Film Genre
Hollywood and Beyond

Barry Langford
A comprehensive introduction, *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond* provides a detailed account of genre history and contemporary trends in film genre, alongside the critical debates they have provoked. The book ranges widely across the field, dealing separately and in detail with not only classic genres – including the Western, the musical, the war film, the gangster film, and *film noir* – but also more recent trends such as body-horror, Holocaust film, and the action blockbuster. Throughout the book, genre is presented as a constantly evolving phenomenon. Writing in a sophisticated yet accessible style, Barry Langford shows how notions of genre help shape the ways that filmmakers, critics and audiences view films and how the often complex scholarly debates around genre reflect important differences in the ways cinema is understood in relation to its social and historical contexts. The book encourages students to interrogate and broaden received ideas about genre.

**Features**

- Key text suitable for both undergraduate and advanced students
- Detailed close analyses of key films (including *The Matrix*, *Saving Private Ryan* and *Singin' in the Rain*)
- Comprehensive bibliography and guide to further reading
- Up-to-date and theoretically informed.

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Part 2
Transitional Fantasies
The two genres discussed in this section both have roots – in the case of the horror film, deep roots – in the classical studio era. Yet in important ways they also look ahead to the post-classical period, a period of reduced levels of film production and correspondingly weakened genre identities. As fantasy genres, both horror and science fiction depart in significant ways from the prevailing canons of representation in the classical Hollywood style, whether one takes that mode to be a form of realism (not the chimerical ‘classic realism’) or, as I have suggested, of melodrama. Horror and science fiction also share an identity as unrespectable genres for an undiscriminating juvenile audience (or an audience that has its mind on other things), with strong roots in exploitation cinema, that have only fairly recently emerged as attractive genres for large-scale production at major studios. Finally, both genres have attracted significant critical attention in recent years, and in each case theories of postmodernism and – which is not always the same thing – currents in postmodern theory have played an important part in reconceiving the genre for audiences and film-makers alike. This critical interest is, I argue, related to the relative weakness in both cases of traditional semantic/syntactic matrices of generic identity, lending them a protean aspect that is well suited to exploiting marketplace currents and trends. That horror and SF take their core generic material from the body and technology, respectively, both engines of contemporary critical enquiry and popular cultural debate, has confirmed their relevance.
The experience of limits, and the transgression of limits, is central to the horror film: the boundaries of sanity and madness, of the conscious and unconscious minds, of the external surfaces of the body and the flesh and organs within, pre-eminently the boundaries of life and death. Yet merely to speak of ‘boundaries’ or even the transgression of boundaries without registering the very specific affective charge with which the horror genre enacts those moves would be largely to ignore its most distinctive aspects. As the name suggests, while on the one hand horror insistently pieces and penetrates the vessel of bodily and representational propriety, at the same time it registers that move as profoundly, even elementally transgressive, in a flood of visceral, disturbing and often violent imagery (though violence is not given, being mostly absent from many ghost stories from The Innocents, 1962, and The Haunting, 1964, to The Sixth Sense, 1990, and The Others, 2001). Death, and of course undead and death-in-life, are omnipresent in horror, usually personified as fearful forces to be shunned and/or destroyed, but occasionally as states capable of generating transcendent insight (as in Hellraiser, GB 1987).

Horror films dramatise the eruption of violence, often (but not invariably, and much less in recent decades) supernatural and always irrational, into normative social and/or domestic contexts, often with an undercurrent – at times a good deal more than that – of phobic sexual panic. The agent of horrific violence – the ‘monster’ – is often seen as embodying and/or enabling the expression of repressed desire(s). One of the most obvious examples is Dracula, who animates intense sexual desire in the (typically bourgeois, demure) women he seduces/assaults while at the same time enacting male ambivalence towards female sexuality in blurring lines between seduction and rape, sex and violence. With the progressive slackening of censorship this sexual dimension has become increasingly explicit. In Nosferatu (Germany 1922), the vampire Orlok’s grotesque, rodent-like appearance and his visual association with vermin (rats, spiders) mitigates the explicitly sexual aspects of the character in Bram Stoker’s original novel of 1897. Dracula’s increasingly suave incarnations by Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee and Frank Langella (1930, GB 1958 (US title Horror of Dracula), 1970) progressively blur the dividing line between violation and seduction. The ‘underground’ Blood for Dracula (1972) specifies Dracula’s need for the blood of virgins. In Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1992), the vampire’s first assault on Lucy Weston is associated with her own unsatisfied sexual appetites (when first seen she is paging through a pornographically illustrated edition of The Arabian Nights and musing about ‘unspeakable acts of desperate passion’), and Dracula, appearing as a man-wolf, couples with her in the gazebo.

In ideological terms, horror is ambivalent: on the one hand, it unmasks latent unspeakable desires in (white, patriarchal, bourgeois) society and shows the inadequacy and hypocrisy of the culture that demands such repression (although the graphic violence is restrained by later standards, this is a particularly strong strain in the British Hammer horror films of the late 1950s and 1960s). On the other, it identifies its protagonist(s) and through them the audience with a project of re-suppression, containment and restoration of the status quo ante through the violent elimination of deviance and disturbance – the destruction of the ‘monster’.

The status of horror as a critical object has undergone a marked transformation in recent years (it is noteworthy that neither horror nor SF merits a chapter in Schatz’s Hollywood Genres, perhaps the most ‘classically’-oriented work on film genre, but they are extensively discussed in the successor volume, which focuses on the transition from classical (or ‘Old’) to post-classical (‘New’) Hollywood (Schatz, 1983). Indeed as Jancovich (2002: 1) notes, the horror film has superseded the Western as the genre that is most written about by genre critics. This says something about not only the enhanced status of the genre but also about the changing priorities of genre criticism. For if, as was suggested in Chapter 1, early film work on film genre prioritised the project of defining secure and stable generic boundaries and establishing a defined corpus of films in each category, more recent work has tended rather to emphasise the porosity and leaky borders of genres; mindful that in any case that the work of definition, if regarded as anything more than a provisional project of practical utility rather than absolute value, is doomed to Quixotic failure, contemporary criticism is minded to embrace and explore textual diversity and contradiction.

