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I Framed Freddy: Functional Aesthetics in the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* Series

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While past scholarship on *A Nightmare on Elm Street* focuses on the concept of the Final Girl (Clover 1992; Christensen 2011), the monstrous feminine (Creed 1993), the female as a double for the monster (Williams 1983/1996) and structural analysis of stalker/slasher films (Dika 1990), little has been written on the aesthetics of horror or slasher films. Although the concept that ‘modern film techniques enable the director to practice a kind of *écriture* (writing) in film’ (Bordwell 1989, 45) is widely accepted, the concept of a franchise or series acting in a similar way with different screenwriters and directors is not (45). If we apply this concept to a franchise/series in order to look at what narrative is written by the series as a whole, and what elements contribute to this ‘writing’, it is possible to examine the ways in which the narrative is built across a series, expanding Bordwell’s concept that ‘a film’s stylistic texture is pervasive, uninterrupted from first moment to last’ to include a series (Bordwell 2005a, 36). Christensen states that ‘[t]he original *A Nightmare on Elm Street* [1984; dir Wes Craven] helped establish Craven as an auteur with a mastery of the macabre and initiated the sadistic Freddy Krueger (then portrayed by Robert Englund) into the annals of popular culture iconography’ (Christensen 2011, 23), allowing for analysis of the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series as experimental or auteur film, from its inception all the way up through the ‘end’ of the series with *Freddy’s Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991; dir Rachel Talalay).

Bordwell lists six basic concepts of the modernist tradition, borrowed from painting and applied to film. Applying these concepts to the *Nightmare* series gives us parameters to discuss how practical and aesthetic concerns fuse to form a ‘functional aesthetic’.¹ It is Bordwell’s

application of a modernist aesthetic in addition to his concept of how form influences function in film that allows us to consider horror films, and in particular the *Nightmare* series, in a new light that bridges two disparate fields – film aesthetics and historical background. Bordwell's first concept is 'modernist artwork courts chance' (1989, 55), and for the early slasher films, the aesthetics of the film are often incidental, a happy accident of casting, location and effects. Low budgets, an occasional lack of script and a need to create technologies and effects as you went led to a particular type of functional aesthetic, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is no exception. These practical considerations also reflect that '[t]he modernist work retains overt traces of the process of its making' (56).

The second concept is 'modernist work seeks a formal and substantive purity' (56). Bordwell connects this to both a minimalist and a modernist approach. The example he uses is Warhol with his 'content-less' films, 'shorn of plot' and 'emptied of human presence' (56). But how can this be applied, and what does that look like? I argue that it is an emphasis on form over content with a focus on symbolism. Slasher films as a genre depend upon symbolism, and the *Nightmare* series depends on abstraction, particularly for the scenes set in the dream world. As the series progresses, it moves from self-reference to metanarrative, making 'you aware you're watching a film' (57) and satisfying the third modernist concept of retaining overt traces of the creation process. Fourth, a conscious focus on the film as film in the series represents the idea that 'formal properties or specific aspects of the medium become the focus of the perceiver's experience' (56). Fifth, the series' self-classification as an independent film, the reputation of New Line Cinema and the nature of the horror genre work to criticize 'dominant theories and practices of art-making' (57). And sixth, the fantastical nature of the narrative, as well as the use of windows, doors and mirrors as frames 'encourages aesthetic distance' (57) since the audience 'cannot really imagine entering the depicted space'. By applying these six concepts to the *Nightmare* movies, we can see how the movies have a narrative continuity formed by the functional aesthetics of the films as a series.

The modernist artwork courts chance

For much of the series, the practical special effects were created on set and on the fly. There was often little rehearsal, and with limited budgets there were often no second chances for effects (*Never Sleep Again: The Elm Street Legacy*, 2010; dirs Daniel Farrands and Andrew Kasch). Despite these constraints, one thing that sets the *Nightmare* original series apart is the