortoise” (Apuleius, 1566:21). Panthia wished to kill both Socrates and Aristomenes, but Meroe had a more horrid idea: “‘Nay, rather let [Aristomenes] live, to bury the corpse of this poor wretch [Socrates] in some hole of the earth’” (1566:21). Meroe then began performing her black magic upon Socrates.

“[Meroe] turned the head of Socrates on the other side, and thrust her sword up to the hilt into the left part of his neck, and received the blood that gushed out with a small bladder, that no drop thereof fell beside…then Meroe…thrust her hand down through that wound into the entrails of his body, and searching about, at length brought forth the heart of [Aristomenes’] miserable companion Socrates, who…gave out a doleful cry by the wound, or rather a gasping breath, and gave up the ghost. Then Panthia stopped the wide wound of his throat with [a] sponge and said: ‘O, sponge sprung and made of the sea, beware that thou pass not over a running river.’ This being said, they moved and turned up [Aristomenes’] bed, until then they strode over [him] and staled upon [him] until [he] was wringing wet” (1566:23-25).

Meroe and Panthia disappeared as mysteriously as they appeared, and Aristomenes was left frightened, confused and soiled. He feared that he would be charged with his friend’s murder, and therefore attempted to hang himself. Unfortunately the rope broke, and he landed on Socrates, who, to Aristomenes’ great relief, awoke. However, when Aristomenes embraced Socrates, he was pushed away, because Socrates smelled the “stink wherewith those hags had
embrued [him]” (1566:31). In the morning, the two friends left the inn, and during their journey they discussed their strange dreams. Socrates confirmed that he too “dreamed this night that [his] throat was cut and that [he] felt the pain of the wound, and that [his] heart was pulled out of [his] belly, and the remembrance thereof makes [him] now to fear” (1566:33). They stopped underneath a large tree for breakfast and rest. Aristomenes scrutinized Socrates’ neck, but saw no sign of his wound or the sponge. Socrates stated that he was thirsty, and Aristomenes saw “behind the roots of the plant-tree a pleasant running water which went gently like to a quite pond, as clear as silver or crystal” (1566:33).

Socrates “kneeled down by the side of the bank in his greedy desire to drink; but he had scarce touched the water with his lips when behold, the wound of his throat opened wide, and the sponge suddenly fell into the water and after issued out a little remnant of blood, and his body (being then without life) had fallen into the river, had not I caught him by the leg, and so with great ado pulled him up. And after that I had lamented a good space the death of my companion, I buried him in the sands to dwell forever there by the river” (1566:35).

The story of Aristomenes and Socrates can be closely linked to that of A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984), as the evil that is committed during the dream has a direct impact on the living body in the ‘real’ world. The victims are terrified to fall asleep. The true horror is that awful realization that you are, in fact, asleep, and you are unable to awake from your dream unless the monster is vanquished, or you are killed.
5. Violation of the “Natural Order”

The violation of the “natural order” has already been touched on in my discussion of the postmodernist horror film in which the natural distinction between the realm of the mind and the real world is suspended or ‘transgressed’. The transgression of the natural order also refers to the transgression of moral and religious codes (e.g. in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* where incest and inbreeding lead to dementia and depraved acts of violence). A third transgression of the natural order is as old as the genre itself: the transgression has a physical presence as the body of the monster. The monstrous body conjures up images of the Vampire, the Ghoul, the Werewolf, and the Psychopath. No matter how diverse, how ‘original’ the monstrous body is presented and represented, one cardinal criterion applies: some form of transgression of the natural order lies at the centre of its existence as ‘monster’. Very often the moral transgression or, if you will, the transgression at the level of the psychopathological, is concretized, made physically present, in the body of the monster. The power of the ‘monster’ is embodied in its ‘otherness’, physically or psychologically. The ‘monster’ is a physical representation of transgression of the natural order, and represents all that is repulsive, all that is offensive, as it cannot (and will not) submit to reason or rationale:

