

▼ CASE STUDY 3: THE HORROR GENRE

In this section we look at:

- the nature of the horror genre
- the development of the genre
- representational and audience issues connected with the genre.

[Our] . . . interest in fearsome fantasies cannot be completely explained as the result of a desire to understand the unknown. Still, the legends of the past provided many of the monsters that haunt the literature of the present, and part of the modern enthusiasm for the macabre may be attributed to ancestral memories of the days when demons were almost expected to put in an occasional appearance.'

(L. Daniels, *Fear: A History of Horror in the Mass Media*,
Paladin, 1977, p. 8)

There can be little doubt that the horror genre – most particularly the horror film – has now become far more popular with audiences than perhaps at any other time in its history. If its beginnings were rooted in literature – Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) are the titles that seem to spring to everyone's mind – we also know that stories have always been told about ghosts, monsters, witches and the dark. It is now the case that almost every week the local multiplex is showing one or more films that might be considered horror films. Television has repeated showings of horror films, and series abound on television that pit teenagers against mythical monsters. Bookshops are stacked with horror novels and graphic novels.



Figure 4.8 Scene from the film *Frankenstein*. Source: British Film Institute © Universal Pictures.

ACTIVITY...

Make a close study of the complete television listings of any given week as well as the film listings in your area. Pick out all the media texts that you would consider to be horror. You might also visit local bookshops or research the sales of horror novels and the like. Spend some time watching a variety of the music channels on television and noting carefully the instances of videos that contain iconic references to the horror genre. Make a list of all the horror texts that you can find. Try to follow the lifespan of horror texts. For instance:

- How long did a horror film last at the local cinema?
- How quickly afterwards did it come out on video or DVD?

Track the trends of horror texts on television:

- What channel do they tend to be on?
- What time of day do they tend to be shown?
- Are they one-off dramas or series?
- Can you establish an audience based on your research?

ACTIVITY...

Compile a list of the elements that *you think* constitute a horror text. You should compare the list you have made with those belonging to other members of your media group in an attempt to create a loose-fitting definition of the term 'horror'. It is likely that some difference of opinion will emerge during your discussion of this definition. Is a ghost story a horror story? At what point does a text about a serial killer become a horror rather than a psychological thriller?

Horror is the stuff of legend and the basis for all our nightmares. The well-worn cliché of a group of people sitting around a camp-fire and telling ghost stories is possibly rooted in ancient practices. Perhaps this is why the opening scene from many a film or television series begins with someone starting to tell a story, often at night, whilst sitting around the ubiquitous camp-fire. An audience will recognise this as one of the first signals that we are about to be told something frightening. An example of this technique can be seen in *The Fog* (directed by John Carpenter, 1979).

ACTIVITY...

Carry out research into people's attitudes to the horror genre. You could ask them:

- Do you enjoy the genre?
- Why do you enjoy the genre?
- If you do not enjoy the genre, why not?
- In which medium do you consume most horror – films, television programmes, books, comics or other?
- What aspects of horror do you most enjoy?
- When you watch horror films and/or programmes at the cinema or on television, do you do so alone or with a group of people?
- What are your favourite horror texts?

Far be it from us to predict the outcome of your research, but it will not come as a great surprise if you discover that the horror genre tends to create two very distinct camps – those who love it and those who would never dream of watching or reading anything in the genre – though it might be interesting to note why people who do not enjoy the genre frequently know so much about it! Once you have discovered who are the horror aficionados you should ask them what exactly they anticipate when watching or reading a horror text.

How do we as an audience recognise horror? As was discussed in the section on genre (p. 53), audiences come to expect certain codes and conventions in any given genre – and at the same time expect some variation on this, otherwise the genre is in danger of becoming stale.

CODES AND CONVENTIONS

Every genre – and we are talking cross-media here – has a set of codes and conventions that have developed throughout the course of its lifespan. Horror is no different. But despite the fact that the horror genre is considered to be fairly static in terms of certain constituent elements, it can be argued that few genres have developed and changed more in relation to wider contexts and audience tastes than has the horror genre.

ACTIVITY...

Think carefully about your own list of favourite horror texts. Make a list of the elements within each of your favourite texts that make it possible for you to place each text under the label of 'horror'.

- Are there elements that each of the texts has in common?
- Are there elements that are unique to one particular medium?

