



AN INTRODUCTION TO THE AMERICAN HORROR FILM

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I. Repression, the Other, the Monster

The most significant development—in film criticism, and in progressive ideas generally—of the past few decades has clearly been the increasing confluence of Marx and Freud, or more precisely of the traditions of thought arising from them: the recognition that social revolution and sexual revolution are inseparably linked and necessary to each other. From Marx we derive our awareness of the dominant ideology—the ideology of bourgeois capitalism—as an insidious all-pervasive force capable of concealment behind the most protean disguises, and the necessity of exposing its operation whenever and wherever possible. It is psychoanalytic theory that has provided (without Freud's awareness of the full revolutionary potential of what he was unleashing) the most effective means of examining the ways in which that ideology is transmitted and perpetuated, centrally through the institutionalization of the patriarchal nuclear family. The battle for liberation, the battle against oppression (whether economic, legal or ideological), gains enormous extra significance through the addition of that term *patriarchal*, since patriarchy long *precedes* and far exceeds what we call capitalism. It is here, through the medium of psychoanalytic theory, that Feminism and Gay Liberation join forces with Marxism in their progress toward a common aim: the overthrow of patriarchal capitalist ideology and the structures and institutions that sustain it and are sustained by it.

Psychoanalytic theory, like Marxism, now provides various models, inflecting basic premises in significantly different ways. It is not certain that the Lacanian model promoted by (among others) *Screen* magazine is the most satisfactory.¹ On the evidence so far it seems certainly not the most potentially *effective*, leading either to paralysis or to a new academicism perhaps more sterile than the old, and driving its students into monastic cells rather than the streets. I want to indicate briefly a possible alternative model, developed out of Freud by Marcuse and given definitive formulation in a recent book by Gad Horowitz, *Repression*:² a model that enables us to connect theory closely with the ways we actually think and feel and conduct our lives—those daily practicalities from which the theorizing of *Screen* seems often so remote. The book's subtitle is *Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory: Freud, Reich, Marcuse*. It is the crucial distinction between basic and surplus repression that is so useful in relation to direct political militancy and so suggestive in relation to the reading of our cultural artifacts (among them our horror films), and through them, our culture itself. Horowitz has devoted a dense, often difficult and closely argued book to the subject; in the space at my disposal I can offer only a bald and simplified account.

Basic repression is universal, necessary, and inescapable. It is what makes possible our development from an uncoordinated animal capable of little beyond screaming and convulsions into a human being; it is bound up with the ability to accept the postponement of gratification, with the development of our thought and memory processes, of our capacity for self-control, of our recognition of and consideration for other people. Surplus repression, on the other hand, is specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture. In terms of our own culture, then, *basic* repression makes us distinctively human, capable of directing our own lives and coexisting with others; *surplus* repression makes us (if it works) into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists ("bourgeois" even if we are born into the proletariat, for we are talking here of ideological norms rather than material status). *If* it works: if it doesn't, the result is either a neurotic or a revolutionary (or both), and if revolutionaries account for a very small proportion of the population, neurotics account for a very large one. Hardly surprising. All known existing societies are to some degree surplus-repressive, but the degree varies enormously, from the trivial to the overwhelming. Freud saw long ago that our own civilization had reached a point where the burden of repression was becoming all-but-insupportable, an insight Horowitz (following Marcuse) brilliantly relates to Marx's theory of alienated labor: the most immediately obvious characteristics of life in our culture are frustration, dissatisfaction, anxiety, greed, possessiveness, jealousy, neuroticism: no more than what psychoanalytic theory shows to be the logical product of patriarchal

capitalism. What needs to be stressed is that the kinds of challenges now being made to the system—and the kinds of perceptions and recognitions that structure those challenges and give them impetus—become possible (become in the literal sense *thinkable*) only in the circumstances of the system's imminent disintegration. While the system retained sufficient conviction, credibility, and show of coherence to suppress them, it did so. The struggle for liberation is not utopian but a practical necessity.

Given that our culture offers an extreme example of surplus repressiveness, one can ask what, exactly, in the interests of alienated labor and the patriarchal family, is repressed. One needs here both to distinguish between the concepts of *repression* and *oppression* and to suggest the continuity between them. In psychoanalytic terms, what is *repressed* is not accessible to the conscious mind (except through analysis or, if one can penetrate their disguises, in dreams). We may also not be conscious of ways in which we are *oppressed*, but it is much easier to become so: we are oppressed by something “out there.” One might perhaps define repression as fully internalized Oppression (while reminding ourselves that all the groundwork of repression is laid in infancy), thereby suggesting both the difference and the connection. A specific example may make this clearer: our social structure demands the *repression* of the bisexuality that psychoanalysis shows to be the natural heritage of every human individual, and the *oppression* of homosexuals: obviously, the two phenomena are not identical, but equally obviously they are closely connected. What escapes repression has to be dealt with by *oppression*.

What, then, is repressed in our culture? First, sexual energy itself, together with its possible successful sublimation into nonsexual creativity—sexuality being the source of creative energy in general. The “ideal” inhabitant of our culture will be the individual whose sexuality is sufficiently fulfilled by the monogamous heterosexual union necessary for the reproduction of future ideal inhabitants, and whose sublimated sexuality (creativity) is sufficiently fulfilled in the totally non-creative and nonfulfilling labor (whether in factory or office) to which our society dooms the overwhelming majority of its members. The “ideal,” in other words, is as close as possible to an automaton in whom both sexual and intellectual energy has been reduced to a minimum. Otherwise, the “ideal” is a contradiction in terms and a logical impossibility, hence the *necessary* frustration, anxiety, and neuroticism of our culture.

Secondly, bisexuality—which should be understood both literally (in terms of possible sexual orientation and practice) and in a more general sense. Bisexuality represents the most obvious and direct affront to the principle of monogamy and its supportive romantic myth of “the one right person”; the homosexual impulse in both men and women represents the most obvious threat to the “norm” of sexuality as reproductive and restricted by the “ideal” of family. But

more generally we confront here the whole edifice of clear-cut sexual differentiation that bourgeois-capitalist ideology erects on the flimsy and dubious foundations of biological difference: the social norms of masculinity and femininity, the social definitions of manliness and womanliness, the whole vast apparatus of oppressive male/female myths, the systematic repression from infancy (“blue for a boy . . .”) of the man’s “femininity” and the woman’s “masculinity,” in the interests of forming human beings for specific predetermined social roles.

Thirdly, the particularly severe repression of female sexuality/creativity; the attribution to the female of passivity, her preparation for her subordinate and dependent role in our culture. Clearly, a crucial aspect of the repression of bisexuality is the denial to women of drives culturally associated with masculinity: activeness, aggression, self-assertion, organizational power, creativity itself.

Fourthly—and fundamentally—the repression of the sexuality of children, taking different forms from infancy, through “latency” and puberty, and into adolescence—the process moving, indeed, from *repression* to *oppression*, from the denial of the infant’s nature as sexual being to the veto on the expression of sexuality before marriage.

None of these forms of repression is necessary for the existence of civilization in some form (i.e., none is “basic”)—for the development of our humanness. Indeed, they impose limitations and restrictions on that development, stunting human potential. All are the outcome of the requirements of the particular, surplus-repressive civilization in which we live.

Closely linked to the concept of repression—indeed, truly inseparable from it—is another concept necessary to an understanding of ideology on which psychoanalysis throws much light, the concept of “the Other”: that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with (as Barthes suggests in *Mythologies*) in one of two ways: either by rejecting and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself. The concept of Otherness can be theorized in many ways and on many levels. Its psychoanalytic significance resides in the fact that it functions not simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also as what is repressed (but never destroyed) in the self and projected outwards in order to be hated and disowned. A particularly vivid example—and one that throws light on a great many classical Westerns—is the relationship of the Puritan settlers to the Indians in the early days of America. The Puritans rejected any perception that the Indians had a culture, a civilization, of their own; they perceived them not merely as savage but, literally, as devils or the spawn of the Devil; and, since the Devil and sexuality are inextricably linked in the Puritan consciousness, they perceived them as sexually promiscuous, creatures of unbridled libido. The connection between this view of the Indian and Puritan repression is obvious: a classic and extreme case of the projection on to the Other of what is

repressed within the Self, in order that it can be discredited, disowned, and if possible annihilated. It is repression, in other words, that makes impossible the healthy alternative: the full recognition and acceptance of the Other's autonomy and right to exist.

