Chapter 6

Pop Goes the Horror Score

Left Alone in The Last House on the Left

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Originally conceived by director Wes Craven and producer Sean Cunningham as nothing more than a pointed, low-budget experiment in bad taste, an “outrageous cinematic prank on a culture . . . reeling out of control in Vietnam,”1 The Last House on the Left (1972) plays out like a modern-day Brothers Grimm fairy tale for the hippie generation—a piece of folklore spiked with bad LSD. Commencing in the idyllic backwoods of rural Connecticut, the movie tracks two teenage hippie girls as they giddily make their way from the country to the city on a quest to attend a rock concert in New York City’s East Village. Looking to “score on some good grass,” the girls stray from the beaten path, only to encounter a band of degenerate criminals who proceed to abduct, torture, rape, and eventually, murder them in their own backyard. Seeking refuge, the killers inadvertently wind up at the home of one of the dead girls’ parents. After the parents discover what has happened to their daughter, they effectively carry out an elaborate but no less heinous revenge scenario. The film ends with each fugitive dead, and both parents bloodied and in shock.

Setting out to reveal “the dark underbelly of the Hollywood genre film,”2 Craven’s Last House breaks with a number of established horror film conventions—including conventional horror scoring techniques—in a deliberate effort to confront and agitate reified sensibilities. In particular, the film’s unrepentant, intensely graphic depictions of torture and rape run directly in the face of traditional stylistic codes for representing screen violence. What’s more, the film’s modern-day setting, along with its focus on the middle-class family unit as a site of potential violence and aggression, deviates sharply from traditional horror cinema’s preoccupation with purely exogenous evil and fantastic monsters. For this reason, a number of critics regard Last House as marking a turning point in the genre’s evolution as a whole—a key index of the “postwar transition of the horror film from its classic to modern phases, when all too human threats replace gothic, otherworldly monsters, and graphic violence replaces suggested mayhem.”3
Yet amid general discussions of modern horror’s various formal and thematic transformations—as well as the particular ways *Last House* fits into this genre history—scholars have largely neglected the issue of corresponding shifts in horror scoring practice. For example, *Last House* is one of the first modern horror films to rely extensively on contemporary pop music idioms as part of an original, purposefully composed score. While pop-oriented horror film scores began to emerge in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s with Amicus Productions and Hammer studio films such as *Horror Hotel* (1963), *Lust for a Vampire* (1970), and *Dracula A.D.* (1972), these would typically consist of one or two songs added during post-production. In these films, the incorporation of pop style (typically jazz or rock) arises mainly as an afterthought, part of a larger effort by these studios to update or “modernize” their output. By contrast, *Last House* employs a mash-up of folk rock and country bluegrass as part of an original, non-diegetic score. In fact, when measured against a handful of dispersed instrumental cues and a few dissonant synthesizer effects, generic folk style tunes such as “Wait for the Rain” (aka “The Road Leads to Nowhere”) and “Now You’re All Alone” stand out as the film’s principal music. This relatively eccentric horror score is characteristic of Craven’s innovative approach to the horror film in particular; but it also stands as a distinguishing film-musical hallmark within American horror cinema and is instantly recognizable to fans and filmmakers alike.

Craven’s use of music in *Last House* is perhaps all the more remarkable for the way the cues maintain conspicuous “audibility” throughout the film—that is, they largely proceed in a manner that is clearly noticeable and, oftentimes, glaringly detached from the dramatic action. More than a mere stylistic flourish, the audibility of these songs performs two unique functions with respect to cinematic representation. First, because the folk rock cues are situated prominently in the audio-visual foreground, they maintain a kind of discursive/moral authority within the overall process of narration. Structurally presiding over the events represented on the image track, the lyrics command attention and are endowed with the unusual capacity to comment on the action from a peripheral space, seemingly “outside” the story world. Like the voice-over in classical Hollywood cinema, the music “speaks from a position of superior knowledge.” It is able to foresee events before they happen and articulate a cautionary moral wisdom that ultimately eludes each of the characters as they become ensnared in a harrowing cycle of murderous revenge.