These familiar elements are called the codes and conventions and are used in two ways. First, they permit audiences to recognise a genre, and it is often based on this recognition that a member of an audience will decide to purchase a particular text. There is a whole world of choice out there – whatever the medium – and classification by genre and the associated codes and conventions makes our choices easier. These codes and conventions also allow short cuts to be made. Familiar plots, characters, and so on do not need time spent on explanation – we already know what is going on and settle down to explore the finer points.

Second, for similar reasons, the notion of genre is also very useful for media producers. It may not guarantee success but some knowledge and understanding of the genres that are popular at any given time allow producers to adopt and adapt what they consider to be winning formulas that seem popular with audiences. For instance, the popularity of the space/star-wars genre was quickly utilised by producers, who managed to combine the horror genre with the space genre and revive the horror film.

The iconography (codes and conventions and recognisable signs) of the horror genre are worth exploring – and it is also interesting to see how they have developed and altered over the decades. To help you understand this you should try the following activity.

ACTIVITY...

Horror is a genre that has long been associated with a set of codes and conventions that seldom change. To what extent is this true? Look at an early example of the horror genre – *Frankenstein* (directed by James Whale, 1931) is a

continued

good starting point. Compare this film with the remake, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1994).

- Make a list of the differences and similarities.
- In what way would you consider the genre to have changed over the sixty years or so that separate the two films – considering that the source for both films is the original Shelley novel?
- If the film were to be remade in this decade, what further changes and developments would you expect?

Unlike the western or gangster film, where there are a few fairly hard and fast rules in terms of the environment that the action might take place in, or indeed the nature of the characters that are ranged against one another, the horror genre can encompass an extraordinarily wide range of environments, characters, threats and subtexts. This is perhaps one of the major reasons that the horror film has remained popular – or has been able to reinvent itself when its popularity seemed to be on the wane. But what exactly does the horror genre consist of?

A SENSE OF THE HISTORICAL

From the 1930s to the 1970s, most horror films were considered very much the poor brethren of the film world. Horror programmes on the television were far and few between and horror novels were generally considered to be trashy paperbacks. Frequently horror films were made cheaply and packaged together in double bills for a supposedly teenage/young-adult audience to go and see (often in late-night showings), to scream and laugh their way through. This notion is captured brilliantly in the film *Matinee* (directed by Joe Dante, 1993), which shows affectionately yet perceptively the cathartic power of horror and also how horror films were watched almost exclusively by young people and looked down upon by adults. There were, of course, exceptions – perhaps the most notable being two films by Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho* (1960) and *The Birds* (1963), both of which helped change critical perspectives on the horror film over time. Both were released in a decade when the most popular horror movies in the UK were the films that came out of the Hammer studio with titles such as *Frankenstein Must Be Destroyed* (1969) and *Dracula, Prince of Darkness* (1965). They conformed to the popular model, featured monsters and werewolves, and were all set in the dim and distant past – gothic in atmosphere – and so, removed from any sense of reality, audiences felt secure even while they were jumping up and down with fright. Admittedly the 1950s had seen a strand of the horror genre that dealt loosely with reality, in films such as *Them* (directed by Gordon Douglas, 1954), which suggested that the horror film did actually take on board contemporary contexts. Thus the ants in this particular film are mutated by a hefty dose of radiation from atomic testing – mirroring, without a doubt, the anxieties of the Cold War period and the after-effects of the dropping of the atomic bomb. But even then – and aliens did pop down too in a variety of films in the 1950s – there was always the sense that the screen managed to distance the audience from the fictional events that were placed in front of them.

Not so in the mid 1960s with Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, which firmly brought the horror genre into some sort of critical view and into a proper contemporary setting. Despite the sly humour, the over-acting and the tricks played on the audience (the heroine disappears about a quarter of the way into the film), *Psycho* was important in changing the general critical and audience attitude towards the horror film. Whereas Hammer films had not received reviews when they came out at the local cinema or got a central London showcase release, *Psycho* did. It was perhaps one of the first horror films to be treated seriously.

Two other horror films are noteworthy in terms of their impact on film critics and their acceptance by mainstream audiences. *Jaws* (directed by Steven Spielberg, 1975) and *The Exorcist* (directed by William Friedkin, 1973) both made an impact on the film world, but most importantly they signalled that horror as a genre could achieve a significant place in the box-office. Inevitably both films spawned sequels (indeed *The Exorcist V* is in pre-production at the time of writing).