Some versions then, of the figure of the Other as it operates within our culture, of its relation to repression and oppression, and of how it is characteristically dealt with:

1. *Quite simply, other people.* It is logical and probable that under capitalism all human relations will be characterized by power, dominance, possessiveness, manipulation: the extension into relationships of the property-principle. Given the subordinate and dependent position of women, this is especially true of the culture's central relationship, the male/female, and explains why marriage as we have it is characteristically a kind of mutual imperialism/colonization, an exchange of different forms of possession and dependence, both economic and emotional. In theory, relations between people of the same sex stand more chance of evading this contamination, but in practice most gay and lesbian relationships tend to rely on heterosexual models. The "otherness," the autonomy, of the partner, her/his right to freedom and independence of being, is perceived as a threat to the possession/dependence principle and denied.
2. *Woman.* In a male-dominated culture, where power, money, law, social institutions are controlled by past, present, and future patriarchs, woman as the Other assumes particular significance. The dominant images of women in our culture are entirely male-created and male-controlled. Woman's autonomy and independence are denied; on to women men project their own innate, repressed femininity in order to disown it as inferior (to be called "unmanly"—i.e., like a woman—is the supreme insult).
3. *The proletariat*—insofar as it still has any autonomous existence, escaping its colonization by bourgeois ideology. It remains, at least, a conveniently available object for projection: the bourgeois obsession with cleanliness, which psychoanalysis shows to be closely associated, as outward symptom, with sexual repression, and bourgeois sexual repression itself, find their inverse reflections in the myths of working-class squalor and sexuality.
5. *Other cultures.* If they are sufficiently remote, no problem: they can be simultaneously deprived of their true character and exoticized (e.g., Polynesian cultures as embodied by Dorothy Lamour). If they are inconveniently close, we already have the example of the American Indian: the procedure is very precisely represented in Ford's *Drums along the Mohawk*, with its double vision of the Indians as "sons of Belial" fit only for extermination, or the Christianized, domesticated, servile, and (hopefully) comic Blueback.
5. *Ethnic groups within the culture.* Again, an easily available projection-object (myths of black sexuality, "animality," etc.). Acceptable in either of two ways:

either they keep to their ghettos and don't trouble us with their "otherness," or they behave as we do and become replicas of the good bourgeois, their otherness reduced to the one unfortunate difference of color. We are more likely to invite a Pakistani to dinner if he dresses in a business suit.

6. *Alternative ideologies or political systems.* The exemplary case is of course Marxism, the strategy that of parody. Still almost totally repressed within our preuniversity education system (despite the key importance of Marx—whatever way you look at it—in the development of twentieth-century thought), Marxism exists generally in our culture only in the form of bourgeois myth that renders it indistinguishable from Stalinism (rather like confusing the teachings of Christ with the Spanish Inquisition).
7. *Deviations from ideological sexual norms*—notably bisexuality and homosexuality. One of the clearest instances of the operation of the repression/projection mechanism: homophobia (the irrational hatred and fear of homosexuals) is only explicable as the outcome of the unsuccessful repression of bisexual tendencies: what is hated in others is what is rejected (but nonetheless continues to exist) within the self.
8. *Children.* When we have worked our way through all the other liberation movements, we may discover that children are the most oppressed section of the population (unfortunately, we cannot expect to liberate our children until we have successfully liberated ourselves). Most clearly of all, the "otherness" of children (see Freudian theories of infantile sexuality) is that which is repressed within ourselves, its expression therefore hated in others: what the previous generation repressed in us, and what we, in turn, repress in our children, seeking to mold them into replicas of ourselves, perpetrators of a discredited tradition.

All this may seem to have taken us rather far from our immediate subject. In fact, I have been laying the foundations, stone by stone, for a theory of the American horror film which (without being exhaustive) should provide us with a means of approaching the films seriously and responsibly. One could, I think, approach any of the genres from the same starting point; it is the horror film that responds in the most clear-cut and direct way, because central to it is the actual dramatization of the dual concept the repressed/the other, in the figure of the Monster. One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses: its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, the "happy ending" (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression. I think my analysis of what is repressed, combined with my account of the Other as it functions within our culture, will be found to offer a comprehensive survey of horror film monsters from German Expressionism on. It is possible to produce "monstrous" embodiments of virtually every item in the list. Let me preface this

by saying that the general sexual content of the horror film has long been recognized, and the list of monsters representing a generalized sexual threat would be interminable; also, the generalized concept of “otherness” offered by the first item on my list cannot be represented by specific films.

Female sexuality. Earlier examples are the panther-woman of *Island of Lost Souls* and the heroine of *Cat People* (the association of women with cats runs right through and beyond the Hollywood cinema, cutting across periods and genres from *Bringing Up Baby* to *Alien*); but the definitive Feminist horror film is clearly De Palma’s *Sisters* (co-scripted by the director and Louisa Rose) among the most complete and rigorous analyses of the oppression of women under patriarchal culture in the whole popular cinema.

The proletariat. I would claim here Whale’s *Frankenstein*, partly on the strength of its pervasive class references, more on the strength of Karloff’s costume: Frankenstein *could* have dressed his creature in top hat, white tie, and tails, but in fact chose laborer’s clothes. Less disputable, in recent years we have *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, with its monstrous family of retired, but still practicing, slaughterhouse workers; the underprivileged devil worshippers of *Race with the Devil*; and the revolutionary army of *Assault on Precinct 13*.

Other cultures. In the 1930s the monster was almost invariably foreign; the rebellious animal-humans of *Island of Lost Souls* (though created by the white man’s science) on one level clearly signify a “savage,” unsuccessfully colonized culture. Recently, one horror film, *The Manitou*, identified the monster with the American Indian (*Prophecy* plays tantalizingly with this possibility—also linking it to urban blacks—before opting for the altogether safer and less interesting explanation of industrial pollution).

Ethnic groups. *The Possession of Joel Delaney* links diabolic possession with Puerto Ricans; blacks (and a leader clad as an Indian) are prominent, again, in *Assault on Precinct 13*’s monstrous army.

Alternative ideologies. The 1950s science fiction cycle of invasion movies is generally regarded as being concerned with the Communist threat.

Homosexuality and bisexuality. Both Murnau’s *Nosferatu* and Whale’s *Frankenstein* can be claimed as implicitly (on certain levels) identifying their monsters with repressed homosexuality. Recent, less arguable, instances are Dr. Frank ‘n’ Furter of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (he, not his creation, is clearly the film’s real monster) and, more impressively, the bisexual god of Larry Cohen’s *Demon*.

Children. Since *Rosemary’s Baby*, children have figured prominently in horror films as the monster or its medium: *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, etc. Cohen’s two *It’s Alive* films again offer perhaps the most interesting and impressive example. There is also the Michael of *Halloween*’s remarkable opening.

This offers us no more than a beginning, from which one might proceed to interpret specific horror films in detail as well as further exploring the genre’s

social significance, the insights it offers into our culture. I shall add here simply that these notions of repression and the Other afford us not merely a means of access but a rudimentary categorization of horror films in social-political terms, distinguishing the progressive from the reactionary, the criterion being the way in which the monster is presented and defined.

II. Return of the Repressed

I want first to offer a series of general propositions about the American horror film, then attempt to define the particular nature of its evolution in the 1960s and 1970s.

1. *Popularity and Disreputability*

The horror film has consistently been one of the most popular and, at the same time, the most disreputable of Hollywood genres. The popularity itself has a peculiar characteristic that sets the horror film apart from other genres: it is restricted to aficionados and complemented by total rejection, people tending to go to horror films either obsessively or not at all. They are dismissed with contempt by the majority of reviewer-critics, or simply ignored. (The situation has changed somewhat since *Psycho*, which conferred on the horror film something of the dignity that *Stagecoach* conferred on the Western, but the disdain still largely continues. I have read no serious or illuminating accounts of, for example, *Raw Meat*, *It's Alive*, or *The Hills Have Eyes*.) The popularity, however, also continues. Most horror films make money; the ones that don't are those with overt intellectual pretensions, obviously "difficult" works like *God Told Me To (Demon)* and *Exorcist II*. Another psychologically interesting aspect of this popularity is that many people who go regularly to horror films profess to ridicule them and go in order to laugh—which is not true, generally speaking, of the Western or the gangster movie.