“Horror exposes the limits of rationality and compels us to confront the irrational. The realm of rationality represents the ordered, intelligible universe that can be controlled and predicted. In contrast, the irrational represents the disordered, ineffable, chaotic, and unpredictable universe that constitutes the underside of life. In horror, irrational forces disrupt the social order” (Pinedo, 1997:94-95).
Human nature is such that we cannot function in a chaotic, disordered world. Humans need rules, boundaries and definitions of ‘normal’. Anything that disrupts these definitions of normal is seen as something ‘else’; something ‘other’ than normal; something abnormal. Schneider, quoting Douglas, states that “[M]onsters…are unnatural relative to a culture’s conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it” (2000:177).

Yet, it is the human mind that wishes to be free from the rules and boundaries. The ‘Monster’ in the Horror film represents our own need to be free, to ‘break’ the chains that hold us and be unleashed upon those who placed the shackles around our feet in the first place. The ‘other’ is, in fact, within us; it is part of who we are – this is perhaps why monstrous depictions of ‘otherness’ are so disturbing; we cannot stand to see our anarchic selves portrayed on the screen. “Horror tends to concentrate on another type of ‘Other’, an ‘Other’ which is very familiar and because of that much more frightening, an ‘Other’ which is rooted in our psyche, in our fears and obsessions” (Ursini, 2000:4). We experience horror when we contemplate how the world would be if humans allowed their anarchic selves free reign. True horror is felt when the ‘monsters’ on the screen embody, and act out, our anarchic fantasies.

The ‘monster’ displaces our own beliefs and understanding of the ‘natural’. It creates disorder in an otherwise ordered world. Stephen Neale (1980:20) states:
“[t]he monster, and the disorder it initiates and concretises, is always that which disrupts and challenges the definitions and categories of the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’...[I]t is the monster’s body which focuses the disruption. Either disfigured, or marked by a heterogeneity of human and animal features, or marked by a ‘non-human’ gaze, the body is always in some way signalled as ‘other’, signalled, precisely, as monstrous”.

Examples of the monster’s ‘disrupted’ body can be found in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, 1974), as Leatherface disfigures himself by wearing a mask of human skin. Freddy Krueger, from A Nightmare on Elm Street (Craven, 1984), has burned skin covering his entire body, which seems to be oozing with a clear, viscous fluid. His hand is disfigured by the bladed glove that he wears – he most certainly is monstrous. Jigsaw represents himself as a puppet in Saw (Wan, 2004), thus removing any hint of his humanity and ‘disrupting’ his victims’ perception of him, because his is watching them through a ‘non-human gaze’. The Jigsaw killer is, in fact, a ‘monster’ that tries to restore order; he is attempting to restore balance by punishing the wicked (his victims) for their sins. In essence, he has taken on the role of the avenging angel, the ‘restorer of order’. Yet, in his victims’ minds and lives, the ‘natural’ order has been grossly disrupted, and the killer is still perceived as the ‘monster’, he who challenges the bounds of the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’.

The ‘monster’ is represented in many forms, for example the psychopath, the shape-changer, or the alien, to name but a few. Most of the forms in which the monster is manifested are abominations; repulsive, and not ‘natural’. The
monster embodies the ‘unnatural’. In its broadest sense, ‘unnatural’ can also refer to our concept of right and wrong. Murder is wrong – is it therefore unnatural? Yet, not all murder depicted in film is part of the horror genre. What differentiates murder in a cops-and-robbers film from murder in a horror film? Murder in a cops-and-robbers film is justified; it is allowed, and ‘legitimate’. There is a reason behind the violence and killings, and the audience is able to rationalize the brutality. In contrast, there is no reason behind the monster’s carnage; the audience does not feel relieved when someone (or something) is hacked, stabbed, beaten, eaten, or bitten to death. Even when the ‘monster’ meets its grisly demise, there is no sense of closure; there is no satisfaction. The true horror is the irrationality behind the murder and the violence – the unreason. One cannot rationalize with the ‘monster’. It is impossible to reason with it, to negotiate the extent of its murderous rampage. The monster simply is; it simply exists within a paradigm which (whether we like it or not) is a mirror image of the hideousness of the human mind. The ‘monster’, which is situated specifically in the mind; namely schizophrenia in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (Robertson, 1920), madness and derangement, and psychopathology in Saw (Wan, 2004), is particularly terrifying because the unwitting victim is mostly unaware of his/her tormentor’s mental ‘affliction’.