It is surely not a coincidence that the advent of the horror film as a Hollywood product that could (and still can) make large profits is mirrored by the new-found respectability of the horror novel – as exemplified by the popularity of authors such as Stephen King, Peter Straub and Clive Barker. A new generation in the 1970s was prepared to open its mind to new experiences. The barriers between high culture and popular culture were lowered and the horror genre was the genre to profit – in all media.

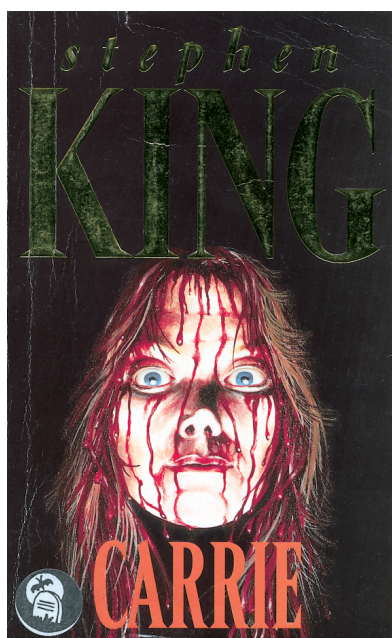


Figure 4.9 Stephen King book covers for *Carrie* and *Christine*. Source: Hodder & Stoughton © 1975 and 1983.

ACTIVITY...

Investigate the popularity of the horror genre at the present time.

- Look at your local listings magazine for information about films currently showing.
- Look in a television listings magazine to see exactly what is showing on television.
- Visit your local video store and discover what proportion of videos and DVDs borrowed are from the horror genre.
- Find a list of current best-selling books.
- Visit your local library and ask a librarian about popular horror writers. Do the same at a major stationery shop.

A similar trajectory occurred with the American crime novel, since both the crime text and the horror text are perfect frameworks for a serious investigation (sometimes not so serious) and/or critique of the social, political, economic and ethical contexts of the time. For instance, the theme of a horror text is frequently the sins of the fathers being revisited on their sons. This theme might be a cliché but it is not that different from the morality subtext of a Shakespearean play – just less subtle.

The very latest contemporary manifestation of the horror film is aimed at an audience that is more knowing than any other horror audience ever has been – an audience who, because of video, DVD and television, has supped on the history of the horror film, watches *Buffy* on television, reads Stephen King novels and graphic novels and watches music videos that pay reference to the horror genre – a tradition that began with Michael Jackson's *Thriller*.

ACTIVITY...

Select a television programme that is considered to be a horror text and watch it carefully.

- What elements of the horror genre did it contain?
- Were there elements from other genres contained within it as well? Why do you think these other generic elements were contained in the programme?
- What clues as to the content of the programme were given by the title sequence?
- Who do you think is the target audience for the programme?
- What elements of the programme made you consider the nature of the target audience?
- Is the programme you selected a popular programme? If so, suggest the reasons for its popularity.

- If the programme selected is comparatively new, what do you think its chances of survival are and why?

What we have now is a genre that is so aware that the audience know the codes and conventions almost backwards that it has started to become self-referential and postmodern in its approach. Thus we are told in *Scream* (directed by Wes Craven, 1996) that virgins are safe, only to discover that they are not. We are told that anyone who leaves the room will die, only to discover that they do not. We watch Buffy fight werewolves, yet are aware that the series is about much more than simply the fight between good and evil. We read novels that describe over four pages the act of disembowelling and we laugh – or smile – because we are aware that the author is playing with our own fantasies. We watch documentaries on the television about serial killers.

ACTIVITY...

There are several examples of horror films that are remade and refashioned. Perhaps the most interesting example is *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*.

The original film – a genuinely frightening warning about the dangers of conformity – was directed by Don Siegel in 1956 and is stuffed with subtly integrated subtexts (post-war paranoia, for example). The film was remade in 1978 by Phil Kaufmann, who turned it into a study in alienation of a society in transition, with references made to the social and political landscape of the time. In 1994 the film was remade again, this time as *Bodysnatchers* (directed by Abel Ferrara, 1994), transposed to a military base in the USA and revolving around the nuclear family coming apart. In 1998 *The Faculty* (directed by Robert Rodriguez) boasts virtually the same plot but is transposed to a high school and the central heroes and heroines are misfit college students with dialogue that acknowledges the debt to all three *Bodysnatcher* films.