2. *Dreams and Nightmares*

The analogy frequently invoked between films and dreams is usually concerned with the experience of the audience. The spectator sits in darkness, and the sort of involvement the entertainment film necessitates a certain switching-off of consciousness, a losing of oneself in a fantasy-experience. But the analogy is also useful from the point of view of the filmmakers. Dreams—the embodiment of repressed desires, tensions, fears that our conscious mind rejects—become possible when the "censor" that guards our subconscious relaxes in sleep, though even then the desires can only emerge in disguise, as fantasies that are "innocent" or apparently meaningless.

One of the functions of the concept of "entertainment"—by definition, that which we don't take seriously, or think about much ("It's only entertainment")—

is to act as a kind of partial sleep of consciousness. For the filmmakers as well as for the audience, full awareness stops at the level of plot, action, and character, in which the most dangerous and subversive implications can disguise themselves and escape detection. This is why seemingly innocuous genre movies can be far more radical and fundamentally undermining than works of conscious social criticism, which must always concern themselves with the possibility of reforming aspects of a social system whose basic rightness must not be challenged. The old tendency to dismiss the Hollywood cinema as escapist always defined escape merely negatively as escape *from*, but escape logically must also be escape *to*. Dreams are also escapes, from the unresolved tensions of our lives into fantasies. Yet the fantasies are not meaningless; they can represent attempts to resolve those tensions in more radical ways than our consciousness can countenance.

Popular films, then, respond to interpretation as at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audiences—the fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology. It becomes easy, if this is granted, to offer a simple definition of horror films: they are our collective nightmares. The conditions under which a dream becomes a nightmare are (1) that the repressed wish is, from the point of view of consciousness, so terrible that it must be repudiated as loathsome, and (2) that it is so strong and powerful as to constitute a serious threat. The disreputability noted above—the general agreement that horror films are not to be taken seriously—works clearly *for* the genre viewed from this position. The censor (in both the common *and* the Freudian sense) is lulled into sleep and relaxes vigilance.

3. *The Surrealists*

It is worth noting here that one group of intellectuals *did* take American horror movies very seriously indeed: the writers, painters, and filmmakers of the Surrealist movement. Luis Buñuel numbers *The Beast with Five Fingers* among his favorite films and paid homage to it in *The Exterminating Angel*; and Georges Franju, an heir of the Surrealists, numbers *The Fly* among his. The association is highly significant, given the commitment of the Surrealists to Freud, the unconscious, dreams, and the overthrow of repression.

4. *Basic Formula*

At this stage it is necessary to offer a simple and obvious basic formula for the horror film: normality is threatened by the Monster. I use *normality* here in a strictly nonevaluative sense, to mean simply “conformity to the dominant social norms”; one must firmly resist the common tendency to treat the word as if it were more or less synonymous with “health.”

The very simplicity of this formula has a number of advantages:

- a. It covers the entire range of horror films, being applicable whether the Monster is a vampire, a giant gorilla, an extraterrestrial invader, an amorphous gooey mass, or a child possessed by the Devil, and this makes it possible to connect the most seemingly heterogeneous movies.
- b. It suggests the possibility of extension to other genres: substitute for *Monster* the term *Indians*, for example, and one has a formula for a large number of classical Westerns.
- c. Although so simple, the formula provides three variables: normality, the Monster, and, crucially, the relationship between the two. The definition of normality in horror films is in general boringly constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them. The Monster is, of course, much more protean, changing from period to period as society's basic fears clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments—rather as dreams use material from recent memory to express conflicts or desires that may go back to early childhood.

It is the third variable, the relationship between normality and the Monster, that constitutes the essential subject of the horror film. It, too, changes and develops, the development taking the form of a long process of clarification or revelation. The relationship has one privileged form: the figure of the doppelgänger, alter ego, or double, a figure that has recurred constantly in Western culture, especially during the past hundred years. The *locus classicus* is Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, where normality and Monster are two aspects of the same person. The figure recurs throughout two major sources of the American horror film, German Expressionist cinema (the two Marias of *Metropolis*, the presentation of protagonist and vampire as mirror reflections in *Nosferatu*, the very title of F. W. Murnau's lost Jekyll and Hyde film *Der Januskopf*), and the tales of Poe. Variants can be traced in such oppositions as Ahab/the white whale in *Moby Dick* and Ethan/Scar in *The Searchers*. The Westerns of Anthony Mann are rich in doubles, often contained within families or family patterns; *Man of the West*, a film that relates very suggestively to the horror genre, represents the fullest elaboration.

I shall limit myself for the moment to one example from the horror film, choosing it partly because it is so central, partly because the motif is there less obvious, partially disguised, partly because it points forward to Larry Cohen and *It's Alive*: the relationship of Monster to creator in the Frankenstein films. Their identity is made explicit in *Son of Frankenstein*, the most intelligent of the Universal series, near the start of which the title figure (Basil Rathbone) complains bitterly that everyone believes "Frankenstein" to be the name of the monster. (We discover subsequently that the town has also come to be called Frankenstein, the symbiosis of Monster and creator spreading over the entire environment.) But we should be alerted to the relationship's true significance from the moment

in the James Whale original when Frankenstein's decision to create his monster is juxtaposed very precisely with his decision to become engaged. The doppelgänger motif reveals the Monster as normality's shadow.

5. *Ambivalence*

The principle of ambivalence is most eloquently elaborated in A. P. Rossiter's *Angel with Horns*, among the most brilliant of all books on Shakespeare. Rossiter first expounds it with reference to Richard III. Richard, the "angel with horns," both horrifies us with his evil and delights us with his intellect, his art, his audacity; while our moral sense is appalled by his outrages, another part of us gleefully identifies with him. The application of this to the horror film is clear. Few horror films have totally unsympathetic Monsters (*The Thing* is a significant exception); in many (notably the Frankenstein films) the Monster is clearly the emotional center, and much more human than the cardboard representatives of normality. The Frankenstein monster suffers, weeps, responds to music, longs to relate to people; Henry and Elizabeth merely declaim histrionically. Even in *Son of Frankenstein*—the film in which the restructured monster is explicitly designated evil and superhuman—the monster's emotional commitment to Ygor and grief over his death carries far greater weight than any of the other relationships in the film.

But the principle goes far beyond the Monster's being sympathetic. Ambivalence extends to our attitude to normality. Central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and which our moral conditioning teaches us to revere. The overwhelming commercial success of *The Omen* cannot possibly be explained in terms of a simple, unequivocal *horror* at the Devil's progress.

6. *Freudian Theses*

Finally, one can simply state the two elementary (and closely interconnected) Freudian theses that structure this article: that in a society built on monogamy and family, there will be an enormous surplus of sexual energy that will have to be repressed, and that what is repressed must always strive to return.

Before considering how the horror film has developed in the past decade, I want to test the validity of the above ideas by applying them to a classical horror film. I have chosen Robert Florey's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932)—because it is a highly distinguished example, and generally neglected; because its images suggest Surrealism as much as Expressionism; and because it occupies a particularly interesting place in the genre's evolution, linking two of the most famous, though most disparate, horror films ever made. On the one hand it looks back very clearly to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*: the Expressionist sets and lighting, with Karl

Freund as cinematographer; the fairground that provides the starting point for the action; the figure of the diabolical doctor, who shows off his exhibit and later sends it to kidnap the heroine; the flight over the rooftops. On the other hand it looks forward, equally clearly, to *King Kong*: instead of *Caligari*'s sleepwalker, a gorilla, which falls in love with the heroine, abducts her at night and is shot down from a roof. It is as important to notice the basic motifs that recur obstinately throughout the evolution of the horror film in Western culture as it is to be aware of the detailed particularities of individual films. *Murders in the Rue Morgue* responds well to the application of my formula.