Second, the obtrusive character of the music functions on a pragmatic level to unsettle standard modes of filmic reception. Unlike the traditional horror score, which typically aims to punctuate moments of fright with a few calculated shock effects, the barefaced audibility of the *Last House* cues—especially prominent during some of the film’s more gruesome scenes—serves to make us aware of our own voyeuristic involvement.
Forgoing the standardized musical devices (e.g. drones and ostinati, stingers, pitch raises, tone clusters) usually employed to generate tension (and release) in horror films, Last House abstains from the conventional practice of creating a “distinctive and enveloping ‘sound architecture’ or ambience” in which to immerse the audience. Instead, the music complicates spectator identification by subverting the established codes that typically align audience sympathies and steer emotional engagement. The music’s detached quality promotes a distancing, or alienating effect (comparable perhaps to Brecht’s “epic” theater), which disrupts and renders difficult the reception (and voyeuristic appeal) of screen violence. As a result, Last House denies audiences any comfortable or “easy” audio-viewing position from which to consume scenes of traumatic carnage and brutality.

It’s Only a Movie . . .

Initially billed (albeit somewhat disingenuously) as a “retelling of Ingmar Bergman’s Academy Award Winner The Virgin Springs (1960) in 1972 terms,” Last House officially opened to a (presumably unsuspecting) suburban middle-class audience in Wethersfield, Connecticut on August 23, 1972. The release inspired immediate public protest, prompting a dismayed contingent of audience members to storm out of the screening, where, without delay, a sizeable group organized and signed a petition in the parking lot as part of an effort to coerce the theater manager to discontinue the movie. Later, a scathing editorial appeared in the local Hartford Courant, deploring the “horrible, sick film” for its “lingering gore, sadism and fetishism.” Echoing these remarks, the Boston Herald-Traveler deemed Last House “an illustration of loathsomeness.” And the Pittsburg Press called it “a cheap-jack of a movie with no discernible merit—but considerable tastelessness.” Eventually, the hoopla prompted an “open letter” response from Hallmark Releasing Corporation, espousing the movie’s “morally redeeming” quality and its “important social message” as regards the film’s more “extreme” subject matter. In a sly bit of “classic exploitation movie hucksterism,” a revised version of the Hallmark letter would later appear as a disclaimer at the top of one of the film’s banner ads, along with the admonition: “To avoid fainting, keep repeating, it’s only a movie . . . only a movie . . .”

Indeed, the film’s undeniable shock value owes much to its unrelenting depictions of brutal violence and “lingering gore,” just as the continued hostility directed towards the film might be traced back to its formal and stylistic “tastelessness.” A number of scholars have suggested as much, pointing to the film’s refusal to sanitize violence through classical realist standards as a way of explaining, at least partially, the tremendous public outcry and vehement calls for censorship surrounding the film’s release. Adam Lowenstein, for example, singles out the film’s “gritty, unadorned
newsreel style” as part of an overall formal and thematic attempt to “demythologize abstracted Hollywood-style violence.” Accentuating “the continuity between depictions of brutality and the ordinariness of everyday life,” the film’s pseudo-documentary visual aesthetic effectively breaks with mainstream media representations of social violence, and thus carries the potential to “penetrate viewer defenses that tend to anesthetize historical trauma.”

Lowenstein’s comments echo Craven’s own description of Last House as a deliberate attempt to “show things the way they really are” by subverting the dominant cinematic codes for representing screen violence. Craven acknowledges a deeper political commitment behind the film’s documentary look and feel, one aimed at exposing the grim realities and national traumas associated with the Vietnam War:

Last House was very much a product of its era. It was a time when all the rules were thrown out the window, when everybody was trying to break the hold of censorship. The Vietnam War was going on, and the most powerful footage that we saw was in the actual documentary films of the war. There was a great amount of feeling that, “The worst of it is being censored, so let’s try to get our hands on what’s really going on over there.”

Especially significant here is the way Craven’s overriding desire to cut through the false appearances of US military propaganda and mainstream news coverage is persistently articulated in terms of breaking with Hollywood narrative style:

In Last House, we set out to show violence the way we thought it really was, and to show the dark underbelly of the Hollywood genre film. We consciously took all the B movie conventions and stood them on their heads... so that just when you thought the shot would cut away, it didn’t. Someone gets stabbed, but then they back up and start crawling... Last House did not play by the rules that had been established for handling violence, where the people who did violence were always bad, and if a good guy did it to the bad guy, it was very clean and quick... That was the sort of attitude that America had gone into Vietnam with... that they were the bad guys and we’d go in like Gunsmoke, face ’em down, and bang, they’d be dead. The fact of the matter was that the war involved horrendous killings piled upon killings.