- Watch all four films. In so doing you will observe the way the horror film changes and develops – how the themes it deals with change even though the central premise remains the same. It will not take long for you to work out how the audience for such films has changed and how the appeal to an audience changes over time.

It is the ability of media producers to adapt and develop any generic text that is what allows it to last and to continue in popularity. The gangster film genre was revived by *The Godfather* in 1971 when a fundamentally ordinary gangster story was given a new angle – the gangsters were humanised, given families and problems and were no longer simply the ‘bad guys’. This is something that the western has failed to do – though it



Figure 4.10 Scene from *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*. Source: British Film Institute © Associated British Pathé Ltd.

can be argued (and frequently is) that the space text is in fact the western in a different location. Similarly the horror text has constantly been reinvented. There are now so many subdivisions and cross-generic links that the whole field is very difficult to generalise about.

The following elements can all be found in current horror texts:

- **The monster** Texts still exist about monsters from the deep, alien invasions, mutation. The monster can represent the id, the offspring from foul scientific experimentation gone wrong, can act as a warning that man must know his place, or can simply be hungry!
- **The gothic** There are still texts that revisit the horrors of old, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. It is interesting to note how there are frequent attempts to bring traditional gothic monsters into a contemporary setting – with varied levels of success.
- **The devil incarnate** The child of the anti-Christ and the spawn of the devil. There has always been a sub-genre of the battle between good and evil; the battle for our souls.
- **Aliens from outer space** The threat of the ultimate unknown. We know they are out there and they surely are not friendly.

- **The horror character** Characters who have created a franchise as they slaughter their way through the narrative and seem never to die. Somehow they have become more popular than conventional heroes.
- **The horror comedy** Our knowledge of the genre is such that we can now parody and pastiche it to our hearts' content.

NOTEBOX

If the gothic horror text had had its day in the 1960s, it was reinvented in the 1970s and 1980s. It was taken into outer space – *Alien*, for example – or brought back home fair and square – *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*, in which notions of reality began to bring the horror home.

Horror is now popular with all ages and viewed/read by people of all ages; it is no longer predominantly an adult genre. The majority of the horror audience now consists of teenagers, yet there is an audience that is much younger. There exists a whole range of texts aimed at children that ostensibly fit into the horror genre. *Count Duckula* and all the *Ghostbusters* cartoons and films are examples, as are television shows such as *Goosebumps* that are shown at 5 p.m. on children's television. In many ways the horror text has become family viewing – it is a rare horror text that is now shown late at night or is rated 18.

REPRESENTATION IN HORROR

When Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* he did so with the understanding that the audience honestly believed in the existence of witches.

Now that the great majority of present-day audiences no longer believe in witches and monsters, and now that we live in a world in which we are more and more distanced from the horrible events that do happen, it is perhaps the horror film that serves to keep us aware of the intrinsic fragility and despair of life.

CATHARSIS A purging of the emotions through pity and terror, leaving an audience less likely to behave horribly because they have experienced the results vicariously.

KEY TERM

The early horror film was a male-dominated domain. Women were victims and/or the object of desire. *Dracula* represented the strong silent man who developed a power over women, who then became his slaves – with a sexual undertone that few films have managed to capture but which literature has achieved. The predominantly male audience sat and watched as women were threatened and killed but at the same time may well have had a woman sitting next to them, since horror films are stereotypically considered to be the ultimate date movies.



Figure 4.11 DVD cover of *Ring 2*.
Source: Tartan Terror.

Refer back to the section on representation (p. 61), and then refer back to the list you made earlier in the activity on p. 293 and look in particular at the characters you noted down and the roles that they play. If we are to agree that all forms of popular culture do in fact mirror and reflect the nature of the society and culture prevalent when they were made – in other words the ‘wider contexts’ – the horror genre is particularly interesting in its presentation of the role of women.

ACTIVITY...

Look again at the four versions of the *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* films that spread over a period of nearly fifty years (p. 299).

- Look closely at the way in which women are represented. Compare the main female protagonist in the 1956 version most particularly with the main female(s) in the last two versions. What are the differences?
- At one extreme we have the woman in distress, saved by her man, but also displaying a fatal feminine weakness. Fifty years later we have younger women who are capable of taking control and fighting back. How did these changes take place?