Physically, there is usually no distinction between the psychopath and a ‘normal’ human being – it is in the mind that the horror dwells; it is in the mind that the ‘monster’ lives.
“Monsters and vampires, man-made creatures and ghosts, mob cruelty and murderers, these are the stock ingredients of horror, and most of them have been handled on occasion with sufficient imagination to lift the result above the category of mere sensationalism. All such terrors, however, are seen from a distance, approaching us from outside ourselves. Our own feet rest on firm ground...But when the mind is the actual stuff of horror, when madness and collapse are presented from inside, rather than viewed from without, then the solid ground itself shifts and crumbles, and we do indeed find ourselves looking into a bottomless pit” (Butler, 1967:77).

The manner in which ‘monsters’ violate the natural conceptual scheme of nature takes many forms, some of which can be identified as the practices of drinking blood, cannibalism, and shape-changing. Some monsters embody the violation of ‘natural laws’ through their mere existence, such as the Frankenstein monster, which had absolutely no control over his monstrosity, or his creation and abominable existence. The Frankenstein monster embodies the state of the human condition – the mishmash of cultures, religions, and belief systems, all ‘rolled’ (or sewn) into one.

He [the Frankenstein Monster] is neither black nor white, neither angel nor devil but, like man in whose image he was made, a combination of these. He was not born with murder in his heart; it was placed there by man himself. To understand more fully the motivations and emotions of the monster, we must understand ourselves, for we have not changed so radically since the people of Dr. Frankenstein’s day (Douglas, 1967:128).

Leatherface, from The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, 1974), can be viewed as a contemporary ‘Frankenstein’s Monster’. He is mentally retarded,
probably cannot distinguish between right and wrong, and his personality has been molded by his heavily inbred and incest-ravished family. He is the ‘product’ of unnatural circumstances; he embodies ‘otherness’. Physically, Leatherface closely resembles the Frankenstein Monster, as he wears a mask of human skin on his face. This mask is made up of skin from, one assumes, various individuals, and the manner in which it is grotesquely and untidily sewn together, resembles the Frankenstein Monster’s own visage. The terror is implicit in the sense that Leatherface is, literally, wearing a second skin. The horror would be the awful realization that, beneath the ‘mask of death’, is a human face. And behind that, the sickness of the human mind.

The vampire, namely Count Dracula, is perhaps one of the most celebrated (and feared) of all classical and contemporary ‘monsters’. His biological need to drink human blood is both repulsive and fascinating, especially the manner in which he ‘acquires’ this blood – he is seductive, sexy and causes women to submit to him without resistance. The female vampire has the same effect on human males.

“The vampire – who is a creature neither truly living nor really dead – must have blood in order to survive. The food of mortals is of no value to him. It is blood he requires, the thick, warm fluid which is the life. He must feed even as mortals do, and during the hours of darkness – traditionally the time of evil, which cannot bear the purifying light of day – he roams the countryside in search of blood. Without it, the spark of his unholy life grows ever weaker” (Douglas, 1967:32).
The vampire's sexuality and explicit (and irresistible) sensual attraction is vital for its survival. It is able to seduce young women (or men) into giving, in essence, what Linda Williams calls their 'life fluid':

“The vampiric act of sucking blood, sapping the life fluid of a victim so that the victim in turn becomes a vampire, is similar to the female role of milking the sperm of the male during intercourse [and fellatio]” (Williams, 2002:65).