- a. *Normality*. The film is quite obsessive about its heterosexual couples. At the opening, we have two couples responding to the various spectacles of the fairground; there is a scene in the middle where numerous carefree couples disport themselves picturesquely amid nature. Crucial to the film, however, is Pierre's love-speech to Camille on her balcony, with its exaggerated emphasis on purity: she is both a "flower" and a "star"; she is told not to be curious about what goes on in the houses of the city around them ("Better not to know"); she is also prevented from obtaining knowledge of the nature of Pierre's activities in the morgue (a "horrid old place"). Even the usual gay stereotype, Pierre's plump and effeminate friend, fits very well into the pattern. He is provided with a girl friend, to recuperate him into the heterosexual coupling of normality. His relationship with Pierre (they share an apartment, he wears an apron, cooks the dinner, and fusses) is a parody of bourgeois marriage, the incongruity underlining the relationship's repressive sexlessness. And he underlines the attempts at separating "pure" normality from the pervasive contamination of outside forces by complaining that Pierre "beings the morgue into their home."
- b. *The Monster*. *Murders in the Rue Morgue* has a divided Monster, a phenomenon not uncommon in the horror film. (In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* the Monster is both Caligari and Cesar; in *Island of Lost Souls* both Dr. Moreau and his creatures.) Here the division is tripartite: Dr. Mirakle (Bela Lugosi), his servant-assistant, and Erik, "the beast with a human soul." The servant's role is small, but important because of his appearance: half-human, half-animal, he bridges the gap between Mirakle and Erik. Scientist and ape are linked, however, in another way: Mirakle himself lusts after Camille, and Erik (the animal extension of himself) represents the instrument for the satisfaction of that lust. Together, they combine the two great, apparently contradictory, dreads of American culture as expressed in its cinema: intellectuality and eroticism.
- c. *Relationship*. The film's superficial project is to insist that purity-normality can be separated from contaminating eroticism-degradation; its deeper project is to demonstrate the impossibility of such a separation. In the opening sequence, the couples view a series of fairground acts as spectacles (the separation of stage from audience seeming to guarantee safety): an erotic

dance by “Arabian” girls, a Wild Red Indian show, and finally Erik the ape. The association of the three is suggestive of the link between the horror film and the Western—the link of Horror, Indians, and released libido. In each case the separation of show and audience is shown to be precarious: Pierre’s sidekick asks his girl if she “could learn to do that dance” for him; two spectators adopt the name “apache” to apply to the savages of Paris; the audience enters the third booth between the legs of an enormous painted ape, where its phallus would be. Dr. Mirakle’s introduction uses evolutionary theory to deny separation: Erik is “the darkness at the dawn of Man.” His subsequent experiments are carried out to prove that Erik’s blood can be “mixed with the blood of man”—and as the experiments all involve women, the sexual connotations are plain.

Though not obvious, the “double” motif subtly structures the film. It comes nearest to explicitness in the effeminate friend’s remark that Pierre is becoming fanatical, “like that Dr. Mirakle.” But Pierre and Mirakle are paralleled repeatedly, both in the construction of the scenario and through the *mise-en-scène*. At the end of the balcony love scene Florey cuts from the lovers’ kiss to Mirakle and Erik watching from their carriage. Later, the juxtaposition is reversed, the camera panning from Mirakle-Erik lurking in the shadows to Pierre-Camille embracing on the balcony; it is as if the Monster were waiting to be released by the kiss. Mirakle sends Camille a bonnet; she assumes it is from Pierre. After Pierre leaves her at night, there is a knock at her door. She assumes it is Pierre come back and opens; it is Mirakle. Bearing in mind that Mirakle and Erik are not really distinct from one another, one must see Pierre and this composite Monster paralleled throughout as rival mates for Camille, like Jonathan and Nosferatu, or like David Ladd and the underworld man of *Raw Meat*. (The motif’s recurrence across different periods and different continents testifies to its importance.) At the climax, Pierre and Erik confront each other like mirror images on the rooftop, and Erik is shot down by Pierre: the hero’s drive is to destroy the *doppelgänger* who embodies his repressed self.

Murders in the Rue Morgue is fascinating for its unresolved self-contradiction. In the fairground, Mirakle is denounced as a heretic, in the name of the biblical/Christian tradition of God’s creation of man; the whole notion of purity/normality clearly associates with this—explicitly, in the very prominent, carefully lit crucifix above Camille’s bed. Yet Mirakle’s Darwinian theories are also obviously meant to be correct. Erik and humanity are *not* separable; the ape exists in all of us; the “morgue” cannot be excluded from the “home.”

The horror film since the 1960s has been dominated by five recurrent motifs. The list of examples offered in each case begins with what I take to be the decisive

source-film of each trend—not necessarily the first, but the film that, because of its distinction or popularity, can be thought of as responsible for the ensuing cycle. I have included a few British films that seem to me American-derived (*Raw Meat*, arguably the finest British horror film, was directed by an American, Gary Sherman); they lie outside the main British tradition represented by Hammer Productions, a tradition very intelligently treated in David Pirie’s book *A Heritage of Horror*. The lists are not, of course, meant to be exhaustive.

- a. The Monster as human psychotic or schizophrenic: *Psycho*, *Homicidal*, *Repulsion*, *Sisters*, *Schizo*.
- b. The revenge of Nature: *The Birds*, *Frogs*, *Night of the Lepus*, *Day of the Animals*, *Squirm*.
- c. Satanism, diabolic possession, the Antichrist: *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *The Possession of Joel Delaney*, *The Car*, *God Told Me To (Demon)*, and *Race with the Devil*, which, along with *High Plains Drifter*, interestingly connects this motif with the Western.
- d. The Terrible Child (often closely connected to the above). To the first three films in (c) add: *Night of the Living Dead*, *Hands of the Ripper*, *It’s Alive*, *Cathy’s Curse*; also, although here the “children” are older, *Carrie* and *The Fury*.
- e. Cannibalism: *Night of the Living Dead*, *Raw Meat*, *Frightmare*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes*.

These apparently heterogeneous motifs are drawn deeper together by a single unifying master-figure: the Family. The connection is most tenuous and intermittent in what has proved, on the whole, the least interesting and productive of these concurrent cycles, the “revenge of Nature” films; but even there, in the more distinguished examples (outstandingly, of course, *The Birds*, but also in *Squirm*), the attacks are linked to, or seem triggered by, familial or sexual tensions. Elsewhere, the connection of the Family to Horror has become overwhelmingly consistent: the psychotic/schizophrenic, the Antichrist and the child-monster are all shown as products of the family, whether the family itself is regarded as guilty (the “psychotic” films) or innocent (*The Omen*).

The “cannibalism” motif functions in two ways. Occasionally members of a family devour each other (*Night of the Living Dead*, and *Psycho*’s Mrs. Bates is a metaphorical cannibal who swallows up her son). More frequently, cannibalism is the family’s means of sustaining or nourishing itself (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes*). Pete Walker’s revoltingly gruesome and ugly British horror film *Frightmare* deserves a note here, its central figure being a sweet and gentle old mother who has the one unfortunate flaw that she can’t survive without eating human flesh, a craving guiltily indulged by her devoted husband.

If we see the evolution of the horror film in terms of an inexorable “return of the repressed,” we will not be surprised by this final emergence of the genre’s real

significance—together with a sense that it is currently the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism—in a period of extreme cultural crisis and disintegration, which alone offers the possibility of radical change and rebuilding. To do justice to the lengthy process of that emergence would involve a dual investigation too complex for the framework of this chapter: into the evolution of the horror film, and into the changing treatment of the family in the Hollywood cinema. I shall content myself here with a few further propositions.