Figure 4.12 *Sigourney Weaver in Alien 3.* Source: British Film Institute © Twentieth Century Fox.

ACTIVITY...

At this point it would be useful to look at *Alien* and *Halloween*. Both texts represent important moments in the portrayal of women in the latter part of the twentieth century, though it could be said that one was a step forward and the other was a step back.

- Look carefully at Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and then look carefully at Laurie (Jamie Lee Curtis). Analyse the look, the clothes, the attitude, the reaction to events, the relationship with others and the way that each character deals with the 'threat'.

It is interesting to note the masculinisation of female characters in the horror genre that has happened over time and is particularly evident in the examples above. It is also interesting to look at the nature of the female victims in the genre.

ACTIVITY...

Since the horror genre is so popular at present you should be taking the opportunity to watch and read as many contemporary texts as you can. Every time you look at or read a horror text you should make sure that you examine closely two important aspects – the representation of women and the representation of the threat.

- Is it possible to make a generalisation about the representation of women in horror texts of the present day?
- Can the same generalisation be made about the threats so common in horror texts?
- Have contemporary horror texts moved away from the stereotypes of earlier horror texts or not?

Many critics have claimed that the horror genre is essentially misogynist and can be said to reflect a perceived hatred of women, especially the post-feminist woman. Thus the victims are often women who are sexually active, whilst those who survive are commonly thought of as 'good girls'. This is particularly true of a sub-genre – the 'slasher' – in which women in peril are the focal point of the narrative. The slasher movie is an interesting phenomenon because there is definitely a contextual undercurrent going on in the genre that may be a reaction to feminism.

ACTIVITY...

Look at a selection of horror texts from the 1970s and examine the number of stock characters that you can identify.

- How easy is it to identify the victims before anything actually happens?
- Examine the heroes and/or survivors?
- What do these two groups of characters have in common with one another?
- What do we have now? A new breed of woman who will take on the monster? Or is it more complicated than that? Are the victims and survivors still so easy to identify?

AUDIENCE AND HORROR

Look back at the subsection on the media 'effects' theory (p. 145). Often consumption of the horror genre is cited as an example of the effects theory in action. There have been many instances of a particular horror film being banned from cinema exhibition because of the effect film classifiers assume that it might have on an audience. This was particularly true of the 'video nasties' (such as *Child's Play 3*) that are referred to

elsewhere in this volume (p. 146). Most recently the teenage killers at Columbine were said to be followers of Marilyn Manson, who borrows heavily from the iconography of the horror film in his videos. It is interesting to note how quickly some media organisations and politicians try to blame the horror text whenever certain outrages occur (this is known as a 'moral panic') but how frequently these are found to be red herrings. Michael Ryan, who went on a killing spree in Hungerford in 1987, was accused of being influenced by repeated viewings of the *Rambo* video – although at the inquest it was discovered he did not possess a video player. The list of 'video nasties' was very long at one stage and contained several notorious titles, though interestingly most of them are now available for home consumption.

ACTIVITY ...

Investigate the audience theories that are available elsewhere in this book (p. 145). Bearing in mind the horror texts that you have consumed in your lifetime, what relevance do you think these theories have when discussed in relation to the horror genre? The horror genre will always outrage certain members of the community. In many cases the creators of horror texts set out quite deliberately to offend and to shock. There are entire sub-genres within the horror genre, such as 'splatter flicks' that are designed only for the strong-hearted (and those with strong stomachs too). There is much debate about the attitude of an audience when confronted with a horror text.

- Do we identify with the killer or the victim?
- What do you think of the anti-hero?
- Why do we admire Hannibal Lecter?
- How many people take a horror text seriously and how many can distance themselves from what they are watching or reading?

The problem with all audience theory is that it is almost impossible to prove – nor is there much point in trying to prove it. If all human beings reacted in exactly the same way to any stimulus then life might be more predictable but very boring. The amount of research that is carried out on media effects is considerable. Most research manages to prove the views held by the researcher in the first place. But it is a controversial area that merits discussion and debate.

FURTHER READING

Jancovich, M. (ed.) (2001) *Horror Film Reader*, Routledge.

Miller, T. (ed.) (2002) *Television Studies*, BFI.

Neale, S. (ed.) (2002) *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, BFI.

Newman, K. (ed.) (2002) *Science Fiction/Horror: A Sight and Sound Reader*, BFI.