Such qualities are themselves central to the kinds of theoretical paradigms that have come to dominate what Feury and Mansfield (1997) call the ‘new humanities’ since the late 1980s – deconstruction, queer theory, post-Freudian analyses of subjectivity influenced by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze,
and a renovated, multi-perspectival historicism. Horror, as a notoriously difficult genre to define satisfactorily— that seems itself to take on the polymorphic, elusive properties of so many horror-film-monsters—is well adapted to these altered critical states. Not only embracing as narrative and thematic content contemporary criticism’s concerns with race, gender, sexual identity, the body and the self—sometimes in ways that seem quite explicitly informed by contemporary theoretical positions (notably in the films of David Cronenberg and in such independent productions as Scream, 1993)—horror today, like science fiction and the action film, revels in the carnival-esque subversion and reversal of generic properties and expectations. Compared to horror’s trickster moves, the efforts of traditional genres like the Western and the musical to come to terms with the demands of the post-classical context can seem scerotic and predictable. Finally, horror remains an attractive critical proposition precisely because of its enduring unrespectability; horror has never wholly shed the ‘disreputable’ flavour noted by Robin Wood (1970: 70), nor its pleasurable frisson of the illicit or at least impolite. Horror films in general remain sensational, gory and relatively cheap, and are promoted in ways that discourage ‘serious’ critical attention. The seriality and repetition to which horror properties are prone (Halloween, five instalments since 1978; Friday the 13th, nine since 1980; Nightmare on Elm Street, seven from 1984 to 1994, plus the parodic franchise ‘face-off’ Freddy vs. Jason, 2003; even the knowing postmodern pastiches Scream, 1996, Scary Movie and I Know What You Did Last Summer, 1997, generating their own part-parodic but seriously profitable franchises) also render horror ‘generic’ in the old, pejorative sense of the term. Whereas, as Hawkins (2000: 66) observes, previous critical generations were minded to remove horror films deemed worthy of critical attention (usually such European films as Les Yeux Sans Visage/Eyes Without a Face, France 1959, Peeping Tom, GB 1960, and Repulsion, GB 1965) to a different, non-generic frame of critical reference: ‘a critical site in which the film’s affective [i.e., its sensational and horrific] properties tend to be divorced from its “artistic” and “poetic” ones’, contemporary criticism’s highly developed trash aesthetic is eager to explore the cultural purchase of indelibly generic, even exploitative material and to take very seriously not only its sociological, psychological and ideological formations but its formal and thematic dimensions too.

PLACING HORROR

Like other genres, the prehistory and early history of the horror film is dealt with rather sketchily in the critical literature. There is a significant gap between the most ambitious contemporary theoretical constructions of the genre, which largely focus on postwar and in some cases even more recent films, and historical accounts, usually directed at a broader readership, such as Claeys (1968), Gifford (1973), Kendrick (1991) and Skal (1993). The latter pay much greater, sometimes fondly antiquarian attention to the trick films of Georges Méliès (see also Chapter 8), British and American silent films such as the first adaptations of Frankenstein (1910) and Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (filmed several times in the silent era from 1908, the most celebrated version featuring John Barrymore in 1920), and the films of Lon Chaney and Tod Browning at MGM and Universal in the 1920s, as well as the influence of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatrical traditions, notably the gore-laden Grands Guignols spectacles in Paris (see Hand and Wilson, 2002) and the popular and long-running stage adaptations of Jekyll, Frankenstein and Dracula in London and New York, the last of which was the direct source for the first film in the Universal horror cycle, Browning’s Dracula (1930), and provided that film’s star, Bela Lugosi.

It is useful to note the influence of the domestic stage given the importance assigned in many overviews of the genre to European cinema, notably the German Expressionist films produced between 1910 and 1928, as a defining moment in the crystallisation of the horror film as a genre and a decisive influence on the American form. The argument for Expressionism’s direct stylistic influence on horror, as later with film noir (see Chapter 9), can easily be overstated: American directors and cameramen did not need the example of Caligari or Nosferatu to teach them about the dramatic impact of shadow-play, silhouettes and ‘low-key’ lighting. Such techniques were widely used by both British and American directors and cameramen prior to the First World War and usually to convey a sinister atmosphere, albeit more associated with scenes of crime and melodramatic skullcargery than outright horror. Domesticated Expressionist touches are, however, visible in the first 1930s Universal horror cycle, for instance in the canted, vertiginous sets of Bride of Frankenstein (1935) or the sepulchral shadows in the opening sequence of The Mummy (1933); this influence owed something to example and something also to the direct participation of some key Weimar filmmakers, including among numerous others Edgar G. Ulmer, a former collaborator of F. W. Murnau and Robert Siodmak whose American films included the hallucinatory Universal horror film The Black Cat (1934), and Karl Freund, cinematographer on the Expressionist films Der Januskopf (an unlicensed adaptation of Dr Jekyll) and The Golem (both 1920) and for Universal Dracula, The Mummy (both 1932) and (as director) The Mummy. Expressionism’s enduring influence, however, perhaps lay in the establishment less of a specific stylistic model than of the principle of a generic vocabulary that expressed extreme psychological states and deformations of reality through the integration of performance, stylised set design
and mise-en-scène, and above all in its delineation of a narrative terrain that systematically threatened conventional waking rationality with oniric supernatural terrors.

If Expressionism points towards the classic horror film, with a heavy reliance on sinister, atmospheric mise-en-scène and contained visual distortion to create a sense of threat and disturbance, the other internationally celebrated European cinema of the 1920s, Soviet Montage, contains important pointers to the more graphically confrontational aesthetic of contemporary horror. For example, despite his emphatic lack of interest in the inner workings of the human mind – motivated by the conviction that human subjecthood was generated out of and through material circumstances and characterised by productive labour and interaction with the material world rather than internal psychic processes – Eisenstein employed ‘shock’ effects as a central part of his dialectical montage experiments. Indeed, at the climax of the famous Odessa Steps sequence of The Battleship Potemkin (1925), a Cossack officer slashes his sabre directly and repeatedly at the lens: a reverse shot of his elderly female victim, her eyeball sliced open, demonstrates both the overt specular aggression and gruesome violence associated with the contemporary, post-Psycho horror film.

The first major horror film cycle, the 1930s and 1940s Universal productions, mostly seem to modern eyes rather calm affairs by comparison with later horror films. (In fact, as Balio (1993) notes, there were two Universal cycles: the first inaugurated by Dracula, including the career-defining performances of Universal’s series horror stars Lugosi and Boris Karloff and running through until Bride of Frankenstein, 1935; the second following on the hugely successful re-release of Dracula and Frankenstein as a double bill in 1938 and running through the more action- and humour-oriented sequels and ‘monster meet-ups’ of the 1940s – starting with Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man, 1946 – to the Abbott and Costello horror burlesques of the late 1940s and early 1950s.) Although James Whale in particular employed an occasionally baroque visual style and at key moments something like ‘shock’ editing – for example, the first appearances of Frankenstein’s Monster and of the Bride – for the most part the fantastic, uncanny and transgressive thrust of the narrative material was held in check by a restrained mise-en-scène that emphasised atmosphere and the sideshow appeal of make-up effects over graphic horror. The Universal horror film in which contemporary theory, with its investment in marginality, has taken the greatest interest is the notorious (and unseen for many years between its initial release and the 1960s) Freaks (1932; see Herzogenrath, 2002).

