The Cultural Politics of Horror Film Criticism

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This article examines film criticism as a social practice. Specifically, it explores the institutional politics of horror film criticism and the various ways critics of the genre justify their own readings and interpretive discourse. It does so by way of positing a horror film “reading formation,” which serves a critical-institutional function within the film academy, namely, securing academic legitimacy for the genre while shoring up cultural and political distinctions specific to elite modes of analysis. Accordingly, the article argues that three intertextual mechanisms (canonical recycling, political auteurism, and symptomatic interpretation) both condition the appropriation of horror film texts as legitimate objects-to-be-read and work to sustain discursive power relations between scholastically credentialed and “nonexpert” reading subjects.

Genre theoreticians and other practitioners are generally loath to recognize (and build into their theories) the institutional character of their own generic practice. Though regularly touting “proper” approaches to genre, theorists rarely analyze the cultural stakes involved in identifying certain approaches as “improper.” Yet genres are never entirely neutral categories. They—and their critics and theorists—always participate in and further the work of various institutions. (Altman, 1999, p. 12)

I am beyond critics ... if I were to make a picture for critics, the public would not go. That is because most critics look for elements about which they can write and show off their interpretive skills. (Herschell Gordon Lewis, Director of Blood Feast [1963], quoted in Mendik, 2002, p. 191)

In a recent article for Cineaste magazine, Christopher Sharrett (2009) notes a problem with contemporary horror films; specifically, he identifies a “reactionary tendency” in the so-called torture porn cycle and singles out films such as Saw (2004) and Hostel II (2007) for essentially “jettisoning the horror film’s most progressive aspects” (p. 32). These films are remarkable, according to Sharrett, not least in their “disregard of the psychological content and social criticism of the horror film at its height,” but also for their “intellectual bankruptcy and retrograde politics”; indeed, any “attempt to evaluate these films seriously provokes doubt about such a project’s worth,” as their chief draw seems to be shocking viewers through “excruciating forms of torture and freeform bloodletting” (p. 32). Moreover, whereas films in the Saw series represent the most lucrative horror movie franchise in history (“‘Saw’ most successful horror series,” 2010), they are worthy of consideration only insofar as they indicate a further diminishing of the genre:

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The numerous gory tableaux of *Saw* tend to make one see them as further indicators of a brain-dead culture rather than inextricably linked to the political reaction and cynicism that pervades the cycle, making *Saw* a perfect emblem of the era’s rightist ideology. Most important, the cycle is part of a tendency that jettisons the horror film’s most progressive aspects, a project visible over the last thirty years. (Sharrett, 2009, p. 32)

In short, and according to Sharrett (2009 p. 32), “the horror film has fallen on hard times,” and it has done so largely because of the failure of latter-day filmmakers to live up to their Golden Age predecessors. To be sure, if “the Sixties saw the emergence of the horror genre as a subversive form,” with Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963), Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), and George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) establishing the genre as “keenly critical of middle-class life and all its supporting institutions, particularly the patriarchal nuclear family,” then the historically radical aesthetic and corresponding political movements associated with Sixties horror films effectively “faded with the cooptation of Sixties resistance movements” (Sharrett, 2009, p. 32). In consequence, any attempt to recuperate the historically progressive potential of the genre, at least in its current manifestations, seems doomed by comparison, as a handful of canonical (in some cases, overtly political) auteurs are made to bear the weight of horror’s transgressive possibilities, while standing in as the ideological prototype against which all subsequent efforts are to be measured and evaluated.

Indeed, if *Saw* is an indicator, the lessons about screen violence taught by Penn, Peckinpah, Aldrich, Siegel, Scorsese, or master horror directors such as George A. Romero, seem lost on the current generation of filmmakers and audiences. But the franchise is important, at the symptomatic level, as a measure of the possible defeat by the contemporary film industry of one of the most contentious and subversive genres. (Sharrett, 2009, p. 32)

Thus, the supposed collapse of horror’s subversive agenda can, at least partially, be blamed on contemporary filmmakers—particularly those who, in their blind quest for visceral gore and graphically violent material, appear to have squandered the genre’s more ideologically riveting aspects. Meanwhile, the apparent “problem” with contemporary horror movies is not that they lack a cutting edge but that they go all in; that is, they appear to trade social criticism and psychological themes for excessive violence and extreme gore, and thus diminish the genre’s otherwise radical potential to comment on such violence in the form of social-allegorical critique. For this reason, it is up to the serious genre critic (Sharrett, in this case) to risk credibility and to make readers understand that these films do in fact have something to “say” about contemporary society, despite having the appearance of merely capitalizing on the most cynical, infantile, and regressive aspects of the contemporary movie industry.

