Projected Fears

HORROR FILMS AND AMERICAN CULTURE

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I dedicate this book to my family: to my father for jumping with me at Jason's appearance in the final moments of Friday the Thirteenth, to my brother for taunting me into seeing Halloween, and to my mother, who never wanted me to watch these "ugly films" in the first place.
Introduction

When I tell people that I'm working on a book about horror films, there are two typical reactions. The first is a mildly incredulous, "Oh." For some, including many within academic circles, horror films hardly constitute worthy cultural texts for analysis. This reaction is compounded as I explain that, rather than pursuing arcane film history or neglected cult classics, I'm focusing on those films that gained a wide mainstream audience. While it is certainly true that the study of popular culture has gained great ground in academic circles over the last few decades, there is still a strong strain of contempt for those cultural artifacts and icons that attain wide levels of popularity. So, due to this first reaction, I've found myself being strategically vague about my current work when in certain company.

The vast majority of the people in my life, fortunately, have a different and much more positive reaction, which focuses on what I call the "top-ten list." This reaction sometimes comes as a question—"So, what is the best horror film of all time?"—and is usually followed by a story—"I remember when I first saw film X. I was fourteen and I ..." Over the past few years of these conversations, I've been struck by the variety of narratives people spin about their memorable encounters with scary films. These stories certainly vary in the kinds of films people recall as frightening. While many are traditional horror films, it's surprising how often films from other genres appear, including the remarkably pervasive fear evoked by The Wizard of Oz. I'm also surprised by the variety
of reactions reported. My father recalls riding along dusty gravel roads in the back of a pickup truck after seeing Dracula in the early 1930s and starting at every shadow and overhanging limb. A friend tells the story of being terrified by an afternoon showing of Nightmare on Elm Street as a child but sneaking back into the theater to watch it again. Over the years, people have described to me their sleepless nights and locked doors and romantic interludes.

After listening to literally hundreds of these stories, I’m particularly impressed by the impact these films have had on individuals. People carry these stories with them, recount the most disturbing moments, and recall their peculiar reactions. Horror films, perhaps more than any other type of film, seem to impact people’s lives. In fairness, the biggest impression is often when we are children or adolescents and are beginning to struggle with societal boundaries and forbidden knowledge. The film that I recall scaring me the most—and it’s a question I often get asked—was Halloween. I was far too young to see Halloween in its first run. However, my brother, who is several years my elder, had seen the film and crept into my bedroom late one evening to recount the tale of Michael Myers coming home. So, with remarkable ease, the next night my older brother helped me sneak into a crowded theater, where we illicitly watched John Carpenter’s classic.

When I watch the film now I’m always struck by how different it seems from my recollection of it. In particular, I recall being most horrified by the sequence in which Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis) is running down the block, desperately banging on the doors of her neighbors. Her cries are ignored, and she eventually must face the killer Michael Myers on her own. Of course, the sequence lasts only a few seconds, but in my memory, the memory of a nine-year-old boy sitting in a crowded north Texas theater, the sequence of suburban pursuit lasted forever.

When I think about this memory now, it makes a great deal of sense. I was a young boy living in a neighborhood not entirely unlike the one depicted in the film—indeed, the filmmakers intended the neighborhoods of Haddonfield to have this generic quality—and like most young people, I was dependent on the adults in my life (family, neighbors, teachers, etc.) for safety. Laurie’s terrified flight through a neighborhood of closed doors, while utterly fantastic, was not entirely alien to me, or in all likelihood, to the millions of other adolescents who flocked to the film in the late 1970s.

While my anecdote, and those of others, depicts the impact that frightening films have on us as individuals, I think it also opens up a broader question about culture—a question that sits at the heart of this book. Each of us experiences a film individually, and our different tastes in films demonstrate how unique our individual reactions are. Yet, what are we to make of those films that seem to have tapped into the collective fears of an entire generation? Can we have what film theorist Robin Wood calls “collective nightmares”?! If so, how should we seek to understand those “projected nightmares” that seem to affect our broader culture? In other words, while any given film can be frightening to any given individual, certain films become the touchstone of fear for an entire generation. It is as if, at certain points, a particular film so captures our cultural anxieties and concerns that our collective fears seem projected onto the screen before us. Not every horror film achieves this effect, indeed, very few do, but when a film does so touch our collective nerve, our reactions to it are unmistakable. We talk about these films, debate their meaning, praise and condemn them. These films that touch upon our collective fears become part of our culture.