The film’s refusal to treat violence in a clear-cut manner—according to the ideological binaries of good and evil, right and wrong, innocent and culpable—is perhaps most evident in the juxtaposition of the opening
and final sequences. The opening sequence presents audiences with a prosaic representation of domestic bliss, complete with chirpy sitcom music and a quaint living room scene involving the Collingwood family and their daughter, Mari, on the morning of her seventeenth birthday. As father John Collingwood reads the newspaper, mother Estelle asks her husband, “What’s new in the outside world?” John breezily responds, “Same old stuff, murder and mayhem. What’s for dinner tonight?” Conversely, the film’s final sequence returns us to the Collingwood home, but under quite different circumstances. Having just brutally raped and murdered young Mari and her friend Phyllis, the Stillo gang (Krug, Weasel, Junior, and Sadie) unwittingly seek asylum with Mari’s parents at their residence, where they will eventually receive their grisly comeuppance. Culminating with the lavishly gruesome revenge murders of each Stillo gang member, and the concomitant breakdown of the picturesque Collingwood family facade, the film’s looping narrative arc offers us a renewed take on the otherwise “normal” character of the Collingwood home. Refracting the latter through the sordid lens of the “outside world,” the final act brings the “murder and mayhem” full circle, drawing a correlation between “outside” and “inside,” monstrous and normal, vulnerable and secure.24

The Baddies’ Theme
The film’s “refusal to play by the rules that had been established for handling violence” also extends to the music, which plays a key role in subverting the conventional narrative formulas and ideological binaries that typically align audience sympathies. Deviating sharply from the stylistic codes that underpin most horror film scores, the music in Last House goes a long way in generating the kind of shock and distress otherwise attributed solely to the film’s visual aspects. For one, the music largely foregoes the kind of modernist avant-garde techniques that have come to characterize modern horror scoring practice.25 Instead, Last House relies predominantly on a host of popular music styles that often sound at odds with the more disturbing images shown on the screen. The incongruity is especially striking when considering the soft acoustic guitar melodies and compact vocal harmonies that suffuse original folk rock songs such as “Wait For the Rain” and “Now You’re All Alone.” These songs appear reluctant to support or “collaborate” with the visuals and resist the traditional functions of heightening a dramatic mood or atmosphere, or expressing through musical parallel the perceived psychological states of a particular character or group of characters. Rather, the music cues appear to be, at times, formally independent of the images, positioned at the forefront of the film’s aural mise en scène, where they frequently call attention to themselves in order to comment on the narrative action.
Composer David Hess—who also made his acting debut playing the lead villain Krug Stillo—deliberately approached Last House with the intention of challenging conventional Hollywood scoring techniques. A former student at New York’s Julliard School of Music, Hess worked for a number of years as a professional songwriter and folk rock singer prior to Last House.26 Teaming up with fellow New York area folk rock artist Steve Chapin to arrange and produce the soundtrack for the film, Hess wrote the bulk of the score on set during film production in close collaboration with Craven and producer Sean Cunningham.27 While claiming this provided him with an exceptional degree of insight into the production process, Hess also admits to drawing inspiration less from the characters and events depicted in the movie and more from his close involvement with cast and crew:

I feel it’s important to be on the set as a composer, because when you’re there and you see what’s happening . . . you write for the people you’re involved with, as opposed to writing for the characters you see on a screen.28

Accordingly, Hess’s score for Last House regularly contradicts the traditional notion that music should serve a subordinate role with respect to the emotional climate and dramatic dictates of the narrative. Rather, the music frequently appears to challenge, or even contradict, the perceived “meaning” of on-screen narrative events, thereby supporting Hess’s more general assertion that “music in movies should be a counterpoint to whatever is going on up on the screen.”29

One might consider here the upbeat, happy-go-lucky “Baddies’ Theme” that accompanies Krug and Co. during their escape to the countryside.30 The entire scene contains little (intelligible) dialogue and is sparse in sound effects; it plays out more like a music video. Having kidnapped Mari and Phyllis, the Stillos attempt a getaway with the two girls bound and gagged in the trunk of their car. As they hightail it out of town, a clunky bit of chase music—the “Baddies’ Theme”—materializes over the soundtrack. The music features a range of peculiar instruments (banjo, piano, kazoo), which all sound jarringly out of place. The whimsical melody appears at once inappropriately cheerful and oblivious to the unfortunate circumstances that plague the two hapless girls. For his part, Hess claims “the contrast was absolutely intentional,” and that the offbeat tenor of the “Baddies” song remains “consistent with the movie” insofar as “there are so many things about the film that are aberrant.”31