To do this, however, it is also necessary to assert a more worthy comparison—namely, the “lessons” of feted auteur-directors Penn, Peckinpah, Aldrich, Siegel, Scorsese, Hitchcock, Polanski, and, of course, master horror auteur George Romero—each of whose ostensibly subversive contributions to the genre are here (and elsewhere) paraded as categorical examples of Sixties radicalism—not to mention the horror film’s (largely theoretical) capacity to act as a subversive cultural form during times of social and ideological crisis. Indeed, if contemporary filmmakers dare to go low (as in splatter low), and therefore transgress the very boundaries of acceptable interpretation, then the genre’s canonical masters behoove us (as critics) to reaffirm the courage of our convictions in taking seriously the political and cultural merits of an oft-degraded form, particularly as these manifest at “the symptomatic level.” As Sharrett (2009) concludes, only by
doing so might “fans of the horror film . . . be prepared to make distinctions, and say clearly why *Dawn of the Dead* [1978] is a significant work of the genre while *Saw* is relative rubbish except as a symptom of the state of culture” (p. 37).

Taking issue with this notion that (1) the field of contemporary horror somehow avoids or lacks discrimination, and (2) that generic history might itself serve as the inherent basis for making such evaluations, this essay argues that discourses of evaluative selection are actually quite common to horror film reception. In fact, “making distinctions” is one of the more conventional things that horror film critics (and fans) do—that is, in addition to generating interpretations that seek to identify “repressed” cultural meanings and/or progressive/regressive ideological effects. Particularly when it comes to the consecrated figure of the horror auteur, the critic—in this case, the vanguardist scholar-critic of lowbrow popular cinema—functions to make distinctions in the Bourdieuan sense of differentiating between various modes of textual enjoyment and more “legitimate ways of appropriating [film] culture and works of art” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 2).

Yet as Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1983) reminds us, cultural debates over what constitutes significant work in a given genre cannot simply proceed as if aesthetic judgments remain free of institutional constraints and other evaluative contingencies; rather, canonical debates need to be contextualized in terms of competing taste formations, socially conditioned patterns of legitimate discourse, and political struggles over cultural power and authority (Staiger, 1985). Indeed, while these might seem like foundational gestures within a (post-) modern film academy, they are, in fact, less often carried out in practice; as Jeffrey Sconce (2007) suggests, “the inclination to dissolve media objects—their histories of production, reception, and analysis—into socially situated fields of discourse is a strategy associated more with television studies, [although] there is of course no reason to avoid such approaches in film (other than memory, tradition, and vanity)” (p. 113). Particularly when it comes to analyzing questions of taste and value as a function of competing power relations and evaluative traditions, such advances often take a backseat to more hallowed institutional practices of dividing film texts among “legitimate and illegitimate approaches, proper and improper perspectives, moral and amoral cinema” (Sconce, 2007, p. 114).

Hence it might be said that, within horror film studies, “not only a canon of films exists but also a canon of literature about film and a canon of film methodologies” (Staiger 1985, p. 18)—methodologies which, in turn, serve to underwrite the cultural hierarchies and regimes of value that are used to distinguish “significant work” from “relative rubbish.” Less often as the case may be, however, such distinctions become the focus of academic inquiry itself: a point of critical self-reflection among those directly involved in institutions of evaluative authority. It is thus my intention in this article to trace these distinctions as they play out across the field of academic horror film reception, doing so in order to spotlight their institutional function as part of a broader “reading formation” (Bennett, 1983, 1985; Bennett & Woollacott, 1987).

**THE POLITICS OF TASTE IN THE FILM ACADEMY**

While a number of writers have used the term reading formation to describe the processes by which film genres are socially and institutionally constructed (see, e.g., Altman, 1999; Cobley,

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1This article is principally concerned with the academic reception of horror films; by contrast, other studies have examined the role of fan discourse in producing genre distinctions. See, for example, David Sanjek (1990), Mark Jancovich (2000), Brigid Cherry (2002), and Matt Hills (2005).
2000), my concern here has more to do with the specific inter-textual mechanisms and discursive frameworks that bear in upon, and ultimately determine, critical practices of evaluation and interpretation. Moreover, whereas previous studies have analyzed the way different film cycles become codified through a process of “genrification” (Altman, 1999, p. 62)—that is, through a standardization of critical practice and industrial activity—2—the present article examines the problematic of textual reading itself as an institutionally circumscribed process bound to a determinant set of reading protocols, or “habits of meaning” (Klinger, 1994, p. xvii). In this sense, it draws on an (admittedly small) body of discursive analyses of scholarly practices, such as Barbara Klinger’s *Meaning and Melodrama*, which describes the conventions of academic discourse as being “radically dependent on the positions and needs of those involved in institutions of evaluative authority” (p. 2), and thereby regards the interpretive claims of the film academy “as a particular kind of meaning-production, rather than as the definitive locus of textual ‘truth’” (p. xviii).