This is a book about horror films. More specifically, it’s a book about those horror films that made such an impression on American culture that they became instantly recognizable and, indeed, redefined the notion of what a horror film is. In my estimation—an estimation I’ll try to justify in the course of these pages—there are ten films that can be thought of as having this kind of connection to American culture: Dracula (1931), The Thing from Another World (1951), Psycho (1960), Night of the Living Dead (1968), The Exorcist (1973), The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), Halloween (1978), The Silence of the Lambs (1991), Scream (1996), and The Sixth Sense (1999). It is not my contention that these are, necessarily, the most frightening films ever made—a line of argument far too subjective to make seriously—or that they are necessarily the most original—a line of argument more of interest to the film historian. Rather, my argument in this book is that these are the most “successful” and “influential” horror films in American history and that their level of success and influence can be correlated to broader cultural anxieties into which they somehow tapped.

When I say these films were successful, I mean not only that they achieved financial success but also that each of these films became “cultural moments.” Of course, all ten of these films achieved huge box-office success, and several did so with very little production
value, promotion, or even major studio backing. Financial success, however, is not enough to argue that these films are important. The history of film is replete with financially successful but instantly forgettable films. Still, these ten horror films have achieved a level of cultural immortality far beyond their monetary profit. They have become part of our culture. What is particularly interesting about these films is that they became part of our culture almost instantly. To attain this kind of broad success, these films had to reach out to more than just the hardcore horror fans. As Elizabeth Cowie notes, “Successful horror films succeed in horrifying both those who love the horror of horror films and those who loathe the horror of horror films.” These were films that people talked about, not that this talk was always positive. Some of these films were widely embraced and praised; others were roundly condemned, even censored. Even the vehemence of this condemnation, however, is evidence of their cultural impact.

Additionally, these films have remained instantly recognizable, even among people who have never seen them. When I talk about the films I’m studying, I’m struck by how almost everyone knows them all and how most can recount the general plot and feel of each film, even those they have never watched in their entirety. Psycho always gets this reaction. Everyone can imitate the striking string musical theme, and most can even describe the shower scene in vivid detail. However, surprisingly few people have actually sat down and watched the entire film, and when they do, they often report to me how surprised they are at its depth, subtlety, and humor. Everyone “knows” Psycho—even if few of us really know Psycho.

In part, the cultural immortality of these films stems from their influence on other films. The success of each of these films spawned—at least in part—a whole new trend in the development of the horror genre: The success of Dracula gave rise to the era of the Universal Monsters; The Thing spawned the creature features of the 1950s; Night of the Living Dead brought the grotesqueries of splatter to American cinema; and even the most recent film in this study, The Sixth Sense, can be said to have heralded a return of Gothic art to American horror films, such as The Blair Witch Project and The Others. To put it simply—and perhaps too boldly—the impact of each of these films was such that, after each one was released, it became very difficult to think of horror films in the same ways. While the Universal Monsters (Dracula, Frankenstein, the Wolfman, etc.) have remained a vital part of our collective imaginary, their capacity to evoke fright, already waning by 1951, became almost impossible after the emergence of The Thing from its icy saucer.

The dynamic, sometimes dramatic, evolution of the horror films makes it difficult to talk about the genre as a whole. How, for instance, can one seek to put the haunting elegance of, say, Picnic at Hanging Rock in the same genre as the assaulting gore of House of 1,000 Corpses? The answer to this problem is suggested by James Naremore, who contends that genres are not constituted so much by essential similarities between the films as they are constituted by the ways we talk about these films. Genres are, as he puts it, “a loose evolving system of arguments and readings, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies.” In other words, if we talk about a film as if it is a horror film—market it that way, respond to it that way, interpret it as one—then it is, effectively, part of the horror genre. Andrew Tudor summarizes the point, “Genre is what we collectively believe it to be.”