Yet, we might concretize Hess’s statement about the “aberrant” aspects of the “Baddies’ Theme” by setting it against the larger backdrop of pop culture and social history. The use of bluegrass-style banjo music in a 1970s low-budget horror film, for example, will inevitably bring with it
a host of cultural meanings, values, and associations that cannot be easily mapped onto the stylistic and ideological norms of the horror genre.\textsuperscript{32} Karen Linn's intricate cultural history of banjo music is quite helpful in this regard.\textsuperscript{33} In her book, \textit{That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture}, Linn traces the instrument's cultural genealogy in the US, from its emergence in African American folk spirituals, as well as its popularization by black minstrel performers during the mid-nineteenth century, to its contemporary status as a signifier of Southern white rural culture. Commenting in particular on the familiar pop culture image of the banjo as an authentic “Appalachian folk artifact,”\textsuperscript{34} Linn draws a connection between the instrument's Appalachian pedigree and its association with a uniquely “antimodern,” populist value system.\textsuperscript{35} Indeed, this association remains a staple of American popular culture and, in fact, is a recurrent feature in a number of screen representations depicting “hillbilly” culture appearing at or around the same time as \textit{Last House} (the iconic “dueling banjos” sequence at the beginning of John Boorman's \textit{Deliverance} [1972] being perhaps the most indelible example).\textsuperscript{36} The prominence of banjo music in films such as Arthur Penn's 1967 \textit{Bonnie and Clyde} (“Foggy Mountain Breakdown”), for instance, effectively shored up the conception of the banjo as an “antimodern machine,” playing off the instrument's nostalgic, mythological connotations—its connection to “Appalachian otherness”\textsuperscript{37}—as a means of criticizing the encroachment of big business on modern American society.

In this context, the “Baddies’ Theme” in \textit{Last House} might be read as a direct reference to the bluegrass-style chase cues made famous by Penn's film a few years prior.\textsuperscript{38} However, where the latter draws a special connection between the “down-home” character of the music and the populist attitudes of the film's titular outlaw heroes, \textit{Last House} deploys this style of music somewhat ironically (if a bit lightheartedly), confusing matters of heroism and violence by lending its irredeemable “baddies” their own upbeat, tuneful theme song. The glib lyrics are especially noteworthy in this regard for the way they reinforce a sense of comedic absurdity, seeming to poke fun at the whole situation: “Weasel and Junior, Sadie and Krug/Out for the day with the Collingwood brood/Out for the day, for some fresh air and sun/Let's have some fun with those two lovely children and off 'em as soon as we're done.” Given the cavalier nature of the music, it seems plausible to interpret the “Baddies' Theme” as an expression of the more or less whimsical attitude of the Stillos themselves.

However, as Linn suggests, bluegrass/banjo music persists as a signifier of cultural otherness, and in this sense the “Baddies’ Theme” can also be understood as an exaggerated (if slightly perverse) variation of the typical horror scoring practice of “othering” through musical sound. Such is the function of “dueling banjos” in Boorman's film, which, as Lowenstein points out, shares a number of thematic parallels with \textit{Last House}. Both
films, for example, utilize a rape-revenge plot structure to engage issues of cultural conflict and class difference, and both rely on an ideological binary structure that hinges on oppositions of center/margin, city/country, and civilized/savage. Lowenstein notes how *Deliverance* ambivalently mobilizes these ideological binary structures by rendering “Appalachian otherness” at once “idyllic” (“dueling banjos”) and “horrific” (“squeal like a pig”), only to eventually and unequivocally demonize the local country “savages” against the more “civilized” city businessmen.\(^\text{39}\) The end result is a straightforward, maligning treatment of “Appalachian otherness” that does nothing to redeem an economically dispossessed community of “mountain men,” while making it virtually impossible to identify with their alien “redneck” culture. By contrast, *Last House* complicates this process of identification (or anti-identification) through its self-knowing, incongruous deployment of bluegrass/banjo music. During the escape sequence, as the gang takes flight from the city and to the country, the conventional city-country dyad is called into question (or at least temporarily suspended); here it is the ostensible “baddies” that are endowed with the privileged capacity to move in between and across otherwise impenetrable geographic/narrative boundaries. Hence, it is the Stillos that appear to defy “convenient categorization as either ‘country’ or ‘city’ forces.”\(^\text{40}\) Nevertheless, their attempt to flee the city and get “out of the state” signals a shift in the ideological terrain—a movement from a state of civility and law and order to a realm of anarchic chaos. The breakdown is at once announced and parodied with the onset of the shambling country bluegrass music cues.