An example of vampirism can be found, once again, in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, 1974). Near the end of the film, Sally Hardesty finds herself an unwilling guest in the home of Leatherface and his cannibalistic, inbred, psychopathic family. Her finger is slit open, and the oozing blood fed to the decaying corpse of the family’s patriarch, ‘Grandpa’. The corpse begins to suck on her bleeding finger feverishly, and ‘Grandpa’ seems to come back from the dead, the blood sustaining him and feeding his rotting and (un)dead organs – similar to the vampire. The terror is felt when the corpse of ‘Grandpa’ is revealed. The horror is experienced when the ‘life fluid’ of someone else is used to bring the corpse back from the dead.

Cannibalism, as is prevalent (yet merely suggested) in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, 1974), is perhaps one of the most horrifying practices portrayed in the horror film. Drake Douglas (1967:73) states:

“the eating of human flesh was [and still is] something unnatural, something beastlike. [The Romans believed that one] who indulged in this particular kind of feasting must be very close to an animal; from here, the next step was belief that such a person actually transformed himself into an animal”.
Leatherface has the visage of a pig – he grunts and squeals (mostly in delight at dismembering his victims); he is overweight and has, behind his mask of human flesh, tiny pig-like eyes that look upon his victims greedily and hungrily. His incestuous family can be represented as a pack of Hyenas, laughing hysterically as they torment and ‘play’ with Sally, who screams in fear and pain. Their animalistic behaviour, in turn, reduces Sally’s status from a human to that of an animal. She seems to be represented as a ‘pig in a pen’, being chased around endlessly by her tormentors.

Examples of other abominations include the zombie, and the walking dead, which fill the human psyche with dread and fear. “There is no horror like that which comes from the grave…People of all lands, regardless of the advance of their civilization, have always been unwilling to believe that death means an end” (Douglas; 1967:174). Freddy Krueger, from A Nightmare on Elm Street (Hooper, 1984), is an example of the abomination that is the ‘undead’. He returns from the grave in the form of a ‘nightmare’; he haunts the offspring of the individuals who killed him originally. He invades his victims’ dreams, entering into a world which should be private and personal. He enters the most intimate and secret (and frightening) of all places – the human mind. He does this when his victims are physically powerless to stop him, when they are unconscious, and unable to (physically) defend themselves. An example of Freddy Krueger’s power extends beyond merely invading his victims’ dreams. He is able to maim, torture and kill
his victims in their dreams, while their physical, sleeping bodies experience the same punishment as their ‘dream’ bodies. Thus, when one of Freddy’s victims is murdered in their dream, their physical body dies in the same gruesome manner in the ‘real’, waking world. This aspect of the contemporary horror film can be closely linked to the postmodern notion of the waking nightmare.

Other forms of ‘monstrosity’ and ‘otherness’ are evident in the issues of female sexuality and feminine liberation. The woman is punished by the monster for performing impure acts, or for preparing to perform impure acts. It is the power of female sexuality that is so terrifying. It can even be suggested that the ‘monster’ embodies the intensity and mystery of female sexuality, which is why it is so terrifying. “[T]he monster’s power is one of sexual difference from the normal male. In this difference he is remarkably like the woman in the eyes of the traumatized male: a biological freak with impossible and threatening appetites that suggest a frightening potency precisely where the normal male would perceive a lack” (Williams, 2002:63). Female sexuality has the potential to completely overpower the ‘normal male’. The ‘monster’, in most cases, is also able to overpower the male.

“It may very well be…that the power and potency of the monster body in many classic horror films…should not be interpreted as an eruption of the normally repressed animal sexuality of the civilized male (the monster as double for the male viewer and characters in the film), but as the feared power and potency of a different kind of sexuality (the monster as double for the woman)” (Williams, 2002:63).
The monster holds the power. Yet, there is often ultimately a force (such as the hero or heroine) greater than the monster that may, at some point, wrest that power from it. This is not always the case. Often, especially within the contemporary horror film, the monster maintains its power, even after its demise. The audience is lulled into a false sense of victory when the hero or heroine slays the monster, but in the back of the mind is always the notion that it is not, and never will be, completely dead and gone.