1. The family (or marital) comedy in which the 1930s and 1940s are so rich, turns sour (*Father of the Bride*, *The Long Long Trailer*) in the 1950s and peters out; the family horror film starts (not, of course, without precedents) with *Psycho* in 1960, and gains impetus with *Rosemary's Baby* and *Night of the Living Dead* toward the end of the decade.
2. As the horror film enters into its apocalyptic phase, so does the Western. *The Wild Bunch* appeared in 1969, the year after *Rosemary's Baby*. And *High Plains Drifter* (1973) fused their basic elements in a Western in which the Hero from the Wilderness turns out to be the Devil (or his emissary) and burns the town (American civilization) to the ground after revealing it as fundamentally corrupt and renaming it Hell.
3. The family comedies that seemed so innocent and celebratory in the 1930s and 1940s appear much less so in retrospect from the 1970s. In my book *Personal Views* I pointed to the remarkable anticipation in *Meet Me in St. Louis* of the Terrible Child of the 1970s horror film, especially in the two scenes (*Halloween*, and the destruction of the snow people) in which Margaret O'Brien symbolically kills parent figures. What is symbolic in 1944 becomes literal in *Night of the Living Dead*, where a little girl kills and devours her parents—just as the implications of another anticipatory family film of the early 1940s, *Shadow of a Doubt*, becomes literally enacted in *It's Alive* (the monster as product of the family).
4. The process whereby horror becomes associated with its true milieu, the family, is reflected in its steady *geographical* progress toward America.

a. In the 1930s, horror is always foreign. The films are set in Paris (*Murders in the Rue Morgue*), Middle Europe (*Frankenstein*, *Dracula*), or on uncharted islands (*Island of Lost Souls*, *King Kong*); it is always external to Americans, who may be attacked by it physically but remain (superficially, that is) uncontaminated by it morally. The designation of horror as foreign stands even when the “normal” characters are Europeans. In *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, for example, the young couples, though nominally French, are to all intents and purposes nice clean-living Americans (with American accents); the foreignness of the horror characters is strongly underlined, both by Lugosi's accent and by the fact that nobody knows where he comes from. The foreignness of horror in the Thirties

can be interpreted in two ways: simply, as a means of disavowal (horror exists, but is un-American), and, more interestingly and unconsciously, as a means of locating horror as a “country of the mind,” as a psychological state: the films set on uncharted (and usually nameless) islands lend themselves particularly to interpretation of this kind.

b. The Val Lewton films of the 1940s are in some ways outside the mainstream development of the horror film. They seem to have had little direct influence on its evolution (certain occasional haunted-house movies like *The Uninvited* and *The Haunting* may owe something to them), though they strikingly anticipate, by at least two decades, some of the features of the modern horror film. *Cat People* is centered on the repression of female sexuality, in a period where the Monster is almost invariably male and phallic. (Other rare exceptions are the panther-woman of *Island of Lost Souls* and, presumably, *Dracula's Daughter*, which I have not seen.) *The Seventh Victim* has strong undertones of sibling envy and sexual jealousy (the structure and editing of the last scene suggesting that Jacqueline's suicide is willed by her “nice” husband and sister rather than by the “evil” devil worshippers), as well as containing striking anticipations of *Psycho* and *Rosemary's Baby*; it is also set firmly in America, with no attempt to disown evil as foreign.

Above all, *I Walked with a Zombie* explicitly locates horror at the heart of the family, identifying it with sexual repressiveness in the cause of preserving family unity. *The Seventh Victim* apart, horror is still associated with foreignness; Irena in *Cat People* is from Serbia, *Zombie* is set in the West Indies, *The Leopard Man* in Mexico, etc. Yet the best of the series are concerned with the undermining of such distinctions—with the idea that no one escapes contamination. Accordingly, the concept of the Monster becomes diffused through the film (closely linked to the celebrated Lewton emphasis on atmosphere, rather than overt shock), no longer identified with a single figure.

Zombie, one of the finest of all American horror films, carries this furthest. It is built on an elaborate set of apparently clear-cut structural oppositions—Canada–West Indies, white–black, light–darkness, life–death, science–black magic, Christianity–Voodoo, conscious–unconscious, etc.—and it proceeds systematically to blur all of them. Jessica is both living and dead; Mrs. Rand mixes medicine, Christianity, and voodoo; the figurehead is both St. Sebastian and a black slave; the black-white opposition is poetically undercut in a complex patterning of dresses and voodoo patches; the motivation of *all* the characters is called into question; the messenger-zombie Carrefour can't be kept out of the white domain.

c. The 1950s science fiction cycles project horror onto either extraterrestrial invaders or mutations from the insect world, but they are usually set in America; even when they are not (*The Thing*), the human characters are American. The films, apparently simple, prove on inspection often very difficult to “read.” The

basic narrative patterns of the horror film repeat themselves obstinately and continue to carry their traditional meanings, but they are encrusted with layers of more transient, topical material. *Them!* for example, seems to offer three layers of meaning. Explicitly, it sets out to cope with the fear of nuclear energy and atomic experiment: the giant ants are mutants produced by the radioactive aftermath of a bomb explosion; they are eventually destroyed under the guidance of a humane and benevolent science embodied in the comfortingly paternal figure of Edmund Gwenn. The fear of Communist infiltration also seems present, in the emphasis on the ants as a subversive subterranean army and on their elaborate communications system. Yet the film continues to respond convincingly to the application of my basic formula and its Freudian implications. The ants rise up from underground (the unconscious); they kill by holding their victims and injecting into them huge (excessive) quantities of formic acid (the release of repressed phallic energy); and both the opening and final climax of the film are centered on the destruction (respectively actual and potential) of family groups.

Since *Psycho*, the Hollywood cinema has implicitly recognized Horror as both American and familial. I want to conclude this section by briefly examining two key works that offer particularly illuminating and suggestive contrasts and comparisons: *The Omen* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

One can partly define the nature of each by means of a chart of oppositions:

<i>The Omen</i>	<i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i>
big budget	low budget
glossy production values	raw, unpolished
stars	unknown actors
bourgeois entertainment	nonbourgeois “exploitation”
Good Taste	Bad Taste
“good” family	“bad” family
the Monster	the Monster
imported from Europe	indigenously American
child destroys parents	parent figures destroy “children”
traditional values reaffirmed	traditional values negated

I don’t wish to make any claims for *The Omen* as a work of art: the most one could say is that it achieves a sufficient level of impersonal professional efficiency to ensure that the “kicks” inherent in its scenario are not dulled. (I would add here that my description above of *Massacre* as “raw, unpolished” refers to the overall effect of the film, as it seems to be generally experienced.) Its mise-en-scène is,

without question, everywhere more intelligent, more inventive, more cinematically educated and sophisticated, than that of *The Omen*. Hooper's cinematic intelligence, indeed, becomes more apparent on every viewing, as one gets over the initial traumatizing impact and learns to respect the pervasive felicities of camera placement and movement.

In obvious ways *The Omen* is old-fashioned, traditional, reactionary: the "goodness" of the family unit isn't questioned, "horror" is disowned by having the devil-child a product of the Old World, unwittingly *adopted* into the American family, the devil-child and his independent-female guardian (loosely interpretable in "mythic" terms as representing child liberation and women's liberation) are regarded as purely evil (oh for a cinematic Blake to reverse all the terms).

Yet the film remains of great interest. It is about the end of the world, but the "world" the film envisages ending is very particularly defined within it: the bourgeois-capitalist patriarchal Establishment. Here "normality" is not merely threatened by the monster, but totally annihilated: the state, the church, the family. The principle of ambivalence must once again be invoked: with a film so shrewdly calculated for box-office response, it is legitimate to ask what general satisfaction it offers its audience.

Superficially, the satisfaction of finding traditional values reaffirmed (even if "our" world is ending, it was still the good, right, true one); more deeply, and far more powerfully, under cover of this, the satisfaction of the ruthless logic with which the premise is carried through—the supreme satisfaction (masquerading as the final horror) being the revelation, as the camera cranes down in the last shot, that the Devil has been adopted by the president and first lady of the United States. The translation of the film into Blakean terms is not in fact that difficult: the devil-child is its implicit hero, whose systematic destruction of the bourgeois Establishment the audience follows with a secret relish. *The Omen* would make no sense in a society that was not prepared to enjoy and surreptitiously condone the working out of its own destruction.