If genre is essentially our collective understanding and expectation, then the evolution of genres involves the skillful violation of those expectations. S. S. Prawer observes that the speed with which conventions become established and expectations set allows the talented filmmaker to “use the conventions as a kind of grid against which to draw their own rather different picture.” The violation of an audience’s expectations contributes to their experience of terror and, in so doing, redraws the contours of the horror genre. Upon their release, each of the ten films examined here redefined fear for a generation and revealed something about the contours of our culture at those moments.

At this point, I want to make my overarching argument a bit clearer. While it might be tempting to claim that these particular films influenced our culture in specific, causal ways, this is not my argument. The logic of causality is appealing but far too simplistic for discussions about film and culture. The films I examine in this book did not cause American culture to go in one particular direction or another. Rather, these films connected to existing cultural drifts and directions in such peculiarly poignant ways as to be recognized as somehow “true.” This is not, of course, to suggest that audiences emerged from these films fearing the undead or ghosts or aliens but that they emerged knowing that somehow what they saw upon the screen was an accurate, if allegorical, depiction of their own collective fears and concerns.
Allegory, however, is not an entirely accurate way of thinking about the connection between certain horror films and the broader culture that embraces them. Allegory, while a useful way of thinking about representation, suggests, on the one hand, too much intention upon the part of the producers of a text and, on the other hand, too much awareness upon the part of the audience. While allegories are powerful fictional tools, they are generally unsuccessful in creating horror. 1984, for example, contains within it numerous horrific images and is a largely disturbing tale. However, as a reader or viewer we can never fully escape the overt allegorical relationship between Orwell’s fictive kingdom and his very real concerns about his contemporary global political situation. Horror fiction may contain elements that upon later inspection contain an allegorical relation to external objects, but if horror bares its allegory too overtly, it fails to produce its primary product—fear. Edward Ingebretnsen notes that every monster is, essentially, a political entity and that our production of monsters is always part of our broader political understanding of the world and of notions of good and evil.6 However, if those politics are too overt, then we read the monster as a symbol and not as a threatening entity. Allegory, as Tzvetan Todorov points out, removes the literal reading of a monster or fantastic event and, thus, removes the space for fear and suspense.7 It is, in other words, difficult to be frightened by a political symbol.

A more productive way of thinking about the subtle relationship between film and culture is suggested by Stephen Greenblatt’s discussion of literature’s relationship to culture.8 Greenblatt contends that works of fiction “resonate” with elements in a particular culture, and I think this is a potentially powerful metaphor for thinking about films and the broader culture within which they become meaningful. Consider the more literal, physical sense of resonance. If we were to sound a tuning fork of the right frequency in a room full of crystal wineglasses, we would find a sympathetic hum emerging from the glasses. This physical act of re-sounding—or vibrating in sympathy with a similar frequency—gives a sense of the way that certain literary or filmic texts impact with the broader culture. An influential horror film does not necessarily create a certain pattern of anxiety or fear within a culture; instead, elements within the film resonate—connect in some sympathetic manner—to trends within the broader culture. Rather than creating cultural fears or reflecting them (as in allegory), the kinds of films with which we are here concerned can be said to attain influence by resonating with the broader culture.

Resonance, while vitally important to a film’s reception, cannot be sufficient. Was resonance enough, then we would watch the same films over and over again. Film, like literature, cannot continue to offer us only the familiar but must, if it is to appeal to the wider collective imagination, offer something new. Greenblatt calls this the “wonder” provoked by a novel text. The broad cultural success of a given work of fiction, then, can be said to rest, in part, upon the balance the work maintains between its resonance with familiar cultural elements and the unfamiliar elements that create in its audience a sense of wonder.