A different approach, even more reliant on atmospheric mise-en-scène but largely abjuring special effects for intense psychological protrairure, was adopted by the ‘B’ feature production unit headed by Val Lewton at RKO in the mid-1940s. The films of this unit, including Cat People (1942), I Walked With a Zombie (1943) and The Seventh Victim (1945), have long been highly praised both for their ‘restraint’ (a term which suggests that these are horror films for people who don’t usually like horror films, and was in any case partly predicated on their budgetary ceiling of $150,000) and also for their unusual focus on female subjectivity. In some ways, precisely in their avoidance of prewar generic clichés and their relocation of (often ‘Old World’) supernatural threats to contemporary American urban locations (the most celebrated scene in Cat People – replayed to lesser effect in the 1982 remake – features a woman stalked by an unseen creature lurking in the shadows around a basement swimming pool), the RKO films bring the viewer into unsettling proximity with the limits of this rational, ‘civilised’ world’s ability to tame and contain the irrational. Although critical praise of the ‘power of suggestion’ often betrays an uncase with horror’s more anarchic and carnivalesque aspects, the success of the low-budget, effects-free chiller The Blair Witch Project (1999) testifies to the enduring power of this approach (as, in a very different way, does the indistinct, uncanny, half-glimpsed terror of Vampyr, Sweden 1932).

Sequels notwithstanding, the Universal cycle had run its creative course well before the end of the Second World War; after the revelations of Dresden, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the Gothic terrors of Dracula, Frankenstein and the Wolfman may in any event have seemed too quaint to retain much of a frisson for audiences. The cycle’s studio-bound, dehistoricised Rutranian milieu was also at odds with the shift towards location filming and greater topicality in postwar cinema. During the 1950s, the debatable generic status of not only the ‘creature features’ (discussed in more detail in Chapter 8) but many other science fiction/horror hybrids before and since points up the difficulty genre historians and theorists have always had in distinguishing between the two genres. Inasmuch as horror and science fiction (SF) audiences were largely perceived by producers as identical, especially in the 1950s – hence exploitation directors such as Roger Corman as well as studio directors like Jack Arnold (It Came From Outer Space, 1953; The Creature from the Black Lagoon, 1954) switched between (what might be externally classified as) SF and horror without any evident prior sense of generic differentiation – Wells (2000: 7) is probably right in arguing that ‘there is no great benefit in seeking to disentangle these generic perspectives’ and that we should instead address our attention to ‘the distinctive elements of any one text within a particular historical moment’. All the same, some evident points of distinction may help illuminate important aspects of both genres.

While in itself a distinction between SF and horror drawn on the basis of ‘science’ versus ‘magic’ would be quite inadequate, if one accepts the criterion of scientific explanation not as an outcome to be assessed (i.e. with
reference to contemporary scientific understanding), but rather as a form of rhetoric and a mode of presentation, it may prove more useful. In the SF universe, that is, the appearance of aliens, monsters and other destructive or malevolent forces is not only depicted as explicable according to the scientific understanding diegetically available (which may or may not map onto our own), but moreover is narratively subject to such analysis, explanation and - more often than not - systematic response. By way of example, although the Monster in Frankenstein (1831) is manifestly a creation of misguided/perverted science - stitched together from corpses, animated by electricity, his violence accountable by the erroneous insertion of a `criminal brain' - the film does not present him as a scientific problem but as a terrifying monstrosity, both pathetic and malign. On the contrary, Frankenstein's narrative arc, spiralling up through intensifying chaos and panic, could hardly be more different from the progress through and past panic towards a scientific/military solution that characterises innumerable SF alien invasion and monster movies from The Thing (1951) to Independence Day (1996). Violence, to be sure, may play a ubiquitous role in defeating the intruder and restoring `normality', but the violence of the SF film is far more likely to be ostensibly rational and considered, that of the horror film, ritualised and reactive (the pogrom-like revenge of the villagers with their flaming torches).

These opposed generic rhetorics, of clarification and the occult, are reflected too in the different visual registers of horror and SF. SF from the 1950s and 1960s in particular generally employs an unobtrusive visual style, which might be seen as affecting a quasi-scientific neutrality appropriate to the solutions that will eventually be found to the threats at hand. This contrasts starkly with the highly stylised and often floridly Expressionistic mise-en-scene of classic horror. As Vivien Sobchack (1987: 29-30) usefully suggests, horror and SF are also distinguished by the latter's tendency to lend its threats a public and collective aspect, whereas horror - as the recent dominance of psychoanalytic interpretative paradigms suggests - explores realms both intimate and - in all senses of the term - occult. The claustrophobically constricted spaces of horror magnify and condense profound and phobic impulses regarding the body, the self and sexuality. In the 1970s, however, in SF/horror as elsewhere, such stylistic generic markers become increasingly unreliable.

Horror's status within the film industry has changed significantly in the post-classical period, although not always in immediately obvious ways. Clearly, horror is no longer quite so marginal in industry terms as it mostly was from the end of the Universal `Golden Age' in the early 1940s until the late 1960s. The massively magnified commercial importance of the college and high-school audience as well as the explosion - intensified since the advent of the Internet established fan cultures with a global and instantaneous reach - in the popularity, visibility and hence market potential of 'cult' (usually SF and horror) film, television and comic books, have ensured that these former `pulp' (or worse) genres are now taken very seriously by studios and filmmakers. Moreover, new genres such as the serial killer film have spliced more mainstream forms like the police procedural thriller with horror tropes and themes to bring ghastly generic material before a far wider audience than horror's traditional inner-city and juvenile demographic - even, in the case of The Silence of the Lambs (1991), earning the ultimate seal of establishment approval, an Oscar for Best Picture (on the generically ambiguous place of Silence of the Lambs, see Jancovich, 2001, 2002).

Still, horror has not fully crossed over to the mainstream to the degree of its sister genre science fiction. Whereas since Star Wars SF blockbusters (as discussed in the next chapter) have regularly commanded vast budgets, top stars and directors, are often the central 'tentpoles' of annual release schedules, and reliably feature in lists of top box-office attractions, this is rarely the case with horror. Horror budgets remain relatively low, and major 'above-the-line' talent is only infrequently attached to out-and-out horror projects. The more clearly generic the material, the truer this is; thus while understated ghost stories like The Sixth Sense are perceived as relatively 'classy', especially if they have a period setting (like The Others) and can attract major stars such as Bruce Willis and Nicole Kidman, a slashing film like Scream, a traditional shocker like Ghost Ship (2003) or a remake like Dawn of the Dead (2003) will typically feature a cast of lesser-known actors, sometimes with a 'name' (Drew Barrymore in Scream, for example) in a featured or cameo role. Despite the breakthrough success of William Friedkin's The Exorcist (1973), few leading directors in the last thirty years have undertaken out-and-out horror films (The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and Bram Stoker's Dracula (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) being obvious exceptions).