As Carol Clover has suggested, the city/country dyad, which lies at the center of countless horror film narratives, is never innocent; rather, it is an ideological construction that addresses, indirectly, more thorny questions of class affluence and economic guilt:

> To be in the country . . . is not only to confront the poverty that one may have colluded in creating and maintaining; it is to confront poverty without the protection of the judicial system and its coercive apparatus—to face the victims of one’s class comforts without recourse to the police. It is no surprise that the site of city/country horror is always just inches beyond the grasp of the law’s long arm . . . “out there where no one can hear you scream.”\(^\text{41}\)

In *Last House*, this conflict is aggravatingly flaunted by the comic presence of an incompetent local sheriff and his equally inept deputy sidekick. The hapless duo repeatedly proves woefully inadequate to the task of tracking down the kidnappers; if anything, they function more on the level of sideshow clowns than as would-be narrative heroes.\(^\text{42}\) Appropriately enough, their bungling attempts are more than once...
accompanied by a clumsy instrumental rendition of the “Baddies’ Theme.” Furthermore, these brief comic asides are set in sharp narrative contrast to the harrowing scenes depicting Mari’s torture and rape at the hands of the Stilos. The juxtaposition directly illustrates the ideological conflict described by Clover, while the gawky music cues, first heard during the Stilos’ getaway, underscore the ineptitude of the local (backwoods) law enforcement. In other words, the music aurally links the criminals and the cops, and in doing so makes explicit the underlying connection between an ineffective “coercive apparatus” and a seedier underclass element that might otherwise be kept comfortably at (law’s) arm’s length.

Additionally, through this crisscrossing of law and order, the “Baddies’ Theme” functions to expose (and perhaps even undermine) the fundamental contradiction that underwrites the city/country, civilized/savage, center/margin dichotomy. Because it encodes ideological associations of deviancy and otherness, the music indeed signifies a “threat.” But the threat embodied by these “aberrant” music cues is less that of other cultures per se (à la “Appalachian otherness” in Deliverance), and more that of an immanent, class-specific danger—a peculiar condition instability, disorder, and “statelessness” lurking just beyond the bounds of (sub)urban, middle-class comfort.43 Put differently, while the music signals the kind of topsy-turvy world described by Clover, the film concretizes our degenerate slide into the “wilderness” by tracking the characters as they cross this quasi-mythic threshold to a place where civilization’s rules (and class-based appurtenances) no longer apply. In Last House, the dialectical contradictions of bourgeois culture return with a vengeance, as it is no longer “out there,” on the edge of middle-class luxury “where no one can hear you scream.” On the contrary, the nightmare now literally plays out in one’s own backyard.

**Now You’re All Alone**

Just as the “Baddies’ Theme” taps “urbanoia” anxieties in order to flout the insular, class-based dynamics of horror spectatorship, it also works to unset traditional, voyeuristic engagements with screen violence. Drawing a sharp (if ironic) contrast with the “unadorned newsreel style” of the images, the music effectively heightens (rather than diminishes) our sense of being both textually and morally de-centered. In its outward detachment, the “Baddies’ Theme” typifies Hess’s contrapuntal approach to film scoring by refusing to resolutely demonize the Stilos through a conventional arrangement of “monstrous” music cues, thus operating in a way that confounds processes of audience (anti)identification. Again, Craven makes the point that the “aberrant” qualities of the soundtrack directly correspond with a certain blasé attitude toward the atrocities in Vietnam:
With that particular song ["Baddies’ Theme"], I guess we wanted to create a bizarre juxtaposition between the carnival raucousness of the movie and the profoundly horrific and sad side of it . . . The contrast between that song and the characters was sort of like showing an image of a village getting napalmed and then saying, “Fuck ’em if they can’t take a joke” . . . and that type of humor was very specific to the era of the early ’70s, and, I think, terribly cynical.44

More than merely reiterate the allegorical connection to the historical traumas of Vietnam, however, Craven’s remark implicitly raises the question of voyeuristically consuming violence at a comfortable distance. Because the music takes a highly ironic stance with respect to images of violence and brutality, it poses a challenge to ideas about the film’s unique claim to realism, including Craven’s own assertion that Last House simply “shows violence the way it really is.” Instead, songs such as the “Baddies’ Theme” highlight our own involvement as spectators, exposing and amplifying the contradiction between the profoundly horrific nature of rape and murder and the conventional “rules for handling,” or mediating, such traumatic events. Consequently, Last House creates a space for audiences to become self-aware of their own complicity, as well as the “terribly cynical” attitudes that underpin the routine consumption of spectacularized violence.