In my analysis of popular horror films, I have found this balance to be vital. In my reading of these films, I find a strong resonance between the elements within the film and various anxieties existing in the broader culture. However, of equal importance, the groundbreaking films—those films that became real cultural events—shock their audiences. In this way, Greenblatt’s notion of wonder seems even more important for horror films. If in love familiarity breeds contempt, in horror it can be said that familiarity breeds boredom and derision. The history of horror figures gives easy evidence of this claim. While Gothic ghouls such as Dracula and Dr. Jekyll provoked fright in their early audiences, after a few years they lost their fearsome potential and ended up costarring with Abbott and Costello. This can be seen in any number of genres from the laughable Styrofoam creatures of the B-movies to the recent success of the Scary Movie trilogy. As a general rule of thumb, monsters that are too familiar become the objects of ridicule.

To be horrific, to fulfill their primary narrative function, horror films must not simply offer us something novel, they must shock us. In the truly groundbreaking horror films of American history this level of shock is caused not merely by the introduction of some new monster but through an almost systematic violation of the rules of the game. The truly shocking—and, thus, successful—horror films are those that make us start in our seats and want to cry out, “Hey, you can’t do that!” In a way, we come to a horror film with some general sense of what a horror film looks like, what its topics are, and what kinds of moves we expect the film to take. However, the groundbreaking films use our expectations to set us up for something new and unexpected. Just as we’ve become comfortable with the way that horror films in general operate, along comes a film that violates our expectations that it becomes the start of a whole new form of horror—thus the cycle begins again.
Of course, just as resonance alone would breed too much familiarity, so too, violation alone would produce exasperation. While there are any number of “art house” films that strive for a level of incomprehensibility, for a horror film to achieve an impact on the broader cultural landscape, it must balance resonance and violation. Thus, in my reading of the history of influential American horror films, I find the central, crucial element to be that combination of familiarity and shock—a combination I refer to as resonant violation.

Each of the ten films I examine in this book attained this resonant violation at the moment of their release. It is not just that they each contain elements that can be seen as resonating with broader cultural elements—most films achieve this to some extent. Nor is it just that they violate audience expectations in shocking ways. Indeed, each of these films had precursors. What these ten films did, and did with considerable elegance, was to combine familiarity and shock—resonance and violation—in such a way that audiences left the theater feeling that each film was both vitally important and disturbingly new. This strange relationship between the recognizable and the shocking is suggested by James Ursini who contends, “Horror is based on recognizing in the unfamiliar something familiar.”

The concept of resonant violation does more than simply explain the success of certain horror films. It is my contention that this combination of the familiar and the unexpected suggests the broader cultural importance of horror films. By drawing upon our collective anxieties—projecting them, even if indirectly, upon the screen before us—horror films can be said to be vitally interested in the broader cultural politics of their day. If resonance connects the horror film to the broader politics of its day, what does the violation of expectations accomplish? It seems to me, that the systematic violation of our narrative expectations almost forces us to think differently about those anxieties, or at the very least, to think about our normal patterns of dealing with those anxieties. Prawer suggests this relationship when observing, “If the horror film is thus connected to our social concerns, it also, paradoxically, helps us to cope with our ordinary life by jolting us out of it.”

I believe this “jolting” is most evident and most effective in the kind of violation of expectations achieved by groundbreaking horror films. These moments of resonant violation demonstrate to audiences, at the very least, that our habitual ways of thinking about the world can get us into trouble and that we’ll have to find new ways of coping. Some initial evidence for this claim can be offered in the often-made observation that horror films tend to become more popular during times of social upheaval. Paul Wells, for instance, asserts that “the history of the horror film is essentially a history of anxiety in the twentieth century.” When the culture is in turmoil, for some reason audiences flock to the horror film. Perhaps, during these times of great, generalized social anxiety, the horror film functions to shock its audience out of their anxiety. Anxiety tends to promote a sense of helplessness; fear, on the other hand, provides an impetus for change. Of course, anxieties and tensions exist at all times, not just those of upheaval. By resonating with these anxieties, whether explicit or implicit, horror films provide a space for reflecting on them.