Although they operate at a lower level of visibility than the major summer blockbusters, horror films nonetheless typify the contemporary Hollywood preference for, in industry parlance, `marketability' the technique of opening a film in as many venues as possible simultaneously, with a barrage of high-impact print and spot TV advertising over `playability' (a film's ability to expand its audience week-on-week through favourable critical reception and word-of-mouth: see Lewis, 2003: 63-70). Horror films usually `open wide' in hundreds of screens on the same weekend, perform strongly enough in their first week to rise to the top, or near the top, of the weekly box-office list, but then drop off sharply in subsequent weeks to disappear from theatres after a relatively short release. In fact, horror's most lasting contribution to contemporary Hollywood may have been as a paradigm for marketing and promotion in the post-classical era. As Kevin Heffernan's recent research (2000, 2004) has revealed, the techniques identified above as
typical of Hollywood’s marketing techniques for its most prestigious and expensive projects – wide opening accompanied by saturation TV, radio and print advertising to clearly defined audience demographics – were pioneered in the 1960s on a smaller (regional and city-wide) basis by independent and exploitation distributors marketing low-budget horror films, principally to black inner-city audiences. Heffernan’s work adjusts standard accounts that single out Jaws (and the role of MCA President Lew Wasserman) as innovating such practices, and valuably helps concretise the well-known general narrative of Hollywood’s increasing adoption of both genres, narratives and publicity techniques from the drive-in and exploitation markets from the 1950s onwards, as part of its ongoing efforts to retrieve shrinking audiences. During the 1950s, the ‘creature feature’ cycle – which was dominated by major studio releases – and the short-lived 3-D boom were clear early indicators of this trend.

**MAKING MONSTERS**

A concept that binds together much cinematic horror is the idea of the ‘monstrous’. Monstrosity is not a self-evident category: monsters are created, not born. Furthermore, as several writers have noted, monster has its etymological roots in the Latin monstrare, ‘to show’: thus the monster exists to de-monstrate, to teach an object (social) lesson of some kind. The visual trope – indissociably one of the genre’s semantic constants – of the tight ‘choker’ close-up on the screaming (usually female) face, giving the spectator ample opportunity to reflect on the terror and horror expressed therein, could be seen as a textual marker of this educative process, an instruction in horror (what we find horrific). In some horror films, the process of ‘monstering’ – of rendering someone or something an object of fear and revulsion – itself becomes part of the narrative: in different ways films like Fears, Quatermass and the Pit (GB 1968), Cronenberg’s The Fly (1986), Edward Scissorhands (1990) and even Frankenstein invite their audience to reflect on the psycho-social dynamics of monstrosity. The 1931 version of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde emphasises Jekyll’s ‘monstrous’ alter-ego as a manifestation of repressed sexual desires that are in themselves perfectly ‘normal’, but rendered hyperbolic and destructive by their systematic frustration in a rigid social order predicated on denial. Such films might be seen as taking their cue from Franz Kafka’s famous parable Metamorphosis, whose protagonist Gregor Samsa’s sudden transformation into a giant insect and the revulsion and rejection this transformation provokes in his family and friends allegorises bourgeois conformity, hostility to and fear of difference, and social isolation.

Far more horror films, however, appear simply to exploit the ‘monster reflex’, positioning their audiences so as to share the hatred, terror and aggression justifiably directed against the monsters they depict. Indeed, the misguided sympathy for, or attempts to reason with, the monster on the part of ivory-tower scientists or well-intentioned liberals, usually ending in the cautionary death of the do-gooders, is a familiar genre motif. Robin Wood (1986: 70ff.) identifies this affective charge in horror as at once a graphic enactment of and a reaction to ‘surplus repression’, the structures of denial and oppression peculiar to ‘patriarchal capitalism’ (which go beyond the basic repressions necessary, on Freud’s account, to the socialisation of the individual). Surplus repression relies crucially on the construction of a terrifying and hateful Other whose embodiment of the forces suppressed by patriarchy – energies centred, for Wood, on sexuality, gender, race and class – reinforce the perception of those desires as monstrous.

Wood, however, goes on to argue that just as repression in the individual, on Freud’s account, is liable to generate a ‘return of the repressed’ in the domain of the unconscious through dreams, fantasies and in some cases neurotic or hysterical symptoms, so too surplus repression in the social meets with a displaced and distorted rejoinder in the transgressive energies of ‘low’ cultural forms like the horror film. Horror film monsters are rarely wholly unsympathetic, Wood argues (drawing the majority of his examples from the classic Universal and Expressionist horror cycles), and at some level they are acting out our own unacknowledged desires: thus horror films offer ‘fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere’ (Wood, 1986: 80). The doubling motifs that abound in the genre are a textual ‘symptom’ of this ambivalence, revealing the deeper affinity of the pro-social hero and the anti-social monster. (Wood notes that in Son of Frankenstein (1939), the eponymous new Baron complains that everyone thinks ‘Frankenstein’ is the name of the monster his father ‘merely’ created; similarly, Hardy (1985: 107) points out the ways in which Frankenstein’s creations in the Hammer cycle are mirror images reflecting back the Baron’s own ‘moral flaws and emotional atrophy’.) Thus horror is an unstable and unreliable ally to dominant ideology, at once serving its purposes and articulating the desire to destroy it.

One way of classifying horror’s many monsters is provided by Andrew Tudor’s (1989) historical study of the genre, which maps out the nature of the threats in different periods across a schematic grid whose key categories are external/internal and supernatural/secular. In prewar horror, threats mostly originated from outside (the individual or the community) and were more likely to be supernatural in origin. The postwar decade, the heyday of atomic mutations and alien invasion, also stressed external threats but shifted decisively towards the secular. External threats could usually be effectively dispatched, given the right knowledge and technology (arcane lore, silver
bullets or, in the case of mutations and aliens, the combined scientific-military might of the modern nation-state). For Tudor and others, Psycho along with the later Night of the Living Dead (1968) mark the transition from the ontological and practical security of externalised horror to the much more uncertain and radically destabilising threats that originate within. That traditional Gothic horror has recently been incorporated into the mainstream action blockbuster (The Mummy, 1999; Van Helsing, 2003), largely shrorn of its horrific elements, may suggest that the genre's focus has shifted away from such 'external' threats towards the less well-defined ground of individual psychology and the paranoid rather than the supernatural.

**HORROR SINCE PSYCHO**

Modern horror films are much more likely to centre on threats originating from inside both the individual psyche (psychopathic killers) and - because even isolated individuals live in necessary relationship of some kind to a larger human community - our own social institutions (above all the family), that are pathological rather than supernatural. 'Monsters' such as Norman Bates and his successors are all the more terrifying because they are not marked, or are less obviously so, by the visible indications of difference-physical deformities, vast size, otherworldly appearance - of their comforting-unmistakable forebears; they retain the transgressive mutability of earlier shape-shifting monsters such as the Wolf Man, but these symptoms of difference and deviance are now internalised. Clover (1992: 24) identifies Psycho's 'sexualisation of motive and action' as a feature that clearly distinguishes the film from previous horror films. Of course, Psycho is also (in)famous for massively intensifying the degree of graphic violence horror films were willing to inflict on their characters and vicariously upon their audiences (notwithstanding that Norman's knife is never seen to penetrate Marion Crane's flesh). Psycho's manipulation of audience sympathies towards characters (first Marion, then Norman, then the investigator Arbogast) only to wrench them violently away is also widely credited with opening a new field in the play of sadism and the gaze in popular cinema (echoed in the subplot involving Detective Kinderman in The Exorcist). Malby (1995: 218-20) credits Psycho with the end of 'secure space' in Hollywood film, both literally and figuratively: audiences after Psycho could no longer confidently rely on narrative, generic and representational conventions to 'protect' the integrity of their viewing experience, any more than they could be assured that a violent attack would still be prepared for - as had hitherto been the convention - through cutaways to sinister figures shambling across misty marshes, etc.