Within horror research, for example, scholars including Jeffrey Sconce (1995) and Matt Hills (2007) have already begun this work, drawing attention to the way particular taste discourses operate within the academy to both legitimate certain types of horror film while devaluing others. Sconce in particular provides an overview of the way films deemed “trash” by official film culture find critical revaluation within academic discourse by way of conventional aesthetic norms such as stylistic deviance, complexity, and film authorship (see also Hills, 2007, p. 221). Along these same lines, William Paul (1994) has suggested that hierarchies of taste and cultural value inform critical assessments of the horror genre at the level of “lower-class forms” such as the gross out movie. In his book *Laughing Screaming*, for example, Paul writes:

> From the high perch of an elitist view, the negative definition of the lower works would have it that they are less subtle than higher genres. More positively, it could be said that they are more direct. Where lower forms are explicit, higher forms tend to operate more by indirection. Because of this indirection the higher forms are often regarded as being more metaphorical, and consequently more resonant, more open to the exegetical analyses of the academic industry. (p. 32)

This largely concurs with Sconce’s definition of paracinema as a reading protocol that is essentially “devoted to all manner of cultural detritus,” and thus more open to making an aesthetic virtue out of lower forms of commercial entertainment (Sconce, 1995, p. 372). However, one might also identify a problem with these arguments in the way they each position horror as a valid object of study on the basis of its supposed opposition to “elitist views” of culture. In particular, the terms of opposition are usually negotiated through a prism of film art, which, in turn, justifies the move to critical appropriation.

Thus, whereas Paul begins his treatise on the “disreputable art” of 1980s horror films by acknowledging the “venerable vulgarity” of such lower forms, he later falls back on the laurels of more serious academic discourse—for instance, seeking out deeper meaning, interpretability and metaphorical significance, or, in Paul’s words, finding “very cerebral ways of thinking about very noncerebral materials” (Paul, 1994, p. x). Similarly, Joan Hawkins (2000) has described an affinity between “low horror” and high art films on the basis of shared audience pleasures that seemingly challenge “the official ideology” (p. 61). In particular, she outlines a politics of taste that portrays the apparent “stake both avant-garde and low-body cultures have traditionally had

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2 As regards the horror film, see, for example, Jancovich (2009) and Nowell (2011).
in challenging the formally constructed notion of mainstream good taste” (Hawkins, 2000, p. 30). However, in doing so she also displays an antipathy toward mainstream commercial cinema as a fundamental condition for horror’s aesthetic valorization. In effect, horror becomes a legitimate area of study precisely because it can be interpreted at the level of avant-garde discourse.

In this way, critics tend to seize upon horror’s generally low cultural status as a way to elevate the genre’s supposedly radical textual politics. However, rather than simply overturn the codes of aesthetic judgment, as these accounts are want to do, the transvaluation of horror’s cultural value becomes a way for critics to both enshrine their own interpretive authority and exert their own cultural power. As Bourdieu (1984) explains, “nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are [perceived as] banal or even ‘common’” (p. 5). Hence academic film criticism has established its own reading strategies for producing distinction and conferring authority on horror films, which largely dovetail with the politics of oppositional taste operating within the film academy.3

In what follows, I want to explore this dimension of horror movie scholarship by examining the particular habits of meaning-production that serve to guarantee “appropriate” methods for interpreting (and indeed championing) certain types of horror films. In doing so, I want to consider the functions of academic film criticism more generally as a social practice that has cultural-political implications. To that end, I invoke the concept of reading formation, not only as a way of highlighting (as countless others have done) the contingent nature of textual interpretation but also, and more pointedly, to underscore the cultural stratifications that take shape as a result of this process; that is, to underscore the way unequal distributions of cultural capital and interpretive competency work to sustain academic legitimacy in the name of more valid reading strategies.

As Bennett and Woollacott (1987) define the term, reading formation describes

the inter-textual relations which prevail in a particular context, thereby activating a given body of texts by ordering the relations between them in a specific way such that their reading is always-already cued in specific directions that are not given by those “texts themselves” as entities separable from such relations. (p. 64)

Thus the concept of reading formation obliges researchers to consider both how particular texts (or entire genres, for that matter) get activated as objects-to-be-read, but also how reading subjects of particular types are constituted in that very process of pinning down appropriate models of interpretation (Bennett, 1985, p. 7); to wit, it requires an examination of the social practice of reading itself, such that texts, readers, and the relations between them are considered equally subject to political struggles over cultural power and authority that inevitably take shape in and through the appropriation of popular texts. As these texts “constitute sites around which the pre-eminently social affair of the struggle for the production of meaning is conducted,” so too do the critical bids for cultural distinction that seek to determine “which system of inter-textual coordinates should be granted an effective social role in organizing reading practices” (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987, pp. 59–60).

Moreover, whereas the dominant orientation of most academic studies of horror films assume that they in some way mirror or “reflect” society (Kapsis, 2009, p. 3), this perspective might also

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be considered *practically* in terms of the way it organizes the field of horror film reception more generally, thereby cueing readers to the inter-textual co-ordinates of symptomatic interpretation. Rather than take this discourse for granted, however, as if horror film texts inherently “express in accessible and entertaining popular cultural terms the characteristic fears of their time” (Tudor, 2002, p. 52), the purpose of this article is to unpack these terms and concepts as they have been applied *to* horror film texts, doing so in order to point up their institutional character; that is, their operative function within a professionalized field of discourse.