Homosexuality, according to Harry Benshoff, is another example of what is viewed as the ‘other’, as something ‘unnatural’, regardless of society’s so-called acceptance of it. It is seen as ‘monstrous”, as something abject. Benshoff (2002:91) describes homosexuality as such:

“[It] is a monstrous condition. Like an evil Mr. Hyde, or the Wolfman, a gay or lesbian self inside of you might be striving to get out. Like Frankenstein’s monster, homosexuals might run rampant across the countryside, claiming ‘innocent’ victims. Or worst of all, like mad scientists or vampires, who dream of revolutionizing the world through some startling scientific discovery or preternatural power, homosexual activists strike at the very foundations of society, seeking to infect or destroy not only those around them but the very concepts of Western Judeo-Christian thought upon which civil society is built”.

Like the monster, homosexuality is seen as a threat to what the Western Judeo-Christian paradigm considers ‘normal’. Benshoff goes on to state that

“[t]he multiple social meanings of the words ‘monster’ and ‘homosexual’ are seen to overlap to varying but often high degrees. Certain sectors of the population still relate
homosexuality to bestiality, incest, necrophilia, sadomasochism, etc. – the very stuff of classical [and contemporary] Hollywood monster movies. The concepts ‘monster’ and ‘homosexual’ share many of the same semantic charges and arouse many of the same fears about sex and death” (2002:92).

The gay man or woman can be likened, Benshoff claims, to that of a vampire, existing primarily in the shadowy realms of ‘otherness’, causing panic and fear when they emerge. He also states that gay men in particular are similar to vampires – “who, with a single mingling of blood, can infect a pure and innocent victim, transforming him or her into the living dead” (2002:92). It is the unknown that is so terrifying. The horror is that dreadful realization that the unknown is, in fact, the known. It is something that we have always known.

6. Blood, Violence, Sex, Sacrifice and Satisfaction

In the introduction of this article I referred to Girard’s theory on sacrificial violence. In this section I shall adapt a key part of his theory in an attempt to explain some aspects of the fascination of the horror genre, a fascination that exerts itself in spite of the fact that our morals and values are violated.

What is the appeal of watching (and consuming) gratuitous violence, explicit sex, gushing blood and evisceration? And why do audiences feel a sense of excitement when a victim is hacked to death by a buzzing chainsaw, or when the monster is dispatched in a particularly gruesome manner? Andrew Tudor, quoting Grixti, states that
“…human beings are rotten to the core’…, whether by nature or nurture, and that horror resonates with this feature of the human condition. The genre serves as a channel releasing the bestiality concealed within its users. If the model is that of catharsis, then the process is deemed beneficial: a safely valve. If the model is one of articulation and legitimation, then the genre is conceived to encourage consumers in their own horrific behaviour. Either way, the attraction of horror derives from its appeal to the ‘beast’ concealed within the superficially civilized human” (2002:48).

Girard (1986) presents a more plausible explanation than this rather naïve ‘rotten to the core’ premise. Since sacrifice is a key element in the horror genre, it makes sense to explore Girard’s (1986:10) notion that violence,

(….)if left unappeased, (…) will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area. The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into ‘proper’ channels.

Within the contemporary, Westernized society that today’s horror audiences exist, there are no ‘proper channels’ through which to direct their need for violence. They are unable to find an outlet, a ‘surrogate victim’ which shall experience their wrath. There is no sense of release; humans are unable to escape the ever-tightening noose that is frustration and choked-up anger. Yet, there is one outlet, one safety-valve: The Horror Film. The audience is able to watch a horror film, and replace the image of the screaming, writhing victim with the image of that which is causing them such anger and frustration. The victim would thus pose a resemblance to the object of the audience’s violent desires,
allowing them to indirectly lash out at the object of their antagonism, thus relieving them of that need to commit violence in the ‘real’ world.