Hitchcock's decision to make an inexpensive black-and-white thriller using members of the production team from his eponymous television series broke with his then-reputation, established during the 1950s, as a master of the lavish action-suspense film (pre-eminently North by Northwest, 1959) and the resulting film undoubtedly shocked and repulsed a proportion of both his mass audience and his critical admirers (see Kapsis 1992: 56-64). However, his successful appropriation of such exploitation-circuit marketing gimmicks as refusing entry to latecomers (a standby of the celebrated exploitation producer William Castle) and more importantly his adaptation, extension and intensification of lurid and grotesque narrative material more than justified the experiment and revealed the enormous market beyond Hollywood's traditional, but increasingly chimerical, 'family' audience for this previously untouchable generic material. Saunders (2000: 75) describes Psycho as 'an act of permission for film-makers in the genre to further expose [sic] the illusory securities and limited rationales of contemporary life to reveal the chaos which underpins modern existence and constantly threatens to ensure its collapse'.

As Tudor's careful tabulations make clear, however, the generic shift that occurs with Psycho is a shift in emphasis, not an outright generic transformation. While various cheaply produced imitations of Psycho (and of the previous season's hit psychological thriller-horror hybrid Les Diaboliques, France 1955) quickly flooded the market (Homicidal, 1963; Dementia 13, 1964; etc.), the older, more restrained and comfortingly distanced - in place, time and nature of threat - Romantic Gothic mode persisted throughout the 1960s, notably in Roger Corman's cycle of Poe adaptations (House of Usher, 1960; The Pit and the Pendulum, 1961; Tomb of Ligeia, 1965; etc.) and the British Hammer horror series; so too such low-key ghost stories as The Innocents and The Haunting. Hitchcock himself developed two aspects of Psycho - the relentless assault of the shower scene and the idea of the inexplicability of violence - further in The Birds (1963). Although The Birds seems to return to the 'external threat' model (and looks forwards to such 1970s 'eco-horror' films as Frogs, 1972, Piranha, 1977, Prophecy, 1979, and even Jaws), strong hints in the film suggest that the birds' sudden attack is in some way related to the characters' familial dysfunction and emotional repression.

But it was arguably not until two films of the 1968 season, the exploitation film Night of the Living Dead and the major studio release Rosemary's Baby, that any horror films repeated Psycho's enormous impact. Both films share Psycho's key generic innovation, the refusal to allow the audience a stable or secure final position. Psycho's refusal to allow its threat to be recuperated by the all-too-neat psychoanalytic categories of the penultimate scene was indelibly etched in the superimposition of Mother's mummified face over
Norman's in the fade-out. *Night ...*, whose horror is more explicitly socially grounded, uses its principal metaphors of zombies and cannibalism to portray US culture in the era of the Detroit and Chicago riots and the Vietnam War as both mindlessly conformist and endemically violent, and rams the point home by having its (Black) hero shot by his supposed ‘rescuers’, and his body thrown onto an Auschwitz-like pyre at the end of the film. *Night ...* evacuated conventional categories like heroism and good and evil of any relevance to the horror film. *Rosemary’s Baby* looked inwards to open up an even more phobic field – the body itself.

**BREAKING BOUNDARIES**

In her powerful reading of the sub-genre of ‘body horror’, Barbara Creed (1986, 1993) invokes the notion of ‘abjection’ explicated in Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1982). Emerging in the mid-1970s in films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Alien* (1979), body-horror blended traditional supernatural (demonic possession) and threat (alien monsters) motifs with a quite new emphasis on explicit bodily violation suffused with imagery of parturition and monstrous sexuality. In *The Exorcist*, a pubescent girl masturbates with a crucifix and spews green vomit onto the faces of the priests ministering to her. *Carrie* (1976), another adolescent girl, unleashes terrifying telekinetic powers against her schoolmates in a film whose first scene sees her viciously mocked for the onset of her first period. In *Shivers* (Canada 1975), a sexually transmitted parasite produces rampant sexual anarchy. Most infamous of all is the monstrous parody of birth in *Alien* as the embryo creature bursts out of John Hurt’s stomach. Creed understands the powerful effect of revulsion operative in these films in terms of Kristeva’s analysis of taboo and defilement in (western) societies, a realm of the excluded or ‘abject’ the construction of which is fundamental to the establishment and maintenance of social norms: for it is through acts of primal prohibition that a discrete sense of the self is effected.

Analysing the feelings of revulsion and disgust elicited by bodily secretions such as faeces, urine, mucus, semen, menstrual blood, etc., Kristeva notes that these ‘abject’ substances share a quality of extrusion: having once been part of our bodies, they are ejected into the world where they exist, intolerably, as both part of ourselves and as objects outside ourselves, as us and not-us. Ultimately, they recall to us that point at which we will all inevitably become strangers to ourselves, and at which our corporeal persistence will offer no reassurance of our continued existence as subjects – our own death, after which the decaying shell of our bodies remain but ‘we’ are no longer present. This indicates the source of the powerful affect in body-

horror films where, in Kelly Hurley’s (1995: 203) words, we find ‘the human body defamilised, rendered other’. Thus conceived, the larger relevance of the abject to horror, the genre that above all concerns itself with death, decay and – in its supernatural versions at least – the persistence of life after or beyond death, is readily apparent.

Kristeva notes that this revulsion is learned rather than instinctive (animals and infants do not share it) and names the process that results in it ‘abjection’. Three points of her complex argument are relevant to horror. Firstly, as noted, the original focus of abjection is those substances and processes that are properly of our bodies but become detached from it – thus alienating us from our sense of ourselves as coherent, integrated beings. Second, the establishment of a sense of the abject is a key boundary-making device: it sorts out what is clean and what filthy, hence (by social and ideological extension) what is right and proper and what evil and loathsome. That is, the constitution of the realm of the abject plays a crucial role in setting the terms of the normative and desirable: only through a sense of limits and exclusion does the latter become available. But the process of abjection akin to acts of primary repression in a traditional Freudian schema – is never complete or secure, and the abject reappears in a variety of displaced forms, all sharing a similar aspect as ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (Kristeva, 1982: 5).

Employing a different theoretical vocabulary, the work of the radical anthropologist Mary Douglas, Noel Carroll (1990: 33) comes to somewhat similar conclusions about the issue of boundaries. ‘Horrible monsters’, he notes, ‘often involve the mixture of what is normally distinct ... The rate of recurrence with which the biologies of monsters are vaporous or gelatinous attests to the applicability of the notion of formlessness to horrific impurity’ (Carroll cites the vagueness of the descriptions of infernal creatures in the horror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft).