As Andrew Britton pointed out to me, *The Omen* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (together with numerous other horror films) have one premise disturbingly in common: the annihilation is inevitable, humanity is now completely powerless, there is nothing anyone can do to arrest the process. (Ideology, that is, can encompass despair, but not the imagining of constructive radical alternatives.) *The Omen* invokes ancient prophecy and shows it inexorably fulfilling itself despite all efforts at intervention; we infer near the opening of *Massacre* that the Age of Aquarius whose advent was so recently celebrated in *Hair* has already passed, giving way to the Age of Saturn and universal malevolence. Uncontrol is emphasized throughout the film: not only have the five young victims no control over their destiny, their slaughterers (variously psychotic and degenerate) keep losing control of themselves and each other.

This is partly (in conjunction with the film's relentless and unrelenting intensity) what gives *Massacre* to such a degree (beyond any other film in my experience) the authentic quality of nightmare. I have had since childhood a recurring nightmare whose pattern seems to be shared by a very large number of people within our culture: I am running away from some vaguely terrible oppressors who are going to do dreadful things to me; I run to a house or a car, etc., for help; I discover its occupants to be precisely the people I am fleeing. This pattern is repeated twice in *Massacre*, where Sally "escapes" from Leatherface first to his own home, then to the service station run by his father.

The application of my formula to *Massacre* produces interesting results: the pattern is still there, as is the significant relationship between the terms, but the definitions of *normality* and *monster* have become partly reversed. Here "normality" is clearly represented by the quasi-liberated, permissive young (though still forming two couples and a brother/sister family unit, hence reproducing the patterns of the past); the monster is the family, one of the great composite monsters of the American cinema, incorporating four characters and three generations, and imagined with an intensity and audacity that far transcend the connotations of the term "exploitation movie." It has a number of important aspects:

1. The image of the "Terrible House" stems from a long tradition in American (and Western capitalist) culture.³ Traditionally, it represents an extension or "objectification" of the personalities of the inhabitants. *Massacre* offers two complementary "terrible houses": the once imposing, now totally decayed house of Franklyn's and Sally's parents (where we keep *expecting* something appalling to happen), and the more modest, outwardly spruce, inwardly macabre villa of the monstrous family wherein every item of decor is an expression of the characters' degeneracy. The borderline between home and slaughterhouse (between work and leisure) has disappeared—the slaughterhouse has invaded the home, humanity has begun literally to "prey upon itself, like monsters of the deep." Finally, what the "terrible house" (whether in Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher," in *Psycho*, in *Mandingo*, or here) signifies is the dead weight of the past crushing the life of the younger generation, the future—an idea beautifully realized in the shot that starts on the ominous gray, decayed Franklyn house and tilts down to show Kirk and Pam, dwarfed in long-shot, playing and laughing as they run to the swimming-hole, and to their doom.
2. The contrast between the two houses underlines the distinction the film makes between the affluent young and the psychotic family, representatives of an exploited and degraded proletariat. Sally's father used to send his cattle to the slaughterhouse of which the family are products.
3. The all-male family (the grandmother exists only as a decomposing corpse) also derives from a long American tradition, with notable antecedents in Ford's Westerns (the Clantons of *My Darling Clementine*, the Cleggses of

Wagonmaster) and in *Man of the West*. The absence of Woman (conceived of as a civilizing, humanizing influence) deprives the family of its social sense and social meaning while leaving its strength of primitive loyalties largely untouched. In *Massacre*, Woman becomes the ultimate object of the characters' animus (and, I think, the film's, since the sadistic torments visited on Sally go far beyond what is necessary to the narrative).

4. The release of sexuality in the horror film is always presented as perverted, monstrous, and excessive (whether it takes the form of vampires, giant ants, or Mrs. Bates), both the perversion and the excess being the logical outcome of repression. Nowhere is this carried further than in *Massacre*. Here sexuality is totally perverted from its functions, into sadism, violence, and cannibalism. It is striking that there is no suggestion anywhere that Sally is the object of an overtly sexual threat: she is to be tormented, killed, dismembered, eaten, but not raped. Ultimately, the most terrifying thing about the film is its total negativity; the repressed energies—represented most unforgettably by Leatherface and his continuously whirring phallic chainsaw—are presented as irredeemably debased and distorted. It is no accident that the four most intense horror films of the Seventies at “exploitation” level (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Raw Meat*, and *The Hills Have Eyes* are the other three) are all centered on cannibalism, and on the specific notion of present and future (the younger generation) being devoured by the past. Cannibalism represents the ultimate in possessiveness, hence the logical end of human relations under capitalism. The implication is that “liberation” and “permissiveness,” as defined within our culture, are at once inadequate and too late—too feeble, too unaware, too undirected to withstand the legacy of long repression.
5. This connects closely with the recurrence of the “double” motif in *Massacre*. The young people are, on the whole, uncharacterized and undifferentiated (the film's energies are mainly with its monsters—as usual in the horror film, the characteristic here surviving the reversal of definitions), but in their midst is Franklyn, who is as grotesque, and almost as psychotic, as his nemesis Leatherface. (The film's refusal to sentimentalize the fact that he is crippled may remind one of the blind beggars of Bunuel.) Franklyn associates himself with the slaughterers by imitating the actions of Leatherface's brother the hitchhiker: wondering whether he, too, could slice open his own hand, and toying with the idea of actually doing so. (Kirk remarks, “You're as crazy as he is.”) Insofar as the other young people are characterized, it is in terms of a pervasive petty malice. Just before Kirk enters the house to meet his death, he teases Pam by dropping into her hand a human tooth he has found on the doorstep; later, Jerry torments Franklyn to the verge of hysteria by playing on his fears that the hitchhiker will pursue and kill him. Franklyn resents being neglected by the others, Sally resents being burdened with him on her vacation. The monstrous cruelties of the slaughterhouse family have their more pallid reflection within

“normality.” (The reflection pattern here is more fully worked out in *The Hills Have Eyes*, with its stranded “normal” family besieged by its dark mirror-image, the terrible shadow-family from the hills, who want to kill the men, rape the women, and eat the baby.)

6. Despite the family’s monstrousness, a degree of ambivalence is still present in the response they evoke. Partly, this is rooted in our sense of them as a *family*. They are held together—and torn apart—by bonds and tensions with which we are all familiar—with which, indeed, we are likely to have grown up. We cannot cleanly dissociate ourselves from them. Then there is the sense that *they* are victims, too—of the slaughterhouse environment, of capitalism—*our* victims, in fact. Finally, they manifest a degraded but impressive creativity. The news reporter at the start describes the tableau of decomposing corpses in the graveyard (presumably the work of the hitchhiker, and perhaps a homage to his grandparents: a female corpse is posed in the lap of a male corpse in a hideous parody of domesticity) as “a grisly work of art.” The phrase, apt for the film itself, also describes the artworks among which the family live, some of which achieve a kind of hideous aesthetic beauty: the light-bulb held up by a human hand, the sofa constructed out of human and animal bones, surmounted by ornamental skulls, the hanging lamp over the dining table that appears to be a shrunken human head. The film’s monsters do not lack that characteristically human quality, an aesthetic sense, however perverted its form; also, they waste nothing, a lesson we are all taught as children.
7. Central to the film—and centered on its monstrous family—is the sense of grotesque comedy, which in no way diminishes (rather intensifies) its nightmare horror: Leatherface chasing Sally with the chainsaw, unable to stop and turn, skidding, wheeling, like an animated character in a cartoon; the father’s response to Leatherface’s devastations, which by that time include four murders and the prolonged terrorization of the heroine (“Look what your brother did to that door”); Leatherface dressed up in jacket and tie and fresh black wig for formal dinner with Grandpa; the macabre farce of Grandpa’s repeated failures to kill Sally with the hammer. The film’s sense of fundamental horror is closely allied to a sense of the fundamentally absurd. The family, after all, only carry to its logical conclusion the basic (though unstated) tenet of capitalism, that people have the right to live off other people. In twentieth century art, the sense of the absurd is always closely linked to total despair (Beckett, Ionesco . . .). The fusion of nightmare and absurdity is carried even further in *Death Trap*, a film that confirms that the creative impulse in Hooper’s work is centered in his monsters (here, the grotesque and pathetic Neville Brand) and is essentially nihilistic.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, unlike *The Omen*, achieves the force of authentic art, profoundly disturbing, intensely personal, yet at the same time far more than personal, as the general response it has evoked demonstrates. As a “collective

nightmare,” it brings to a focus a spirit of negativity, an undifferentiated lust for destruction, that seems to lie not far below the surface of the modern collective consciousness. Watching it recently with a large, half-stoned youth audience who cheered and applauded every one of Leatherface’s outrages against their representatives on the screen was a terrifying experience. It must not be seen as an isolated phenomenon: it expresses, with unique force and intensity, at least one important aspect of what the horror film has come to signify: the sense of a civilization condemning itself, through its popular culture, to ultimate disintegration, and ambivalently (with the simultaneous horror/wish-fulfillment of nightmare) celebrating the fact. We must not, of course, see that as the last word.

