

MOVIES

# Do Horror Films Filter The Horrors of History?

By SHAILA K. DEWAN    OCT. 14, 2000

The idea that horror films reflect, or even caricature, society's collective anxieties is nothing new. "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" is frequently read as a critique of McCarthy-era pod people. King Kong? A metaphor for the Great Depression or the threat of the black man to white social norms. Godzilla? A Japanese reaction to the devastation of the bomb. And the vampires haunting us of late? A coded response to the trauma of AIDS.

In the late 60's and 70's horror films entered a cycle of unparalleled carnage that has often been explained in the psychological terms of, say, family dynamics or the subconscious. As filmmakers and scholars look more closely at those seemingly exploitative films, however, they have shifted their focus from the psyche to the era's history, arguing that schlocky B-movies, in particular, deserve study as important social artifacts or as a way people process the terrors of real life.

In wildly successful films like "Night of the Living Dead" (1968), "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" (1974) and "Halloween" (1978), the lonely monsters of earlier decades gave way to human-on-human violence. Zombies shuffle across the land, chewing on human flesh, girls kill their mothers with trowels and crazed men take up chainsaws and butcher knives. The changes had more to do with what was going on outside the studio than inside it. Indeed, what distinguishes that period was the public's almost daily exposure to graphic, violent pictures, whether of napalm victims, street riots or police brutality. Movies were nourished by imagery from the nightly news, the ur-horror film of the day.

George Romero's "Night of the Living Dead" (completed just days before the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated) had policemen scouring the countryside with dogs at their side, mirroring photographs of Southern sheriffs spoiling for civil rights activists. The movie's black protagonist, Ben, is mistaken for a zombie and shot through the head, with the comment, "That's another one for the fire."

In a new documentary on independent horror movies between 1968 and 1978, "The American Nightmare," which had its premiere last night on the Independent Film Channel and will be rebroadcast through Halloween, major splatter-film directors like Mr. Romero, Wes Craven, John Carpenter and Tobe Hooper talk, some for the first time, about the social context of their films.

"What happened in part," said Adam Simon, the documentary's director, in an interview, "was simply that there were images being delivered to American living rooms that would not have been allowed on the screens of their movie theaters without an X rating. And the self-evident contradiction of that, in part, was what broke through the barriers.

"It's the Vietnam images, but it's equally the images of protesters being beaten, it's the images of kids at Kent State with blood all over the concrete," he said.

Tom Savini, who is primarily known for his groundbreaking, literally visceral makeup and special effects in "Dawn of the Dead" (1978) and "Friday the 13th" (1980), served in Vietnam in 1969, photographing corpses for the United States Army. As a young man obsessed with Frankenstein and fake scars, he lived in a constant state of fear. To calm his nerves, he analyzed the carnage from a

filmmaker's point of view. "You have to turn off your emotions to see this stuff," he says in the documentary. "I almost stepped on an arm, but to me, through a camera, it was a special effect."

The new explicitness wasn't confined to violence. Mr. Simon intersperses scenes from Masters and Johnson's sex experiments in the early 70's with scenes from "Shivers," a 1975 David Cronenberg film in which a parasite turns people into demented sex addicts, and an interview with Mr. Cronenberg discussing the sexual revolution.

Adam Lowenstein, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh who is writing a book about post-Holocaust horror films and appears in the documentary, said in an telephone interview: "It's the horror film that's actually able to engage traumatic history and to confront viewers with it. And it's largely because the horror film is already equipped with the tools to shock us, to unsettle us, to disturb us. It's not the place most people would think of as where history is happening. It's precisely that preconception that allows things to go on in relation to history."

Mr. Lowenstein is cautious about conjecturing what today's horror films say about the culture, but when pressed he ventured, "The "Scream"-type film and its imitators," with their insular worlds of teenagers obsessed with horror films and ruthless journalists obsessed with teenagers, "will be seen to have a lot to do with events like Columbine," the high school in Littleton, Colo., where 12 students were murdered by classmates last year.

"And by the same token," he said, " 'The Blair Witch Project,' " with its handmade pseudo-documentary feel, "is going to look a lot clearer to us as a product of a moment in an information culture where the desire for the real is just as intense as its impossibility."

Mr. Lowenstein's analysis of the way films function historically echoes that of the German critic Siegfried Kracauer, who made an early connection between horror and history in his classic 1947 book "From Caligari to Hitler." Not only did the silent German Expressionist films reflect the uncertainty of the Weimar Republic, he argued, but they also captured a German fondness for authoritarianism, thus predicting the rise of Hitler.

Cinema, Kracauer later wrote, "aims at transforming the agitated witness into a conscious observer."

Yet some critics are skeptical of the claims being made for horror films. Geoffrey Hartman, the director of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, has recently written that the graphic images churned out by today's culture make critical thinking more difficult, not less.

"Is this a working-through, or is it a sign that we somehow are in a new phase of culture in which everything gets escalated and violence becomes a necessary ingredient to move us, to stir our emotions?" he asked in an interview. In other words, is the violence in horror films truly cathartic or just gratuitous pandering?

Eric Foner, a Columbia University historian, is blunter. "I'm always skeptical of filmmakers' exaggerating their own social impact," he said, suggesting that horror films were more about making money than making sense out of war.

Clearly box office returns are a driving force. But some film scholars and filmmakers say that horror films serve another purpose: they penetrate the defenses of even the most jaded viewer in a way that straight historical dramas can't.

"In a funny way, it isn't just that these traumas trigger these films, but that we understand these traumas through these films," said Tom Gunning, a film historian at the University of Chicago. The direct presentation of a historical event is almost always reassuring, he said, comforting viewers instead of leading them to the abyss. "I can't stand 'Schindler's List' because it's a feel-good movie about the Holocaust," he went on. "And the sequence that always infuriates me is where they're in the shower and water comes out. Because that never happened. It kind of reverses the trauma for us."

That gory films became commonplace in the Vietnam era, Mr. Simon contends, is evidence not of decadence but rather of a "revolutionary" willingness to confront the mayhem of the day. In contrast, he argues, the moral panic that periodically arises in response to violent films, like the recent outrage over Hollywood studios' testing R-rated films on children, is really the displaced panic of a numbed culture overwhelmed by the magnitude of real-life horrors.

Referring to the Rampart neighborhood of Los Angeles, where the police framed more than 100 people and are suspected of shooting and beating others, Mr. Simon, 38, said: "The question is not why our parents in L.A. freaked out about the horror movies their kids might see. It's why aren't they horrified about what they hear happened in Rampart, which is more horrifying than any of the police scandals of my youth?"

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