That monster X is categorically interstitial [using Mary Douglas’s terms] causes a sense of impurity in us without our necessarily being aware of precisely what causes that sense ... In addition, the emphasis Douglas places on categorical schemes in the analysis of impurity indicates a way for us to account for the recurrent description of our impure monsters as ‘un-natural’. They are un-natural relative to a culture’s schema of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it. (Carroll, 1990: 34)

Like much psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva’s account of abjection has been attacked as universalising – i.e. insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural differences and contexts. However, there is no real reason why abjection cannot have an evident socio-political dimension, one moreover that is
immediately relevant to the horror film. Even if the processes of abjection are, as Kristeva insists, universal, its objects are necessarily contingent. In our flight from the intolerable fact of mortality, it is possible to trace a process whereby those aspects we loathe and fear in ourselves – as our body’s traitorous confessions of its own limitations – are projected onto specific Others who then take on a murderous quality, as if they were somehow responsible for the death that inevitably awaits us.

Creed’s essay suggests the importance of feminism as a context for the films she discusses – construing the ‘monstrous-feminine’ as a manifestation of male phobic rage against the empowerment of women (as has also frequently been noted, the eruption of the Devil in The Exorcist into Washington, DC, in the era of Watergate and Vietnam is not without obvious satiric application). It is certainly possible to extend the application of abjection beyond this time-frame to a broader engagement with the horror film’s dynamics of profanation.

QUEER HORROR

As suggestive as Creed’s exploration of the abject has been, she still finds horror to be a genre that articulates phobic fantasies of maternal monstrosity with the ultimate aim of recontaining female energies in socially acceptable forms. In this regard, her critique reflects the difficulties experienced by much feminist criticism in recovering a positive dimension from a genre that seems so consistently to trade in the victimisation – the terrorisation and increasingly graphic physical violation – of women. This tendency has been particularly marked in the stalker/slasher films that emerged as belated after-echoes of Psycho in the late 1970s. One marked stylistic device of these films was their deployment of a point-of-view camera that seemed frequently to put the audience in the position of the killer stalking his victims and to encourage vicarious identification with the murderous gaze. For Williams (1983: 61), the female spectator of a horror film is ‘asked to bear witness to her own powerlessness in the face of rape, mutilation and murder’.

More recently, however, writing about horror from the perspective of queer theory has focused attention on the ways in which the horror film’s textual instability and focus on the ‘category error’ of the monster can be seen as articulating positions whose challenge to conventional dualities of gender, race and especially sexuality are ultimately not recontained by the monster’s final destruction. In some cases, indeed, victorious ‘normality’ triumphs precisely by taking on itself some of the ‘deviant’ properties of the monster. As pro-social as this move may be in narrative terms – that is, it is aimed at eliminating the monster – it produces not a reversal but a trans-

valuation of the normative categories that Wood and Creed understand the horror film finally to reinforce. Thus identities are not resecured and the original (imaginary) integrity of the subject remains in process. This has little to do with the narrative incorporation of gay, lesbian or bisexual characters into traditional Gothic horror subjects, for example the homoeotic elements in Interview With the Vampire (1994) or the lesbian vampires of The Hunger (1988) (see Benshoff, 1997; lesbian vampires have a long cinematic history dating back at least to Dracula’s Daughter, 1936, and objectified in entirely conventional ‘girl-on-girl’ pornographic fashion in Hammer’s early 1970s cycle starting with The Vampire Lovers, 1970; see Weiss, 1992). A relatively early example of a modern horror text that resists final reinsertion (literally) is the 1982 remake of the classic 1950s SF monster movie The Thing. The 1982 version replaces the confident if watchful Cold War tenor of the earlier film’s famous conclusion – ‘Keep Watching the Skies’ – with a much grimmer ending in which the two surviving cast members wait amid the smouldering embers of their Arctic research camp for inevitable death. What makes the ending notable though is not only its bleakness but also its indeterminacy: the film’s extraterrestrial is a shape-shifter, able almost instantly to mimic the physical appearance of any organism it attacks. Although The Thing appears to have been destroyed in the climactic conflagration that has destroyed the base, neither the two surviving scientists nor the audience can be absolutely sure that one or other of them is not an imposter, and the film ends having refused to resolve the question.

The Thing focuses narrative attention on the question of identity and ‘passing’ in its all-male group and seemed to reflect anxieties provoked by the novel threat of the ‘gay plague’ AIDS in the early 1980s (in a key scene, the group members test each other’s blood for alien contaminants). The film’s threat originates in a definitive ‘elsewhere’ (outer space) but penetrates American male bodies in ways that render individuals strange and terrifying. The Thing also relies heavily on prosthetic effects to image the monstrous transformations and transgressions. Such effects (as Neale (1990) notes, the object of reflexive commentary in The Thing when a character responds to a particularly spectacular/grotesque effects tour de force with the words ‘you’ve got to be fucking kidding!’) not only render the hidden interior spaces of the body graphically visible but, by inviting the spectator to register their visceral artifice, stress the constructed nature of apparent biological or bodily givens.

The most infamous instances of this probably remain the embryo alien’s eruption from Kane’s stomach in Alien and the oozing video slot/aperture in James Wood’s stomach in Videodrome (1986). Tania Modleski (1988: 28) finds such imagery ‘very far from the realm of what is traditionally called “pleasure” and much nearer to so-called jouissance, discussions of which privilege terms like “gaps”, “wounds”, “fissures”, “cleavages”, and so forth.’
Although relatively few horror films have explicitly explored this rapturous violation – one exception might be Hellraiser, with its Bataille-like confluence of pain, mutilation and pleasure – this gives rise to the notion of horror as a ‘critical genre’ whose subversion of identities extends beyond the transformed or violated body to the text itself: Modleski goes on to argue that

[the] contemporary horror film thus comes very close to being the ‘other film’ that Thierry Kuntzel says the classic narrative film must always work to conceal [i.e. because of open-endedness, lack of identifiable characters, nihilistic qualities]: ‘a film in which ... the configuration of events contained in the formal matrix would not form a progressive order, in which the spectator/subject would never be reassured ...’ (Modleski, [1986] 2000: 291)

Judith Halberstam (1995: 155) similarly asserts that ‘the horror film makes visible the marks of suture that classic realism attempts to cover up.’ However, Halberstam and other queer theorists differ from Modleski and other earlier feminist writers on horror in their attitude towards horror’s textual politics. Queer theory emphasises the disturbances and carnivalesque reversals inflicted upon normative (‘straight’) identity concepts by the fundamentally unstable nature of categories of sexuality and gender (and in a growing number of queer theory formations also of race, disability and even class), and the rampant semiotic proliferation that is encountered at the borders of such over-determined socio-sexual categories. So whereas Modleski still questioned the political progressivity of horror’s oppositional stance in much as it explored male fear of, hence relied on violence towards, women, Halberstam sees the postmodern splatter film (The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 1974; The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2, 1986) as moving beyond the demonising binarism of the classic monster movie towards a riotous ‘posthumanism’ where ‘orderly’ categories of gender in particular are not only not reaffirmed but exploded. Thus whereas ‘monster-making ... is a suspect activity because it relies upon and shores up conventional humanist binaries’,

the genders that emerge triumphant at the conclusion of a splatter film are literally posthuman, they punish the limits of the body and they mark identities as always stitched, sutured, bloody at the seams, and completely beyond the limits and the reaches of an impotent humanism. (Halberstam, 1995: 143–4)

The endless procession of sequels that typifies the contemporary horror genre might itself be seen as ‘queering’ traditional notions of narrative closure and resolution: however apparently fatal and final the end inflicted on Jason, Freddy or Michael, the audience is well aware that this is merely a formal marker of the film’s ending that in no real sense genuinely ‘ends’ the story.