Perhaps the most upsetting audio-visual incongruities occur during the protracted torture scenes in the woods, where the sedate and charming sounds of Hess’s folk ballad “Now You’re All Alone” regularly saturate the soundtrack. Sounding woefully out of sync with the graphic images on screen, the music roundly denies audiences the opportunity for any kind of (unproblematic) emotional identification by refusing to steer us in a unilateral way toward a sympathetic affinity with any one particular character. Rather, the music seems to do quite the opposite, instantiating what Michel Chion might call an “anempathetic” relationship to the situation depicted.45 While most horror film scores dutifully adhere (through rhythm, tone, phrasing, timbre) to the perceived feelings of the characters—most often the emotional state of a victim caught in tumultuous throes of fright, shock, anxiety, or pain—the cues in Last House mainly deviate from the cinematic-cultural codes typically relied upon for (musically) representing cinematic horror. Successfully carving out an affective space for us to inhabit as spectators, traditional horror music does more than simply register the emotional climate of a particular scene; it also encourages our identification with the appropriately conveyed—that is to say, horrified—emotional response, so that audiences are left with the resounding impression of being able to feel exactly what the characters are feeling. Where conventional horror film music is especially remarkable, then, is in its ability to elicit a direct, or
“empathetic,” emotional response in the spectator. Conversely, anempathetic music refuses such a response, functioning instead to “exhibit a conspicuous indifference to the situation” at hand.46

Building off Chion, Stan Link has outlined the features of anempathetic music cues with respect to cinematic representations of psychopathology. Link contrasts the highly affective strategies of “traditional musical horror,” wherein spectators become emotionally wedded to the position of the victim through techniques of musical expressionism, with the more eccentric approach characterized by “musical anempathy.”47 Here, instead of being afforded the impression of an emotional bond with on-screen victims, for example, musical anempathy disallows spectators the ability “to know” and experience their suffering through affective identification. Because it “disagrees with what we take to be either the victim’s reaction or the spectator’s ‘appropriate’ empathy with the victim’s plight,”48 musical anempathy closes off the possibility for emotional “intimacy,” for sharing the “emotional perspective” of the victim—a path of identification commonly afforded by traditional horror scoring. Moreover, the music’s apparent refusal to directly express emotional trauma through sonic parallel “engenders a distancing that may become expressively particular.”49 The effect is one of “emotional confusion,” a kind of cine-musical disorientation that carries the potential to trigger awareness within the spectator of film music’s overall capacity for affective manipulation.

While Mari and Phyllis are repeatedly tormented, Hess’s chorus-like commentary refuses to arrest viewer emotions with the events on the screen. The result is music that “highlights our expectations by thwarting or negating them.”50 By upending a deeply ingrained and culturally overdetermined process of hearing horror films, the cues effectively highlight the representational processes involved in discursively constructing screen violence. At the same time, they continue to have a deep impact on spectatorship. Despite their utter refusal to steer our emotional involvement, the music cues do not necessarily fall short of “moving” audiences; rather, they obstinately deny moving us in the “right” way—channeling our sympathies toward the “right” character, or the “right” feeling, or the “right” emotional/moral sense.51 In other words, Hess’s music forecloses the possibility for any kind of unproblematic or unilateral viewer identification. Denying audiences the “music-affective”52 standpoint of the characters, the song cues merely reiterate the tragic nature of the events from a detached, anempathetic position of mild concern. As Mari and Phyllis are forced to strip naked and “make it with each other,” Hess’s soft-spoken lyrics (“Now you’re all alone/Feeling the world close in on you/And you’re looking for someone to hold your hand, someone who will understand . . . Now you’re all alone”) gingerly coax us through the torment, articulating a kind of cynical regret that reflects dually the position of the characters and the position of the spectator. Both Wood53
and Lowenstein have argued that the scene immediately following Mari’s rape effectively conveys a brief, sympathetic moment of remorse and self-regret on the part of the Stillos. Realizing the true horror of their actions, the characters stand over Mari’s naked body, exchanging glances and appearing, at least temporarily, alienated and despondent (“Now You’re All Alone”). According to Craven, the scene was intended as an especially poignant moment of rupture within the film:

The real essence of the picture was that moment when the characters went so far that they horrified themselves . . . where they became repulsed and couldn’t wait to try to clean up. It was kind of the telling point of the whole story, when everything switched . . . the bad guys became penitent and almost unsure of themselves, while the parents later became completely ruthless.