To that end, the essay proceeds by charting three discursive mechanisms that together make up the system of inter-textual coordinates commonly used to confer value and status upon horror film texts—and hence ensure their “schooled” interpretation. These coordinates include discourses of “canonical recycling” (Klinger, 1994, p. 29), political auteurism, and symptomatic interpretation. It is my contention that these coordinates not only condition the critical appropriation of horror film texts as legitimate objects-to-be-read, but also reinforce “proper” modes of aesthetic appropriation alongside established reading protocol. That is, they motivate critical interest in the genre by way of securing academic legitimacy in the field—for making professional interpretive claims *about* horror films while also shoring up cultural and political distinctions conducive to the film academy. Hence they wind up freezing the terms of meaning (Klinger, 1994, p. 27) so as to establish hierarchical relations between different reading practices.

**CANONICAL RECYCLING: THE GOLDEN AGE OF HORROR**

As part of the broader institutional attempt to stabilize horror films as legitimate objects-to-be-read, canonical recycling has proven especially conducive to horror film scholars interested in boosting the genre’s claims to social relevance and cultural value. Particularly when it comes to the so-called golden age of American horror film—a period dating from the late 1960s through the mid 1970s, when developments in low budget exploitation led to a surge in American independent horror film production—the practice of reading for key works in the genre emerges as central project for preserving generic value and defining critical topicality (Mathijs, 2003). Indeed, this era of filmmaking, according to Robin Wood (2004), demonstrated “the most despised and ridiculed of genres was in fact worthy serious attention,” and moreover, that horror’s formal “evo-lution [was] strongly influenced by cultural-political evolution” (p. xiii). As such, films like *Night of the Living Dead*, *Last House on the Left* (1972), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) have come to find positive critical evaluation as progressive/subversive genre texts (Klinger, 2003, p. 78).

Thus a *New York Times* article informs its readers that such golden age horror films “reflect, or even caricature, society’s collective anxieties,” and furthermore that these films “deserve study as important social artifacts . . . as a way people process the terrors of real life” (Dewan, 2000, p. B11). Similarly, a *National Review* column alleges “there’s something about rising gas prices, apocalyptic anxieties, and unpopular foreign wars . . . that makes filmmakers turn to brutal, nihilistic gore . . . The gorefests of the 1970s terrified a nation that was coming home from Vietnam: they were about the darkness waiting in the heartland’s heart” (Douthat, 2007, p. 54). In this way, popular assessments of the genre (at both ends of the political spectrum) mirror broader canonical ideals of the film academy—particularly as regards issues of aesthetic realism and cultural relevance. Both are glimpsed as the product of a certain kind of nostalgic auteurism;
as one trade publication notes, the apparent desire to say something about society is precisely what distinguishes the work of seventies horror auteurs as being culturally significant within the modern horror tradition: “Not only did these directors [Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven, and George Romero] bring to the genre a kind of realistic brutality that still resonates in modern filmic vocabulary, they also laid the foundation for independent cinema with dynamic, profitable ventures that spoke to the upheavals going on around them” (McIntyre, 2000, p. 17; see also Nelson, 2007; DeKinder, 2007). As such, these canonical perspectives continue to inform the way both scholars and popular critics alike perceive the genre’s supposed radical challenge to society, as well as its topical relevance to national culture(s) more generally.

Yet the dominant tendency to equate a golden age of American horror film with a subset of 1970s exploitation films raises questions about the genre’s continuing viability as a cultural form. As Steffen Hantke (2010) points out, the inclination to view contemporary horror through the lens of generic crisis or permanent decline stems from the fact that critics of the genre habitually reify the generational accomplishments of 1970s’ auteurs as a basis for making generic evaluations. That is, they tend to identify the core essence of the genre with auteurist perspectives and symptomatic interpretations that define this period (see also Jancovich, 2002, pp. 8–9). As a result, canonical audiences for these films (i.e., those trained in interpretive conventions of the film academy) will often dictate a provisional demand be made for “cultural-political legibility” on behalf of those films seeking to recuperate horror’s progressive political meaning (Hills, 2005, p. 53). Here canonical references to horror’s golden age become, if not the cornerstone for discursively securing thematic depth and critical legitimacy, than an excuse for scholars to indulge in horror’s radical potential. As Hantke (2010) points out, this sort of institutionalized historiography “makes perfect sense as a rhetorical move that reinforces, by way of repetition, the idea that tribute must be paid to canonical texts” (p. xix).

As a result, even while there may be no actual critical consensus as to whether or not contemporary horror films are, for example, progressive/subversive genre texts in the tradition of so-called neo-horror masters, the very fact that aesthetic judgments continue to be made according to this criterion belies the extent to which critical discourse itself remains hamstrung by the very procedures of canonization. As Hantke (2010) observes “the instrumentalization of this past”—in the form of historical narratives, textual reading strategies and theoretical paradigms that discursively privilege low-budget 1970s horror as a source of canonical legitimacy and...
cultural value—effectively furnishes scholar-critics with a “repository of aesthetic and political positions” (p. xxvii). In this sense, canonical recycling works to exclude certain types of horror film as illegitimate (or “mainstream”) while bolstering a “largely romanticized period” of genre production (Hantke, 2010, p. xviii; see also Jancovich, 2002, pp. 4–5). Indeed as Hantke (2010) writes: “Within academic criticism, the 1970s neo-horror has already been safely integrated into postwar American cultural history. It is when measured against this criteria of its canonization—transgressiveness coupled with the mystique of rebellion and political subversiveness—that contemporary horror films, with their mainstream credentials, fall short” (p. xviii). Thus, the “golden age” of horror (and the canonical texts that this label is meant to evoke) functions both as discursive shorthand for critics looking to demarcate and distinguish an ostensibly radical period of horror film production, but also as a way to endow canonical expertise with a certain mystique of its own—buttressed, of course, by the authoritative distinctions handed down over the years by prevailing institutional apparatuses.