Although Girard was speaking of sacrificial violence within an anthropological context, the following quote can, in a sense, be used in my discussion of horror as a film genre.

“[A]l victims…bear a certain resemblance to the object they replace; otherwise the violent impulse would remain unsatisfied” (1986:11).

In a sense one could argue that the ‘replacement’ on the screen therefore becomes the audience’s sacrificial victim – the representation of all that is frustrating and violence-invoking.

“The desire to commit an act of violence on those near us cannot be suppressed without a conflict; we must divert that impulse, therefore, toward the sacrificial victim, the [person] we can strike down without fear of reprisal…” (1986:13).

The audience of the Horror film shall not be punished for reveling in the slow, painful and bloody death of the representation of their anger. They are allowed to experience it fully, and visually take part in the torture.

“The sacrifice serves to protect the [audience] from its own violence…[Sacrifices are designed to suppress the audience’s] internal violence – all the dissentions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels within the [lives of the audience]. The purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the [audiences’ lives], to reinforce the social fabric” (1986:8).
Violence (which shall be discussed shortly) and sacrifice in the horror film serve “a variety of psychological functions in society…Like tragedy, horror promotes emotional catharsis of audiences; like fantasy, it offers viewers an escape from the tedium of everyday life” (Schneider, 2000:168). Sacrifice in the horror film allows its audience an outlet, a ‘catharsis’, for their repressed anger and violent tendencies. “Violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object [the on-screen victim], something it can sink its teeth into” (Girard; 1986:4).

An example of sacrifice within a horror film is portrayed in Saw (Wan, 2004). Dr. Lawrence Gordon, in a desperate attempt at saving himself and his family, saws off his foot in order to escape. He sacrifices a part of himself so that his family can survive. In an earlier flashback, the audience learns of Amanda, who had to sacrifice the life of her cell mate in order to ensure her own survival.

Violence is particularly prevalent in many film genres today, but more so in the horror genre. Yet, not all violence is horrific. What is it about violence in the Horror film that evokes such strong responses?

“[V]iolence…marks the horror film, most evidently in films where a monster – werewolf, vampire, psychopath or whatever – initiates a series of acts of murder and destruction which can only end when it itself is either destroyed or becomes normalised…” (Neale; 1980:21).

The monster communicates through violence, and it has already been established that there will be no reasoning or moralizing with it. The only ‘language’ it understand is that of violence – that which it could do or what could
be done to it, if I may use Schneider’s statement as such. The characters therefore have to deal with the monster in the manner that it deals with them – through violence.

“[V]iolence in the horror film is not gratuitous but is rather a constituent element of the genre. The horror narrative is propelled by violence, manifested in both the monster’s violence and the attempts to destroy the monster” (Pinedo, 1997:91).

J. David Slocum, in Violence and American Cinema, defines violence as such:

“Violence is a notoriously expansive notion. While the term indicates an action or behaviour that is harmful or injurious, the least elaboration quickly demonstrates the range of phenomena for which it is potentially relevant. Individuals, groups, and states undertake harmful actions against individuals, groups, states, animals, property, and nature. Harm can be physical, psychological, or even sociological...Even more, the threat of harm or injury [terror] can often be as disturbing as the act itself [horror]. And the act need not have an immediate cause or responsible agent: systemic or structural violence can emerge from conditions – like racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, or xenophobia – that inscribe a set of social or cultural relations without necessarily clarifying the reasons for or consequences of specific actions. Still more basically, aggression, sadism, or destructive behaviour can be viewed as the result of the psychological or physiological tendency of human beings or social groups – that is, of human nature” (2001:2).

Slocum states that violence is inherent in human nature – deep down we are vicious hell-hounds that need release from our bourgeois, pseudo-civilized cages. Hell is in the mind; the horror film emphasizes that. The horror film “explores the capacity for experiencing fear, hysteria and madness, all that lies on the dark side of the mind and the near side of barbarism; what lurks on and
beyond the shifting frontiers of consciousness…and where, perhaps, there dwell ultimate horrors or concepts of horror and terror…paradigms, images and figures of suffering and chaos, and thus of various kinds of hell…” (Cuddon, 1991:417).