Following this line of argument, we should be able to gain a great deal of insight into American culture at particular moments in time by focusing on those films that attained the kind of widespread success and influence I’ve suggested above. Indeed, this is the ultimate aim of the present book: to examine the potential points of resonant violation between influential horror films and the particular cultural moments in which they emerged. I pursue this purpose by examining each of these films with a particular eye towards the broad cultural issues and anxieties surrounding its release.

The critic’s job, in essence, is to slow the film down—pause over these points of connection between film and culture in ways that an audience cannot easily do during an initial viewing. I often think of this process as working like a roller coaster. Looking at a coaster from a distance, from the safety and solidity of the ground, we can see all the mechanisms that cause us to flip, fly, and spin. When we’re on the coaster we know these mechanisms exist, but if the coaster is successful we don’t have time to reconcile that knowledge with our thrills and shrieks. Horror films, at least successful ones, operate in the same way. If we have the time and distance to see the artifice, then it doesn’t work.

Of course, an awareness of audience is crucial. Our goal is not to look for any possible meaning but to seek those meanings that might resonate with a given audience. Despite the temptation to view films in the abstract as universal or transcendent symbols of some human impulse, we should never forget that they are shown in real space and time to real people who come for real reasons. We cannot hope to know exactly what audiences made of each of these films, nor can we hope to gain that knowledge through interviews or archival
research. Our hope, rather, is to offer an informed speculation about
the possible relationship between these culturally significant films
and the broader culture within which they became so meaningful
and to ask the simple question, “Why?” Why did Dracula or Halloween
or The Silence of the Lambs become so meaningful to their respective
audiences? What in those films invited audiences to take them as so
meaningful and important? We are, in essence, seeking to sit along-
side those audiences in those darkened theaters of 1931 or 1960 or
1968 and, with the benefit of hindsight and critical distance, examine
the complex relationship between film and culture, between fictional
fear and cultural anxiety, between familiarity and shock.

My goal in this book is to trace some of these points of
resonant violation in those horror films that have defined and redefined
the notion of horror in American culture. By focusing each
chapter on one influential film, I hope to provide a specific and par-
ticular reading of those films that have had an irrefutable impact on
American culture and filmmaking. By pursuing these influential
films in their chronological sequence, I hope to show the dynamic
developments in the broader genre. By the end of this book, then,
we should be able to trace the changes in America’s notion of horror
from Dracula to The Sixth Sense. By following the resonant viola-
tion in these films, we should be able to examine the ways that our
notion of horror adapts to the particular cultural environment in
which we face very real fears and anxieties. Ultimately, we should
gain some insight into the dynamic processes by which we project
our collective fears onto the screen and by which these fears are
projected back to us.

1 Dracula (1931)

“I am Dracula…. I bid you welcome.”

The roots of the American horror film can be traced to turn of the
century England. For it was in England in 1897 that Bram Stoker’s
Dracula first emerged from his crypt to frighten readers. Deeply
influenced by classical Gothic texts such as Horace Walpole’s The
Castle Otranto (1764) and following in the immediate footsteps of
Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s
The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), Stoker’s novel
was, as Rosemary Jackson explains, “the culmination of nineteenth-
century English Gothic.”

Yet, despite its place in the literary canon and its popularity,
Dracula was a surprising subject for a 1930s Hollywood film. The
novel is a massive, labyrinthine tale with a large cast of characters
and a plot that spans several countries. What’s more, the novel oozes
with violence, blood, and sexuality, all taboo during the restrictive
reign of the Production Code. Paramount Studio’s supervisor E. J.
Montange reported the reaction of his reviewers to the prospect of a
filmed version of Dracula in a company memo: “We did not receive
one favorable reaction. The very things which made people gasp and
talk about it, such as the blood-sucking scenes, would be prohibited
by the Code and also by censors.” One reader for Universal Studios—
which would, of course, go on to produce the film version—noted
that the story “contained everything that would cause any average
human being to revolt or seek a convenient railing.”