SYMPTOMATIC INTERPRETATION: PRE-EVALUATING THE FIELD

Just as most horror films (whether classic or contemporary) inevitably fall outside the golden age canon of American horror, they nevertheless arrive already preclassified, or “preevaluated” to use Herrnstein Smith’s (1983, p. 23) term, according to the 1970s ideal postulated by critical discourse. Given their implicit (and oftentimes imperfect) relation to that ideal, however, the bulk of non-canonical works remain significant nonetheless as second-rate fixtures within the official reading formation; that is, proper generic foils by which to discursively validate canonical expertise and critical authority.

Hence a recurring trope appears throughout academic writing on horror, and particularly throughout the canonically informed Readers and critical anthologies which elicit a rather portentous, gloomy nostalgia for the projected fears and allegorical nightmares of horror’s golden age. For instance, one finds in the introductory texts of Paul Wells (2000), Reynold Humphries (2002), and Kendall Phillips (2005) a mutual disdain for contemporary trends that either fail to engage with “real world contexts” or else betray roots in erstwhile classics that “operate with high social relevance” (Wells, 2000, p. 20). In particular, Wells (2000) deplores the overwhelming “McDonaldisation of horror”—a commercial tendency which he sees plaguing latter-day franchise films such as Scream (1996) and I Know What You Did Last Summer (1997)—texts which, according to the author, display a keen awareness of the genre’s codes and conventions, yet “speak only limitedly about the culture that produces them” (p. 97). Similarly, Humphries (2002) remarks upon the “failure” of contemporary horror movie directors to live up to their golden age predecessors, noting how “the political thrust of the 70s” is missing, and that “it is patent that we shall see no more films of the caliber of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, which represents for the present writer everything that a horror movie can and should be” (p. 195). In the same vein, Phillips (2005) undertakes a critical examination of “the recent trend of unremarkable and ineffective remakes,” only to propose a more symptomatic explanation: “In a climate racked with fears, some justified and some not, and where ‘terror’ has become a point of great political energy, manipulation, and contention, perhaps allegorical terrors cannot suffice. The fears at large in the real world have been so magnified and intensified that for the time being Americans prefer their projected fears to be more tame and predictable” (p. 196).
In each case, symptomatic reading strategies are called upon to effectively shore up “cultural-political bids for cultural distinction” (Hills, 2007, p. 233), while at the same time, canonical tastes and preferences are discursively validated through extra-textual reference to broader political ideologies and popular fears. In this way, a critical elite trained in the art of veiled significance is able to ensure that canonically relevant texts are able to perform the necessary social function of concealing their “true” meaning; meanwhile the subversive implications of these films are called upon to proffer a model of the horror text itself, which, on the one hand, conforms to canonical accounts of the genre’s epistemological function as a harbinger of “repressed” social meanings, and, on the other, effectively devalues untutored reading positions that ostensibly fail to observe horror’s social-allegorical dimension. Wells (2000) provides the clearest example of this tendency when he writes:

The horror film makes us confront our worst fears, our more perverse feelings and desires, our legitimately complex “darker” agendas, and in this it serves an important function as a progressive and sometimes radical genre, in the face of increasingly reactionary stances. (p. 24)

In this way, proper critical perspectives are maintained so as to deploy a hidden depth dimension (Kellner, 1995, p. 114) to horror films, which, in turn, condemn “reactionary stances” that supposedly overlook horror’s darker agendas. Conceiving of horror films in terms of “our worst fears” and nightmares, then, presents scholars with an opportunity to enact their own cultural-political distinction, while at the same time performing acts of critical one-upmanship through strategic reference to horror’s non-obvious meanings.

At the same time, making ideological sense of the genre appears to be one way to lay blanket suspicion on both horror film texts and their audiences, as nondisciplined (or disciplinized) readers apparently lack the hermeneutic wherewithal to discern hidden political agendas and radical social meanings; hence they are often belittled through the patronizing rhetoric of ideological criticism. As one reputable critic would have it:

The wide range and popularity of post-1970s Hollywood horror films suggests that something is profoundly wrong with U.S. society . . . The broad panorama of popular horror films attests to a resurgence of the occult in contemporary society which suggests that individuals are no longer in control of their everyday life . . . Consequently, during eras of socio-economic crisis when individuals have difficulty coping with social reality, the occult becomes an efficacious ideological mode which helps explain unpleasant circumstances or incomprehensible events with the aid of religious or supernatural mythologies. (Kellner, 1995, p. 126)

Whereas the attraction of horror films is thus attributed to unpleasant social realities—with the “real” social undercurrents of the genre proving too “difficult” for individuals to handle—any pleasure afforded by this model becomes suspect: “a deceptive veneer behind which ideology works” (Hutchings, 2004, p. 184). And thus any engagement that fails to take into consideration the genre’s socially allegorical meanings becomes susceptible to charges of ideological naïveté. In effect, “those audiences who thought they were going to see horror films just for the purposes of entertainment are revealed as being unaware of the real reasons for their behavior, as being in effect the dupes of ideology” (Hutchings, 2004, p. 184).

