

The bystander effect in *Carrie* (DE PALMA, Brian, 1976). How does the audiences role in the horror genre make us feel helpless?

The way in which a film engages with its audience is a fascinating idea. Films are made to be watched, to be engaged with, to immerse the audience within their worlds for a moment and leave an impact on them. A film will often try and place the audience in the shoes of the protagonist in order to make us connect with them, make us understand them deeply.

Carrie (Dir. DE PALMA, Brian) is a supernatural horror coming-of-age film. A 1976 adaptation of the Stephen King novel only two years after its release, *Carrie* follows a young girl, outcast Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) after she gets her first period and is bullied by her peers. Throughout the film, the audience watches Carrie navigate her school and home life, mastering her growing telekinetic abilities alongside. At the same time, we witness a plot unfold crafted by her classmate Christine "Chris" Hargensen (Nancy White) in order to get revenge on Carrie.

The film, much like other horror films of its kind, builds up a sense of unease and tension throughout the films runtime. There is a clear discomfort that is communicated to us in watching scenes of revenge, child abuse and bullying play out, and the audience is left to wonder what will await them in scenes to come. This feeling, the sensation of the link between the audiences morbidly watching eyes and the upset of the horror on screen is exactly what this essay aims to explore. How do horror films make the audience feel helpless?

In order to answer this question, the aim of this essay is to find and examine the link between the horror genre and spectatorship, and how the combination of the two places the audience in a hopeless position of watching but not being able to intervene. This essay will use *Carrie* as its prime example.

THE HORROR GENRE

"Indeed, the genres of suspense, mystery, and horror derive their very names from the affects they are intended to promote-a sense of suspense, a sense of mystery, and a sense of horror." (Carroll, N. 1987)

Horror is a genre that has permeated film throughout its history. From the era of the slashers during the 80s and 90s, the universal monster movies of the 1930s, to the big boom of splatters in the early 2000s. While often controversial, horror is a fundamental genre in film. *Carrie* is often categorised as a supernatural horror, defined by its usage of otherworldly subject matter, in this case, Carrie Whites developing telekinetic abilities. Supernatural horror will present these in a disturbing and unnatural light, showcasing the effects that the unnatural, the unusual, the unfamiliar can have on people and their societies.

SPECTATORSHIP

“Absorbed in the world of the fiction, we forget that it is a fiction.” (Smith, M. 1995)

Spectatorship is vital in film, as a primarily visual medium, we are expected to engage with what we are seeing on screen, analysing, even if unconsciously, and forming an understanding of what is happening throughout the film. No one member of the audience will come out of the film with the same understanding. Though the film will often try and push us towards the characters we are meant to root for, and who not to. *Carrie* is no different to this, as the audience is both expected to empathise with and fear Carrie. And there is no argument that we are supposed to resent her bullying peers and her religiously abusive mother.

In this essay, I will be arguing the position that *Carrie* places the audience in during its runtime is not entirely in the shoes of Carrie herself, nor in the role of her bullying peers. But instead the way the film is shot and told causes the audience to feel more like bystanders to the situation. Still immersed in the world, still sympathetic towards Carrie and her situation, but unable to feel like there is a way to help.

FIG. 1 - THE CAUSE.

"When Carrie gets her period, we can neither identify with her cruel classmates, who yell, “Plug it up!” while pelting her with tampons, nor can we identify with Carrie, whose shock at her own blood reveals a disquieting and even reprehensible innocence. " (Briefel, A. 2005)

One of the first scenes in the film is presented in relatively light-hearted tone, as the camera pans in slow motion through the girls shower room before finally settling on Carrie, alone and distant from the other girls in a moment of peace in the shower. This moment sours as Carrie is unable to recognise her first period and, believing something is wrong, cries out to her peers for help, who turn on her cruelly and pelt her relentlessly with tampons.

Throughout this scene, we are forced to be spectators, from the moments before we see Carrie, where the camera moves silently between the girls as they get dressed. To the way the camera observes Carrie as she showers, it feels uncomfortable. The shots of Carrie cowering alone in the corner of the shower and the reverse of her peers, stacked upon each other, taking up the frame as they torment her. We are placed between Carrie and her peers, not engaging with the abuse but being forced to passively watch.

FIG. 2 - THE CONSEQUENCE.

"And despite the emphasis it places on Carrie's sightline, the split-screen process refuses us access to her optical point of view, since both seer and seen are represented on screen at once. She is rendered only an object of specularly." (LINDSEY, S.S. 1991)

At the film's climax, Carrie's slowly developing psychic powers bubble to the surface after she is humiliated at the school prom by being doused with pig's blood. The immediate build up to this moment, as we follow the gaze of Sue Snell (Amy Irving), a classmate who took pity(?) on Carrie after initially participating in her torment; This scene, much like the previously mentioned shower scene, is presented in slow motion. Our eyes become Sue's, as they follow the trail of rope up towards the precariously balanced bucket of blood above Carrie's head. For a moment there is a glimmer of hope, that maybe this realisation will enable the scene to go in a different direction away from the obvious conclusion, until this hope is ripped away from the audience as Sue is unable to voice this in time, unable to help, but forced to watch.

Circling back to the horror genre for a moment, and coming back to focus on the aftermath of the previously mentioned scene, it's important to discuss how the tone shifts in this scene post-bucket of blood. While the film has been building towards a sense of tension throughout, with moments of Carrie using her telekinesis against others in moments of rage, these scenes are brief and short lived, flashes of anger from years of frustration and holding back her emotions. In this scene we see it all come to the surface, though Carrie's rage is so blinding that she is unable to fully express it on her face, eyes wide and mouth set straight as she locks the gymnasium shut and punishes her peers from the stage.

THE ANSWER

While the film does successfully make us as the audience sympathetic towards Carrie, and the punishment towards her peers and her mother ultimately feels vindicated, we, as the audience, are still too far away from her. We are expected to sympathise, and we are expected to understand her, but we are not entirely expected to *be* her. In a way, Carrie and her supernatural abilities are still presented as the villain, the thing to be feared. And we, as the audience, are subjected to the consequences of her rage. Not as victims, nor involved in her downfall, but instead as watchers, staring eyes, passive to her plight.

The role that a film can place its audience in is fascinating. A film is meant to be watched and engaged with, but only for a moment in time, the audience is presented with a moment in these characters' lives and must eventually leave them behind.

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