In this sense, the anempathetic cues provided by Hess’s score might be said to correspond with the alienated position of the Stillos, while also maintaining the kind of “clear divisions” between audience, victim, and villain described by Link. Like the Stillos, all we can do at this point is look on haplessly. Bereft of any kind of music-affective contact, our emotional involvement is momentarily suspended and we are forced to assume a rather discomfiting position of isolated, anempathetic confinement.

Accordingly, what is most unsettling and provocative about the music in these scenes is the way it refuses to “suture” the gaping wound that lies at the heart of horror film spectatorship. Whereas most traditional horror films invite us to become completely immersed within the represented diegetic reality of on-screen monsters and their victims, the music in Last House does the opposite; it foregrounds the impossibility of total enclosure and highlights the gap that exists between the spectator and the screen image. As Link suggests:

Perhaps anempathy’s most disturbing subversion . . . lies less in ironizing graphic violence than in undermining or mocking the magical thinking that finds redemptive powers in a spectator’s sympathy. Without a partner in suffering—without intimacy—the prey is left truly alone.

Likewise, we might say that musical anempathy in Last House tarries at the border of the screen world (the “real” site of violence), making apparent the remote character of cinematic reception and forcing audiences to endure the experience of screen violence without the cathartic illusion of musical-emotional intimacy. In effect, the music conditions a self-reflexive mode of horror spectatorship, which roundly denies viewers both the experience of empathic absorption and the corresponding opportunity to disown screen violence as something perfunctorily
experienced by audiences and characters alike. Rather, screen violence is made indigestible by conspicuously doing away with the cultural-musical codes typically deployed to aurally represent horrific, traumatic events. Consequently, any attempt we might make as spectators to fall back on the “magical thinking” of immediate emotional identification is confounded by the soundtrack, which mercilessly strips away our customary aural security blankets. In the end, we are left with nothing more than to repeat the hollow mantra, “it’s only a movie . . . only a movie.”

Notes

1 David A. Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left”: The Making of a Cult Classic (Guildford: FAB Press, 2000), 16. Hands down, the most informative work to date on Last House is Szulkin’s book, to which this essay owes a great deal.

2 Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 15.


5 One might also include here Ennio Morricone’s early work for Dario Argento in L’Uccello dalle piume di cristallo (aka The Bird with the Crystal Plumage, 1970) and Il Gatto a nove code (aka The Cat o’ Nine Tails, 1971).


7 Szulkin’s book contains original transcripts of both the “Baddies’ Theme” and “Wait for the Rain” as well as a copy of the original music cue sheet for the film, which served as my primary source for all song/cue titles.

8 Although scholars typically pay no more than passing reference to the Last House soundtrack, fans and filmmakers have proven to be more astute in their assessment of the music’s efficacy as horror film music. Take, for example, Eli Roth’s redeployment of “The Road Leads to Nowhere” in the opening minutes of his 2002 film Cabin Fever, or David DeFalco’s blatant Last House rip-off, Chaos (2005). In both cases, music lifted from Hess’s original score is recycled as both audio homage and narrative film music.

9 Claudia Gorbman cites “inaudibility”—or the imperative to minimize any potentially disruptive elements in the overall subordination of film music to the emotional and dramatic dictates of the narrative—as one of the definitive principles of Hollywood film scoring practice. See Claudia Gorbman, Unheard Melodies (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

11 Kaja Silverman has demonstrated the discursive authority granted to the (typically male) voice-over in classical Hollywood cinema: the voice-over "seems separated from the fiction by an absolute partition;" it becomes "a voice on high . . . a voice which speaks from a position of superior knowledge, and which superimposes itself 'on top' of the diegesis." See Kaja Silverman, The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 48.

12 Alongside the more prominent folk rock songs, occasional synthesizer effects and experimental cues accompany the torture sequences. During the scene where Phyllis escapes her captors and is chased through the woods, for example, composers David Hess and Steve Chapin relied on percussion instruments—beating xylophone mallets on a leather chair—to simulate a heartbeat sound (Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 122–3).

13 Donnelly, The Spectre of Sound, 93.


15 Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, 139.

16 Both Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, 139, and Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left”, 134–5, explain the curious choice of suburban Wethersfield, Connecticut by pointing to the corporate ties linking the film’s distributor (Hallmark Corporation) and Paris Cinema movie theater where the film was initially screened. One might also infer the shrewd marketing tactics motivating the debut of a low-budget, exploitation horror film to a crowd of unwary middle-class viewers—an explosive recipe guaranteed to incite controversy and uproar (if not a jolt of free publicity).


18 Ibid., 135.

19 Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, 118, 120.