**BEYOND HOLLYWOOD**

Horror films, like the musical, are found in every national cinema. Probably best-known outside Hollywood are the British horror films produced by Hammer. Hammer revised and updated the classic Universal Gothic series – Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy – along with a variety of home-grown monsters in a series of mostly period films from the late 1950s until the mid-1970s. Hammer horror is often approached in terms of its scrutiny of class relationships (with the middle-class specialist – Van Helsing, for example – like the ‘boffins’ in British war films of the same era, using his technical expertise to triumph over the combined forces of medieval superstition and an outdated aristocracy: see Hutchings, 1993). These categories might not have been so relevant in the US, where Landy (2000b: 60) suggests that Hammer horror was able to capitalise on anxieties about authority gone awry and beleaguered masculinity and femininity. Street (2002: 162) adds that ‘the cycle’s international popularity implies that these gender issues were equally relevant to other [i.e. non-GB] societies.’

The horror film has also flourished in continental European cinemas, with perhaps the best-known traditions those of Italy and Spain. Italian horror in particular received international attention as an *auteur* cinema in the 1960s through the giallo tradition in the films of Mario Bava (The Mask of the Devil, 1960; Black Sunday, 1960), Riccardo Freda (The Terror of DR Hichcock, 1962) and in the 1970s Dario Argento (Suspiria, 1977; Inferno, 1980), all of which won critical praise for their bravura visual style and their refunctioning of art-cinema motifs in unexpected genre contexts (see Jenks, 1992). Outside Europe, the Japanese horror film, often with a strong basis in folkloric and native theatrical traditions (Onibaba and the anthology film Kwaiden, both 1964) has been one of the most notable: recently, such Japanese SF/horror hybrids as Tetsuo: The Iron Man (1990) and its sequel Tetsuo II: Body Hammer (1991) have contributed to the ‘body-horror’ sub-genre, while a new wave of turn-of-the-millennium East Asian horror films, principally from Japan (including Ringu, 1998; Battle Royale, 2000; Audition, 2000; Dark Water, 2002; and The Grudge, 2004) and South Korea have achieved cult and crossover success in US and worldwide markets (see McRory, 2004).

The expansion of fan culture, as well as horror’s arguably universal preoccupations, has led to both the increasing visibility of non-European genre films in the US and UK, a greater – though still limited – penetration of English-speaking markets by non-Anglophone horror films, and importantly

CASE STUDY: RINGU (HIDEO NAKATA, JAPAN 1998)/ THE RING (GORE VERBINSKI, 2003)

Hideo Nakata’s Ringu – which quickly spawned two follow-up films, Ringu 2 (1999) and the prequel Ringu 0 (2000) – is perhaps the most celebrated of the new wave of East Asian horror films to be released in the late 1990s in Western Europe and the US, securing sizeable cult followings. Ringu was quickly remade both in a low-budget South Korean version (The Ring Virus, 1999) and in the US by Dreamworks as The Ring, released in October 2002. The American remake is largely faithful to the Japanese original and indeed includes several shots patterned directly after Nakata’s film. The plot involves a mysterious video whose viewers are condemned to certain death exactly one week after watching the tape for the first time. The faces of the victims are frozen masks of indescribable terror, and their hearts seem quite literally to have stopped from sheer fright. A journalist (Reiko in Ringu/ Rachel in The Ring) following the trail of what she originally believes to be an urban myth, having watched the video finds herself the victim of the curse. Her increasingly frantic search for the truth behind the video in the hope that this will lift the curse, intensified when first her ex-husband (Kyuji/ Noah) and then their son (Yoichi/Aidan) see the curse video, makes up the main body of the narrative. The curse is revealed to have its roots in the strange and tragic story of a child, Sadaka/Samara, born decades previously into an island community with extraordinary but destructive telepathic powers. It is the vengeful spirit of this girl, thrown into a well and left to starve to death by her own father after her mother committed suicide, that has sent the curse video into the world. The film falls into an established category in Japanese horror, the kaidan or ‘avenging spirit’ film (see McRoy, 2005), typically as here focusing on a wronged, usually female entity returning in spectral form to avenge herself upon those who harmed her in life. Sadaka/Samara’s appearance, her face cloaked behind a mask of long black hair apart from a single basilisk eye, is iconographically conventional in this tradition. (It has been suggested that the ongoing popularity of this motif in contemporary Japan reflects anxious and/or phobic negotiations in the masculine imaginary of the changing role of women in Japanese society.)

The central device of the curse video illustrates well the horror film’s...
capacity to update its semantic elements while retaining its characteristic generic syntax. The device of the videotape substitutes for the traditional face-to-face imprecation an impersonal medium where the identity of the victim is irrelevant (although Reiko’s response to the curse may be seen as in classic horror-film style a challenge she rises to meet). The origin of the tape is left deliberately obscure, as is the precise means whereby (as opposed to why) it comes to be in the inn over the well. In the context of a medium in which sequels and series are de rigueur – and a film that would in due course generate two sequels of its own – there is at least the suggestion of an ironic reflexive dimension in the idea of a videotape which demands to be exactly copied and passed on in an endless chain.

Both Ringu and The Ring confront a perennial problem for the horror film: the visual communication of the otherworldly and the infernal – that has become especially vexed as the traditional ‘external’ (in Tudor’s classification) terrors (Frankenstein’s monster, the Wolf Man, Godzilla) have for modern audiences lost much of their capacity to frighten. Jacques Tourneur was compelled by his distributor to add several shots of a fire-breathing giant demon into his otherwise visually restrained satanic thriller Night of the Demon (1957), a move generally held to have damaged a well-regarded film. Alongside the decline – or at least the shift into a less horrific affective register – of old-style monsters, however, the post-Psycho horror film faces a transformed context of reception where audiences anticipate and require intensified ‘shock’ value, usually measured in ever more graphic simulations of violence and bodily violation. Films aiming to revitalise horror’s traditional supernatural terrain thus perform a difficult balancing act between the ‘tasteful’ atmospherics of The Sixth Sense and its imitators on the one hand and the full-on pandemonium of the splatter film on the other. The attempt in the SF-horror hybrid Event Horizon (GB 1997) to convey the experience of a parallel universe of absolute evil into which the eponymous spaceship has slipped illustrates the problem. The transition into the hell-realm is imaged for the viewer by the ship’s video log, which shifts from recording routine tasks to fragmentary and fleetingly glimpsed images of violence and madness accompanied by a soundtrack of shrieks, mad laughter and sonic distortion. While this achieves a modestly satisfying visceral frisson in a crowded theatre, as an encounter with a wholly Other order of being its horror-comic images (the ship’s captain holding a denucleated eyeball in the palm of each hand and so on) leaves quite a bit to be desired.