Thus, it seems incumbent upon genre critics to not only discover—or more accurately, construct—potentially subversive hidden meanings behind horror film texts but also to assert a more properly social-allegorical dimension. In this way, horror film criticism not only demands “a hierarchical ordering of the relations between different reading practices such that some are
conceived as more valid—and therefore more worthwhile, more objective, more deserving of analysis—than others” (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987, p. 68); it also relies upon the specialized techniques of the film academy to do so—that is, to effectively “bully” other interpretations off the field (Bennett, 1983, p. 15).

Remarkably, this appears to be the case even amongst those writings that identify “popular” modes of reception. For example, Ken Gelder’s (2000) editorial introduction to The Horror Reader, which purports to complicate the field of horror by juxtaposing predominant critical dispositions with countervailing subcultural tendencies, nonetheless winds up devaluing non-canonical reception strategies. Referring to the video nasties debate of the 1980s, for instance, Gelder describes “the cultural production of illegitimacy” which effectively kept the genre “down-trodden and free from complexities: as if a horror text, like pornography (to which it is often compared), is a simple matter of cause and effect, arousing, nauseating or inciting, as the case may be” (p. 5). In response, Gelder moves to distinguish the academic study of horror from those modes of reception (popular or otherwise) that presumably find genre films “entirely bereft of meaning”:

The academic readings included in this Reader . . . take the opposite view. They see horror texts as signifying systems: their approach is primarily semiotic. A number of contributions draw on the “revealing,” decoding methodologies of psychoanalysis. These and other essays thus provide “deep” readings of a genre that may, to the unsympathetic, seem either superficial or incomprehensible. (p. 5)

Interestingly, Gelder follows up this editorial assertion with a telling juxtaposition of scholarly and vernacular approaches, noting how, for instance, “we might contrast this kind of [academic] reading to the practice of horror fanzines and genre guides, which instead lay out the field of horror ‘horizontally’: processing vast numbers of films and novels, often providing the most minor or idiosyncratic particulars about directors, writers, stars, special effects, and so on” (p. 5). However, rather than treat this practice as self-sufficient, Gelder instead draws a correlation with traditional academic protocol, that is, historiographical research “which demonstrates an extensive knowledge of horror genealogies and networks” (p. 6), the implication being that subcultural capital of horror fans remains valuable insofar as it yields institutionally approved interpretive results.

A more nuanced view, perhaps, is offered by readings of horror that emerge from queer theory, and particularly work by Harry Benshoff (1997), which situates the metaphorical and connotative meanings of the putative horror film monster alongside the identifications and pleasures of queer spectators. While such readings indeed tend to foreground the allegorical significance of horror films as the sine qua non of “queer space” in the genre, they do so in a way that fundamentally opens up, rather than closes down, the potential for multiple readings and reading positions (Benshoff, 1997, p. 15). In effect, they recognize the possibility for producing multiple interpretations that do not necessarily hew to predominant critical dispositions, while emphasizing queer discourse as a source of genre pleasure and entertainment. As a result, while multiple social and historical meanings have been articulated to “the monster queer” primarily as a form of metaphorical expression (Benshoff, 1997, p. 4), these have largely served to validate a popular reception

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7 Here the term “queer” implies not so much interpretations derived from gay or lesbian readers, but a reception practice that fosters a fluidity of reading positions, including those which disrupt binary definitions of gender and sexual identity (Benshoff, 1997, p. 5).
practice that derives meaning from the identificatory pleasures of fan discourse and subcultural audiences, as opposed to conventional aesthetic norms of academic film culture.

Conversely, Stephen Prince (2004) has noted the “trivializing” effect of “all-too-plentiful splatter films,” such as those associated with cult horror films and their fans, which “equate horror with gore,” and thus “make the genre today a very disreputable one” (p. 9). Accordingly, in his editorial introduction to The Horror Film, Prince makes a bid for greater legitimacy on behalf of those films that are said to “swing away from gore and back to the psychological and suggestive elements of horror” (p. 9). Crucially, however, this attempt to qualify scholarly discontent with contemporary “gross-out special effects” and heightened “shock value” takes the form of asserting more “proper” modes of aesthetic appropriation. As Prince (2004) explains, “today it is relatively rare to find the genre mined with serious artistry . . . The turn toward graphic violence often has entailed a forfeiture of the genre’s artistic credentials. Horror is ultimately about, and poses, philosophical, metaphysical, or ontological issues . . . and gore is merely a pathway toward these” (p. 9). Hence graphic violence is treated as a mere pretext to horror’s more pertinent, that is, philosophical, metaphysical, or ontological, subtexts. In this way, Prince moves to appropriate the genre in terms of the kind of intellectual pleasures horror is typically said to lack, while transmuting the genre’s otherwise sensational properties into a medium for “deep” philosophical speculation.8