Blood, sex and violence often go hand in hand in the Horror film. Any type of bloodletting – be it through open wounds, internal bleeding, or menstrual bleeding – rouses fear.

Menstrual blood is particularly disturbing, as it is so closely linked to sexuality, which in turn is closely linked to violence. “The fact that the sexual organs of women periodically emit a flow of blood has always made a great impression on men; it seems to confirm an affinity between sexuality and those diverse forms of violence that invariably lead to bloodshed” (Girard, 1986:34-35). Girard also states that menstrual blood is impure, which leads to the conclusion that sexuality is impure, because sexuality is so closely connected to violence.

“Sex and violence frequently come to grips in such direct forms as abduction, rape, defloration, and various sadistic practices…Sex is at the origin of various illnesses, real or imaginary; in culminates in the bloody labours of childbirth, which may entail the death of mother, child, or both together” (Girard, 1986:35).

Blood, sex and violence have been around since the first child was born. These three elements combine to create a powerful horror film, and allow the audience all the catharsis they need to purge themselves of their need for blood and violence. The three elements allow the audience the opportunity to sacrifice the
characters on the screen so that they can be relieved of their desires and frustrations.

The catharsis that the audience feels leads to a type of satisfaction, a sense of relief that they have been purged (at least temporarily) of their aggravations. The audience experiences this catharsis by, in a way, physically taking part in the violence on the screen. As mentioned, Linda Williams (1999) has identified three specific genres that deal with excess, with sensation and excitement. These three genres are the melodrama (the ‘tearjerker’), the horror (the ‘fear jerker’) and pornography (the ‘jerk-off’), and she places them within an overarching category called ‘The Body Genre’. According to Williams,

the ‘ecstatic excesses [of] pornography’s portrayal of orgasm,…horror’s portrayal of violence and terror, and…melodrama’s portrayal of weeping,…, could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm – of the body ‘beside itself’ with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness. Aurally, excess is marked by [the audience sharing in the characters’] inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama” (1999:703-704).

There is a sense, says Williams, of a lack of proper esthetic distance; of over-involvement in the film – the audience goes ‘too deep into the rabbit hole’, and becomes immersed in the fantasy world of the film. Often, it is the amount of screams that a horror film can elicit from its audience that determines its success – the audience mimics the character’s screams of pain and terror and revel in the violence and bloodshed. The audience is able to expel their own demons and sacrifice their own lambs during the course of a 120-minute horror film. They exit
the cinema feeling purged of their desires to be violent. They return home, climb into bed, and turn off the lights. Yet, what the audience has given to the horror film, the horror film has returned – with interest. Instead of their minds being filled with images of bloodshed and violence, only one reflection remains in the back of their minds – they see themselves, as the primal beast, the original sinner, the ultimate horror monster.

7. Conclusion

In this article I have explored some definitive characteristics of the horror film as a relatively young manifestation of an ancient genre. While not nearly qualifying as a genre typology, some key issues revolving around the relationship between violence, terror and horror, which are frequently confused in literature on the horror genre, have been clarified. In this regard I have shown that all horror films contain violence, but that very few violent movies can be categorized as horror. Terror, as the superlative of fear, is linked to real danger of bodily harm; horror is as much an emotional as physical reaction to the depravity that underlies those actions or manifestations (in the form of the monstrous body) that cause the terror.

Schneider, quoting Cavell, states that “terror is of violence, of the violence I might do or that might be done to me. I can be terrified of thunder, but not horrified by it” (2000:168). Terror is the fear of what could happen. Horror is the awful realization of the extent of human depravity and excess. Terror is the result of real, imminent danger to us. Horror lies in the realm of the mind and it is
evoked by the images and representations of the horror film - of that which we try
to contain behind the thin veneer civilization.
References


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