The key textual and narrative mediator of the uncanny in Ringu and The Ring is the curse video, seen entirely or in part several times in both films: this is our bridge to the discourse of the Other in the film, Sadaka’s demonic psychic effusions. Ringu attempts to communicate a sense of the uncanny without resorting to standard generic shock techniques while also not giving away the secret of Sadaka’s story, which unfolds over the course of the film through Reiko’s investigations. Quite clearly, if the video is visible or simply uninteresting a great deal of the element of threat instantly leeches away. Ringu accordingly takes great care in manufacturing a series of oneiric images that present a sufficiently cognitive rather than merely interpretative challenge to the spectator to be unsettling beyond their manifest content (that is, we are sufficiently unsure about what we are seeing as to challenge our simple demand of what it might mean). The video contains just six separate elements – seven if one counts Sadaka’s mirrored reflection separately from her mother’s – none of them readily generically placeable or indeed placeable in any other way (of all the images, that of the stumbling, contorted people and menaces, as we later learn, of Sadaka’s telekinetic outburst – is the most disturbing in terms of its content). The video is extremely low-definition and none of the (static) shots have any sense of being ‘composed’. The intensely disturbing effects of the sequence are traceable to the inexplicable and incomprehensible nature of its images rather than their superficial horrific content.

The Ring’s curse video is significantly longer than Ringu’s and although it repeats key images from the Japanese version – the mirrors, the view of the sky from inside the well, the exterior shot of the well – it adds a number of others, several of which are generic ‘horror’ images: an electrode unspooling from an open mouth, a giant centipede snaking away from underneath a table, a finger impaled on a nail, severed fingers in a box. The images are considerably clearer than in Ringu, more strikingly composed and on at least one occasion – Anna’s suicide – the camera Steadicams in towards its subject. The Ring’s video lacks the key discursive elements of the video in Ringu – the word ‘erection’ pulsing across the screen, and the ideogram ‘Sada’ glimpsed in the close-up of Sadako’s eyeball substituting some technological detective work by Rachel who, by manipulating the tracking on the frame of the image of the dead horses, is able to identify the location depicted in the video, her first real breakthrough in her researches. Indeed, several of the curse video’s images prove to be straight indexical traces, Samara’s memories that provide direct pointers for Rachel to track down and confirm the location of Samara’s family.

Rather strikingly, The Ring introduces a reflexive anticipations of the audience’s rejection of, or indifference to, this much more elaborate sequence of images in Noah’s dismissive description of the tape as ‘very student film’. (By contrast, Kyuji seems uneasy and unsettled by his first viewing of the tape.) This gesture of disavowal also highlights the different gender politics of the two films, with Noah a significantly more sceptical, ‘realist’ (‘I’m sure it’s much scarier when you’re alone’, he adds) presence than Kyuji, whose investigatory partnership with Rachel is motivated by his own externally
verifiable evidence (the tell-tale distorted photographs that identify him as a victim of the curse) rather than in direct response to her expressed fear. This reflects a generally more empirical attitude in The Ring that shifts the story away from Ringu’s roots in folk myth towards the established generic vernacular in contemporary American popular culture for rendering the paranormal (The X-Files, etc.). The increased dramatic prominence of Samara’s family compared to Ringu reflects these different priorities, as does the wholesale suppression of the folkloric element - Sadaka as the child of a sea-god or demon. The Ring also introduces two set-piece scenes, the uncanny panic of the horse aboard the ferry and the scene in which Samara’s father electrocutes himself in the bathtub. Neither of these have any direct parallel in Nakata’s film and appear to have been introduced to give an eventful boost to the narrative of Rachel’s quest and meet audience expectations of disturbing and violent plot incidents. The Ring also establishes a direct parallel between Samara and Aidan by reassigning telepathic abilities from Kyuji in Ringu to Aidan – again accommodating the source material to US generic conventions by echoing The Sixth Sense’s trend-setting portrayal of a child with paranormal powers.

The Ring employs a more generically placeable visual style than Ringu, using both shock cuts, fast dollies and tracks, and the prosthetic/make-up effects the Japanese version abjures (for instance, the very fast track into the first victim’s face as she - presumably - sees Samara offscreen, the last frames of which substitute a horrific make-up effect for the actress’ screaming face, the swap masked by the speed of the camera movement). Whereas Reiko is called to Kyuji’s apartment by the police, Rachel discovers Noah’s dead body herself in a scene that is constructed as a horrific coup de théâtre, with a tense build-up to the reveal of Noah’s corpse, posed tableau-like atop a dias (this is unexplained as when last seen Noah was scrambling along the floor, but recalls for example Hannibal Lecter’s spectacular body-compositions in The Silence of the Lambs), his face grotesquely transformed into the ‘terror mask’ of Samara’s victims.

Perhaps the most notable difference between the two films, however, involves the ending. Ringu fades out on a high-angle shot of Reiko’s car speeding up the motorway: we know she is taking her son Yoichi to show her father the curse video, determined to sacrifice the old man rather than her only child. The film thus ends on a bleak note: there is no escaping the curse, merely the inevitable transmission of the contagion. While The Ring reproduces the twist of the copx, at the of the film Rachel makes no answer when Aidan asks her who she intends to show the video to: the specific sense of desperation and cruelty at the end of Ringu is considerably mitigated, while also pointing up the different, more atomised, sense of family and community in The Ring’s suburban US milieu.

NOTES
1. Its ‘lowness’ is key to its transgressivity - as apparent detritus, the subversive charge of horror so to speak creeps in beneath the radar of ideological censorship.
3. For a shot-by-shot comparison of the two films, see the fan site at http://www.mandiapple.com/snowblood/ringcompare.htm.
in an increasingly hermetic circle of reference and counter-reference that can – in extreme cases such as Tarantino – proceed largely without reference or obvious relevance to the extra-generic world. This may pose a problem for traditional genre theory, which, as we have seen, has tended to attach considerable importance to the ways in which film genres and genre films interact with their social, political and cultural contexts.

From another perspective, however, the changing generic field of play (and the changing rules of generic production and consumption) return us to the point where this book began – the realisation that genre, and genres, are inherently processual. As we have seen, a problem that theories of film genre and accounts of individual genres have periodically encountered has been their attempt to make genres seem both more internally integrated and more consistent than they generally are. Even the most atypically integrated and consistent genre, the Western, has under the pressure of recent critical interrogation revealed itself as an interestingly fissiparous and multi-stranded genre tradition. In that sense, the increasingly transgeneric tendency in twenty-first-century Hollywood film may represent not the breakdown of ‘classical’ genre traditions, but the more visible enactment, in transformed institutional contexts, of those ‘post-classical’ impulses that have always been present in the system of genres. At the very least, such developments confirm that we still have a number of questions to ask about what genres are, what they do, why and for whom, and that genre in turn still has a great deal to teach us about how movies work.

NOTES
2. For example, all of John Wayne’s Monogram Westerns are now available on DVD in the UK and USA.

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