As such, techniques of (self-) legitimization are carried out at the expense of noncanonical works and noncanonical audiences, as academic discourse on horror continues to reify a model of “the horror film audience” as either hopelessly naïve (in terms of ideology) or passively enthralled (in terms of the genre’s “mindless” special effects). As Matt Hills (2005) argues, this trope is especially prevalent throughout debates over the genre’s pleasures, which often take the form of some sort of “paradox” or “problem” that critics alone can heroically resolve: whether this takes the form of symptomatic reading strategies or media effects models, theorists of horror tend to assume that it is they who “can actively explain horror texts while its audiences are passively and emotionally subjected to the genre’s products” (Hills, 2005, p. 90). Such assumptions go a long way toward explaining how untutored viewers can be relegated to the position of textual dupe, while horror’s textual pleasures are “written into, and disciplined within, a specific cultural-political framework” (Hills, 2005, p. 51)—that of the film academy.

THE HORROR AUTEUR FUNCTION

As a principle of classification that works to sustain and privilege the power of critical authority, the horror auteur operates in much the same way as Foucault’s “author-function”—as an inter-textual mechanism that accompanies the selective appropriation of some horror texts and not others. As Foucault (1979) points out, texts do not obtain authors spontaneously but rather acquire authorship credentials through a complex series of discursive rules and operations; it

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8Interestingly, the philosophical approach advocated by Prince proclaims stark opposition to the kind of psychoanalytic and cultural perspectives outlined above (Carroll, 1990). However, his stated focus on “more fundamental questions of human nature” and “the anxiety at the heart of the genre” (Prince, 2004, p. 2) nevertheless resonates with methods of interpretation associated with psychological and socio-historical approaches. In other words, Prince’s “metaphysical” notion of horror winds up obscuring equivalencies in method, or styles of interpretation.
is these rules which, in turn, govern the construction of particular types of authors, as well as the operative procedures through which certain types of discourse can be valued (pp. 19–23). Likewise, the figure of the horror auteur persists as a discursive function of established reading protocol: it serves to uphold not only a canon of “great” horror films and their directors, but also a canonical assortment of film-critical methodologies. As such, the practice horror auteurism relies on conventional analytical procedures to govern the discursive construction of particular types of authors.

Additionally, it provides the key reference point for establishing textual “truth” in relation to which certain noncanonical works (and directors) can be found wanting. Consider, for example, Wells’s (2000) assessment of postmodern era filmmakers, whose films “about film-making” are “predicated on the understanding that horror fans are versed in the appeal of mechanistic formulas and the artifice of special effects” (p. 35). While these films are merely said to “play out adolescent issues and pre-occupations . . . the horror text that remains ‘adult’ still carries with it the complex psychological, emotional, physical and ideological charges of ancient folklore, fairytale and myth” (Wells, 2000, p. 35). In other words, in “commenting upon the deep-seated anxieties of its time, the horror film thus performs a necessary social function, for to challenge and disturb is to insist upon a liberal democratic process that both reflects and critiques its socio-cultural moment” (Wells, 2000, p. 35). In this manner, so-called “postmodern auteurs” are roundly disparaged, not just for bringing irony and pastiche to the genre for an increasingly “knowing” audience (Wells, 2000, p. 35), but also for their supposed preoccupation with “adolescent issues” (i.e., shock and special effects), which, again, are said to blind undisciplined spectators to the genre’s otherwise redeeming social merits and complex ideological issues.

Meanwhile, the dual fates of audiences and postmodern filmmakers alike are discursively intertwined, as both appear woefully ignorant of the genre’s “necessary” social function. For instance, David Sanjek (2000) claims that American horror films of the 1990s evince little in the way of “the most prolific and thought-provoking practitioners of these forms” (p. 112). To wit, he argues that contemporary genre films “rarely if ever incorporate an overt radical or revolutionary agenda” (p. 114), and hence, just as “auteur theory has long fallen out of favor” (p. 112) “audience members are more interested in observing the genre rearticulate itself rather than call attention to the social, cultural, and ideological fissures and fault lines that the form represents” (p. 114). More cautiously, perhaps, David Church (2006) summarizes “the post-Scream era” of “creative void” and “uninspired” remakes as one in which “critics and audiences accustomed to 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” (para. 12). In both cases, divergences in audience taste and subcultural competency are clearly acknowledged; however, this is done so only to rearticulate, more forcefully, bids for cultural-political legibility.