III. The Reactionary Wing

I suggested earlier that the theory of repression offers us a means toward a political categorization of horror movies. Such a categorization, however, can never be rigid or clear-cut. While I have stressed the genre’s progressive or radical elements, its potential for the subversion of bourgeois patriarchal norms, it is obvious enough that this potential is never free from ambiguity. The genre carries within itself the capability of reactionary inflection, and perhaps no horror film is entirely immune from its operations. It need not surprise us that there is a powerful reactionary tradition to be acknowledged—so powerful it may at times appear the dominant one. Its characteristics are, in extreme cases, very strongly marked.

Before noting them, however, it is important to make one major distinction between the reactionary horror film and the “apocalyptic” horror film. The latter expresses, obviously, despair and negativity, yet its very negation can be claimed as progressive: the “apocalypse,” even when presented in metaphysical terms (the end of the world), is generally reinterpretable in social/political ones (the end of the highly specific world of patriarchal capitalism). The majority of the most distinguished American horror films (especially in the 1970s) are concerned with this particular apocalypse; they are progressive insofar as their negativity is not recuperable into the dominant ideology, but constitutes (on the contrary) the recognition of that ideology’s disintegration, its untenability, as all it has repressed explodes and blows it apart. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Sisters*, *Demon* are all apocalyptic in this sense; so are Romero’s two *Living Dead* movies. (Having said that, it must be added that important distinctions remain to be made between these works.)

Some of the characteristics, then, that have contributed to the genre’s reactionary wing:

1. The designation of the monster as *simply* evil. Insofar as horror films are typical manifestations of our culture, the *dominant* designation of the monster must necessarily be “evil”: what is repressed (in the individual,

in the culture) must always return as a threat, perceived by the consciousness as ugly, terrible, obscene. Horror films, it might be said, are progressive precisely to the degree that they refuse to be satisfied with this simple designation—to the degree that, whether explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously, they modify, question, challenge, seek to invert it. All monsters are by definition destructive, but their destructiveness is capable of being variously explained, excused, and justified. To identify what is repressed with “evil incarnate” (a metaphysical, rather than a social, definition) is automatically to suggest that there is nothing to be done but strive to *keep* it repressed. Films in which the “monster” is identified as the Devil clearly occupy a privileged place in this group; though even the Devil can be presented with varying degrees of (deliberate or inadvertent) sympathy and fascination—*The Omen* should not simply be bracketed with *The Sentinel* for consignment to merited oblivion.

2. The presence of Christianity (insofar as it is given weight or presented as a positive force) is in general a portent of reaction. (This is a comment less on Christianity itself than on what it signifies within the Hollywood cinema and the dominant ideology.) *The Exorcist* is an instructive instance—its validity is in direct proportion to its failure convincingly to impose its theology.
3. The presentation of the monster as totally nonhuman. The “progressiveness” of the horror film depends partly on the monster’s capacity to arouse sympathy; one can feel little for a mass of viscous black slime. The political (McCarthyite) level of 1950s science fiction films—the myth of Communism as total dehumanization—accounts for the prevalence of this kind of monster in that period.
4. The confusion (in terms of what the film wishes to regard as “monstrous”) of *repressed* sexuality with sexuality itself. The distinction is not always clear-cut; perhaps it never can be, in a culture whose attitudes to sexuality remain largely negative and where a fear of sex is implanted from infancy. One can, however, isolate a few extreme examples where the sense of horror is motivated by sexual disgust.

A very common generic pattern plays on the ambiguity of the monster as the “return of the repressed” and the monster as punishment for sexual promiscuity (or, in the more extreme puritanical cases, for *any* sexual expression whatever: two teenagers kiss; enter, immediately, the Blob). Both the *Jaws* films (their sources in both 1950s McCarthyite science fiction and all those beach party/monster movies that disappeared with the B feature) are obvious recent examples, Spielberg’s film being somewhat more complex, less blatant, than Szwarc’s, though the difference is chiefly one of ideological sophistication.

I want to examine briefly here some examples of the “reactionary” horror film in the 1970s, of widely differing distinction but considerable interest in clarifying these tendencies.

David Cronenberg's *Shivers* (formerly *The Parasite Murders*) is, indeed, of very special interest here, as it is a film single-mindedly about sexual liberation, a prospect it views with unmitigated horror. The entire film is premised on and motivated by sexual disgust. The release of sexuality is linked inseparably with the spreading of venereal disease, the scientist responsible for the experiments having seen fit (for reasons never made clear) to include a VD component in his aphrodisiac parasite. The parasites themselves are modeled very obviously on phalluses, but with strong excremental overtones (their color) and continual associations with blood; the point is underlined when one enters the Barbara Steele character through her vagina. If the film presents sexuality in general as the object of loathing, it has a very special animus reserved for female sexuality (a theme repeated, if scarcely developed, in Cronenberg's subsequent *Rabid*). The parasites are spread initially by a young girl (the original subject of the scientist's experiments), the film's Pandora whose released eroticism precipitates general cataclysm; throughout, sexually aroused preying women are presented with a particular intensity of horror and disgust. *Shivers* systematically chronicles the breaking of every sexual-social taboo—promiscuity, lesbianism, homosexuality, age difference, finally incest—but each step is presented as merely one more addition to the accumulation of horrors. At the same time, the film shows absolutely no feeling for traditional relationships (or for human beings, for that matter): with its unremitting ugliness and crudity, it is very rare in its achievement of *total* negation.

The Brood, again, is thematically central to the concept of the horror film proposed here (its subject being the transmission of neurosis through the family structure) and the precise antithesis of the genre's progressive potential. It carries over all the major structural components of its two predecessors (as an *auteur*, Cronenberg is nothing if not consistent): the figure of the Scientist (here psychotherapist) who, attempting to promote social progress, precipitates disaster; the expression of unqualified horror at the idea of releasing what has been repressed; the projection of horror and evil on to women and their sexuality, the ultimate dread being of women usurping the active, aggressive role that patriarchal ideology assigns to the male. The film is remarkable for its literal enactment, at its climax, of the Freudian perception that, under patriarchy, the child becomes the woman's penis-substitute—Samantha Eggar's latest offspring representing, unmistakably, a monstrous phallus. The film is laboriously explicit about its meaning: the terrible children are the physical embodiments of the woman's rage. But that rage is never seen as the logical product of woman's situation within patriarchal culture; it is blamed entirely on the woman's mother (the father being culpable only in his weakness and ineffectuality). The film is useful for offering an extremely instructive comparison with *Sisters* on the one hand and *It's Alive* on the other.

In turning from Cronenberg's films to *Halloween*, I do not want to suggest that I am bracketing them together. John Carpenter's films reveal in many ways an engaging artistic personality: they communicate, at the very least, a delight in skill and craftsmanship, a pleasure in play with the medium, that is one of the essential expressions of true creativity. Yet the film-buff innocence that accounts for much of the charm of *Dark Star* can go on to combine (in *Assault on Precinct 13*) *Rio Bravo* and *Night of the Living Dead* without any apparent awareness of the ideological consequences of converting Hawks' fascists (or Romero's ghouls, for that matter) into an army of revolutionaries. The film buff is very much to the fore again in *Halloween*, covering the film's confusions, its lack of real *thinking*, with a formal/stylistic inventiveness that is initially irresistible. If nothing in the film is new, everything testifies to Carpenter's powers of assimilation (as opposed to mere imitation): as a resourceful amalgam of *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Exorcist*, and *Black Christmas*, *Halloween* is cunning in the extreme.