20 Ibid., 118, 120.

21 Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 15.

22 Referencing Daniel C. Halin, Lowenstein counters the historically revisionist notion that mainstream TV news coverage provided an extraordinarily graphic and “uncensored” account of the war:

Even in the later years of the war, “the Nixon administration retained a good deal of power to ‘manage’ the news” and “journalists continued to be patriots in the sense that they portrayed the Americans as the ‘good guys’ in Vietnam.” As a result, “the public came to see the war as a ‘mistake’ or ‘tragedy,’ rather than the crime the more radical opposition believed it to be.” Television’s contribution toward containing public disillusionment with the war can be attributed partly to . . . the relative lack of aired footage depicting actual combat or casualties, “despite the emphasis on military action,” and the “almost perfectly one-dimensional image of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong as cruel, ruthless, and fanatical.” (Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, 129).

23 Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 15.

24 The film’s refusal to isolate violence as an extraordinary event, situating it instead against the humdrum backdrop of quotidian existence, has prompted a number of critics to interpret Last House for its radical sociopolitical meanings. Most notable here is Robin Wood, who argues that Last House stands as one among a cluster of 1970s American horror films to incisively
link issues of violence to the patriarchal bourgeois family in a way that highlights the ambiguous relation between perceived normality and dreadful monstrosity (Wood, Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan, 108–15). Although modernist-derived horror scoring techniques appear as early as the 1930s, they do not become a staple feature of horror cinema until the 1950s, when they are frequently used to signify the “alien” quality of a wide swath of fantastic monsters that appear across a host of low-budget, B-grade sci-fi/horror movies. From there, the horror-modernist association continues well into the 1970s and 1980s, where it acquires an implicit seal of approval in the scores for a host of more prestigious, mainstream Hollywood horror movies, including The Exorcist (William Friedkin, 1973), The Omen (Richard Donner, 1976), and The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980).

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26 Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 118.
27 Ibid., 119–21.
28 Ibid., 119.
29 Ibid., 121.
30 The “Baddies’ Theme” also accompanies the film’s end credit montage sequence.
31 Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 121.
32 I credit Neil Lerner for pushing me to consider this relationship in closer detail, particularly as regards the cultural history of the banjo in the US.
34 Ibid., 117.
35 These “antimodern values” include: a “distrust of luxury and consumer desires . . . [a suspicion of] the evils of the industrial society, the virtue of a spartan simple life, [and] the desire for an egalitarian social structure” (Linn, That Half-Barbaric Twang, 123). Linn goes on to point out that such “antimodernist sentiments,” first articulated to Appalachian life in the late nineteenth century as part of a larger conservative critique of industrial society, would later be embraced and celebrated by various “admirers of Appalachian otherness” in the late twentieth century, including those in the folk revivalist movement of the 1950s and 1960s (123–4).
36 One might also include here such “small screen” examples as The Andy Griffith Show, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Hee Haw.
37 Linn, That Half-Barbaric Twang, 123.
38 Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 120.
39 Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, 133.
40 Ibid., 133.
42 For example, one scene follows their ham-fisted attempts to hitch a ride from a chicken farmer after their cruiser has run out of gas, making for an odd moment of cheap slapstick as the sheriff and deputy are thrown from the top of the farmer’s pick-up.
43 Clover describes the figurative city-country encounter, which distinguishes what she calls the “urbanoia” (or “city revenge”) film, in precisely these terms:

The collision between country and city is also a collision between a state mentality (in which citizens can submit their grievances to the executive function) and statelessness (in which citizens rely on vigilantism) . . . What the city limits mark, in horror, is the boundary between state and no-state. (Clover, Men, Women, and Chainsaws, 132–3).
44 Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 120.
46 Ibid., 8.
48 Ibid., 20.
49 Ibid., 7.
50 Ibid., 7.
51 As Kay Dickinson points out, the traditional rules of horror scoring embody the “appropriate” strategies not only for musically representing cinematic horror but also for charting an “appropriate” viewer response. Accordingly, they reinforce a shared cultural common sense for what constitutes “both moral and musical right and wrong.” See her essay, “Troubling Synthesis: The Horrific Sights and Incompatible Sounds of Video Nasties,” in Sleazy Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste Style and Politics, edited by Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, MD: Duke University Press, 2007), 176.
52 Link, “Sympathy with the Devil?,” 3.
54 Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, 120–1.
55 Szulkin, Wes Craven’s “Last House on the Left,” 81.
56 Link, “Sympathy with the Devil?,” 7.
57 Ibid., 20.