In this way, questions of authorial intention can, with good conscience, be wholly sidelined, as it is the “collective dreams” of audiences and filmmakers that supposedly constitute the genre’s thematic core. To quote one of the genre’s foremost auteurist critics, “one might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses” (Wood, 2003, p. 68); accordingly, these films “respond to interpretation as at once the personal dreams of their directors and the collective dreams of their audiences, the fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology” (Wood, 2003, pp. 70). As such, the
practice of symptomatic reading becomes the principal mediator through which both cinematic meaning and film authorship are realized, as it is the task of interpreting horror films “seriously and responsibly” that requires critics to identity authorial works which exhibit an extraordinary “symptomatic interest” (Wood, 2003, p. 68), while revealing their “repressed” meanings through specialized techniques of interpretation.

Hence we might say that a director’s sole function as horror auteur boils down to his or her capacity to essentially serve as a cultural conduit—or unconscious mediator—of radical social forces embedded deep within genre materials. As Humphries (2002) explains in his chapter on “Directors and Directions,” for example:

The directors discussed here are George Romero, Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, Larry Cohen, and Joe Dante . . . The films chosen for analysis testify to a certain homogeneity in theme and outlook conducive to the psychoanalytical and ideological approach to class, gender, and politics I have adopted from the outset. (p. 113)

A group of films is thus preselected (and preevaluated) in terms of “radical” textual approaches, which openly favor “progressive/subversive” ideological readings as a way to reaffirm canonical expertise. The value of these films is such that they oblige readers to consider great horror films as symptomatic expressions of their time, and insofar as there is any subversive potential to be recovered, it is something that has to be ascertained through attentive close reading.

Emphasis shifts in these (and other) auteurist accounts of the genre (see, e.g., Williams, 2003; Royer & Royer, 2005; Beard, 2006; Browning, 2007; Bernardini, 2010) from how horror movies get made to how they are interpreted, from the act of creative inspiration to the practice of critical reading. Thus the tendency to equate horror film authorship with a text’s nonobvious meanings provides discursive cover for an interpretive practice bent on evaluating films in terms of socially repressed material. Meanwhile, political auteurism serves not least as an indication of a director’s ability to disclose, in a more-or-less unconscious fashion, “all that society represses or oppresses;” as such it also serves as a way to effectively foreground the critic’s own discursive mastery over those meanings and effects that seemingly occur unbeknownst to the author. Again, significant works of the genre are hailed to provide normative aesthetic criteria for exceptionally “deep” acts of interpretation.

**THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF (HORROR) FILM CRITICISM**

For the horror cognoscenti, blood and the broken flesh screen and obscure secret truths. Only the unlettered amateur is moved by what appears on the surface. (Lake Crane, 2004, p. 153)

Taking up horror film thus presents a distinct hermeneutic challenge to the would-be serious critic, as the only way to neutralize horror’s seemingly toxic pleasures is to unmask some latent insidious ideological intention. While this may afford opportunities to perform “a reasoned understanding of what horror film is ‘really’ about” (Hutchings, 2004, p. 186), it also works to denigrate the more literally affective pleasures of the genre as insufficiently allegorical, and even politically dubious. In contrast, less “resistive” approaches, such as those associated with horror film audiences, are often distinguished from the procedures of symptomatic interpretation on the basis of the latter’s ability to recognize deep cultural meanings within the genre. The result is a branch of
criticism that becomes synonymous with imposing hard-and-fast political distinctions. As Kellner (1995) writes:

If one wishes to maintain a critical perspective, one must also make difficult normative discriminations as to whether the resistance, oppositional reading, or pleasure in a given experience or artifact is progressive or reactionary, emancipatory or destructive. Critical practice must seek norms of critique and make critical discriminations in appraising the nature and effects of cultural artifacts and practices. (pp. 39–40)

Thus, while canonical discourse makes possible the uniform identification of potentially “emancipatory or destructive” effects, it also identifies the practice of criticism with the power to make such distinctions. In effect, criticism is distinguished as a cultural practice of prescribing normative ways of reading horror films—systems of value and disvalue that can be used to discredit improper approaches—while its cultural power rests on the ability to decipher hidden meanings and/or veiled ideological agendas. Critics thus respond to the genre by cutting through mindless gory effects and scare tactics to reveal some “deeper” meaning looming just beneath the surface. In doing so, they affirm their own vaunted status as “renegade critics” (Lake Crane, 2004, p. 164, n. 6) distanced from the more-or-less naïve pleasures of less “critical” readers.

As Lake Crane (2004) tellingly puts it: “the genre is at last worthy of careful attention because of the analytical genius brought to bear by the leading lights of the critical community . . . In illuminating the hidden meaning that lies behind the blood and gore, the analyst alleviates the deadly sting of the genre and mitigates any baleful attack committed against beleaguered fun-house protagonists and a defenseless, terrified audience” (pp. 151, 154). Indeed, disreputable cultural objects once deemed beyond interpretation are legitimated through an intellectualizing discourse of scholar-critics perpetually on hand “to offer some valuable and transcendental nugget that lies unseen—masked by bloody, but permeable, scrim” (Lake Crane, 2004, p. 154). Under these auspices, the critic not only maintains exclusive capacity to transform a culturally disreputable genre into something more socially and politically meaningful; they also establish a “criteria of validity in relation to which other readings can be found wanting” (Bennett & Woollacott, 1987, p. 65).

REFERENCES


TOMPKINS