The confusions, however, are present at its very foundation, in the conception of the monster. The opening is quite stunning both in its virtuosity and its resonances. The long killer's-point-of-view tracking-shot with which the film begins, establishes the basis for the first murder as sexual repression: the girl is killed because she arouses in the voyeur-murderer feelings he has simultaneously to deny and enact in the form of violent assault. The second shot reveals the murderer as the victim's bewildered six-year-old brother. Crammed into those first two shots (in which *Psycho* unites with the Hallowe'en sequence of *Meet Me in St. Louis*) are the implications for the definitive family horror film: the child-monster, product of the nuclear family and the small-town environment; the sexual repression of children; the incest taboo that denies sexual feeling precisely where the proximities of family life most encourage it. Not only are those implications not realized in the succeeding film, their trace is obscured and all but obliterated. The film identifies the killer with "the Bogeyman," as the embodiment of an eternal and unchanging evil which, by definition, can't be understood; and with the Devil ("those eyes . . . the Devil's eyes"), by none other than his own psychoanalyst (Donald Pleasence)—surely the most extreme instance of Hollywood's perversion of psychoanalysis into an instrument of repression.

The film proceeds to lay itself wide open to the reading Jonathan Rosenbaum offered in *Take One*: the killer's victims are all sexually promiscuous, the one survivor a virgin; the monster becomes (in the tradition of all those beach party monster movies of the late 1950s to early 1960s) simply the instrument of Puritan vengeance and repression rather than the embodiment of what Puritanism repressed.

Halloween is more interesting than that—if only because more confused. The basic premise of the action is that Laurie is the killer's real quarry throughout (the other girls merely distractions en route), because she is for him the reincarnation

of the sister he murdered as a child (he first sees her in relation to a little boy who resembles him as he was then, and becomes fixated on her from that moment). This compulsion to reenact the childhood crime keeps Michael tied at least to the *possibility* of psychoanalytical explanation, thereby suggesting that Donald Pleasence may be wrong. If we accept that, then one tantalizing unresolved detail becomes crucial: the question of how Michael learned to drive a car. There are only two possible explanations: either he *is* the Devil, possessed of supernatural powers; or he has *not* spent the last nine years (as Pleasence would have us believe) sitting staring blackly at a wall meditating further horrors. (It is to Carpenter's credit that the issue is raised in the dialogue, not glossed over as an unfortunate plot necessity we aren't supposed to notice; but he appears to use it merely as another tease, a bit of meaningless mystification.) The possibility this opens up is that of reading the whole film against the Pleasence character: Michael's "evil" is what his analyst has been projecting on to him for the past nine years. Unfortunately, this remains merely a possibility in the material that Carpenter chose not to take up: it does not constitute a legitimate (let alone a coherent) reading of the actual film. Carpenter's interviews suggest that he strongly resists examining the connotative level of his own work; it remains to be seen how long this very talented filmmaker can preserve this false innocence.

At first glance, *Alien* seems little more than *Halloween*-in-outer-space: more expensive, less personal, but made with similar professional skill and flair for manipulating its audiences. Yet it has several distinctive features that give it a limited interest in its own right: it clearly wants to be taken, on a fairly simple level, as a "progressive" movie, notably in its depiction of women. What it offers on this level amounts in fact to no more than a "pop" feminism that reduces the whole involved question of sexual difference and thousands of years of patriarchal oppression to the bright suggestion that a woman can do anything a man can do (almost). This masks (not very effectively) its fundamentally reactionary nature.

Besides its resemblance to *Halloween* in general narrative pattern and suspense strategies (Where is the monster hiding? Who will be killed next? When? How? etc.), *Alien* has more precise parallels with *The Thing*. There is the enclosed space, cut off from outside help; the definition of the monster as both non- and superhuman; the fact that it feeds on human beings; its apparent indestructibility. Most clearly of all, the relationship of Ash, the robot science officer, to the alien is very close to that of Professor Carrington to the Thing; in both films, science regards the alien as a superior form of life to which human life must therefore be subordinate; in both films, science is initially responsible for bringing the monster into the community and thereby endangering the latter's existence.

What strikingly distinguishes *Alien* from both *Halloween* and *The Thing* (and virtually every other horror movie) is the apparently total absence of sexuality. Although there are two women among the space-ship's crew of seven, there is no

“love interest,” not even any sexual banter—in fact, with the characters restricted exclusively to the use of surnames, no recognition anywhere of sexual difference (unless we see Parker’s ironic resentment of Ripley’s domineeringness as motivated partly by the fact that she is a woman; but he reacts like that to all displays of authority in the film, and his actual phrase for her is “son of a bitch”). Only at the end of the film, after all the men have been killed, is female sexuality allowed to become a presence (as Ripley undresses, not knowing that the alien is still alive and in the compartment). The film constructs a new “normality” in which sexual differentiation ceases to have effective existence—on condition that sexuality be obliterated altogether.

The term *son of a bitch* is applied (by Ripley herself) to one other character in the film: the alien. The cinematic confrontation of its two “sons of bitches” is the film’s logical culmination. Its resolution of ideological contradictions is clear in the presentation of Ripley herself: she is a “safe threat,” set against the real threat of the alien. On the one hand, she is the film’s myth of the “emancipated woman”: “masculine,” aggressive, self-assertive, she takes over the ship after the deaths of Kane and Dallas, rebelling against and dethroning both “Mother” (the computer) and father (Ash, the robot). On the other hand, the film is careful to supply her with “feminine,” quasi-maternal characteristics (her care for Jones, the cat) and gives her, vis-à-vis the alien, the most reactionary position of the entire crew (it is she who is opposed to letting it on board, even to save Kane’s life). She is, of course, in the film’s terms, quite right; but that merely confirms the ideologically reactionary nature of the film, in its attitude to the Other.

If male and female are superficially and trendily united in Ripley, they are completely fused in the alien (whose most striking characteristic is its ability to transform itself). The sexuality so rigorously repressed in the film returns grotesquely and terrifyingly in its monster (the more extreme the repression, the more excessive the monster). At first associated with femaleness (it begins as an egg in a vast womb), it attaches itself to the most “feminine” of the crew’s males (John Hurt, most famous for his portrayal of Quentin Crisp) and enters him through the mouth as a preliminary to being “born” out of his stomach. The alien’s phallic identity is strongly marked (the long reptilian neck); but so is its large, expandable mouth, armed with tiers of sharp metallic teeth. As a composite image of archetypal sexual dreads it could scarcely be bettered: the monstrous phallus combined with *vagina dentata*. Throughout the film, the alien and the cat are repeatedly paralleled or juxtaposed, an association that may remind us of the panther/domestic cat opposition in *Cat People* (the cats even have the same surname, the John Paul Jones of Tourneur’s movie reduced here to a mere “Jones” or “Jonesey”). The film creates its image of the emancipated woman only to subject her to massive terrorization (the use of flashing lights throughout *Alien*’s climactic scenes strikingly recalls the finale of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*) and enlist her in the battle

for patriarchal repression. Having destroyed the alien, Ripley can become completely “feminine”—soft and passive, her domesticated pussy safely asleep.

It is not surprising, though disturbing and sad, that at present it is the reactionary horror film that dominates the genre. This is entirely in keeping with the overall movement of Hollywood in the past five years. Vietnam, Nixon, and Watergate produced a crisis in ideological confidence which the Carter administration has temporarily resolved; *Rocky*, *Star Wars*, *Heaven Can Wait* (all overwhelming popular successes) are but the echoes of a national sigh of relief. *Sisters*, *Demon*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, in their various ways reflect ideological disintegration and lay bare the possibility of social revolution; *Halloween* and *Alien*, while deliberately evoking maximum terror and panic, variously seal it over again.

Notes

1. Andrew Britton, “The Ideology of Screen,” *Movie* 26 (Winter 1978–79): 26.
2. Gad Horowitz, *Repression—Basic and Surplus Repression in Psychoanalytic Theory: Freud, Reich, Marcuse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
3. For a fuller treatment of this, see Andrew Britton’s magisterial account of *Mandingo* in “Mandingo,” *Movie* 22 (Spring 1976): 1–22.