

Genre and the horror film

This piece considers how genres are understood and defined with reference to horror films. A distinctive sub-genre of horror, the 'fantastic', is looked at in brief, and in conclusion, generic evolution is examined. The page references are to suggested further reading in Introduction to Film.

From a relatively young age most people learn to understand the concept of genre, even if they do not know the term. Genre is learnt through the experience of watching a range of texts. David Gauntlett's research (quoted in the *Guardian*, 18 May 1999) suggested that children at:

Ages 3 years to 3 years 6 months: acquire knowledge of first genre: adverts.

Ages 3 years 7 months to 3 years 11 months: acquire knowledge of second genre: cartoons.

Ages 4 years to 4 years 6 months: acquire knowledge of 'news'.

Understand the idea of 'children's television' at special times.

Certainly by the time most children become teenagers they know the generic frameworks of the most popular genres, such as thrillers, horror, science fiction and romance.

It seems then that the idea of genre is derived from evidence 'submitted' by the texts. This evidence is obviously 'inserted' by the texts' producers. Where do the producers get their idea of genre? Well, when they were little they would watch a 'range of texts'...

Genre must have started at some point, since it is doubtful that, if we went back far enough, we would come across Adam and Eve watching the utopian fantasy, *The Garden of Eden* (???? BC). There's no mention in the Old Testament (or the Koran, the Talmud or anywhere else) of God giving genres to humankind with very clear instructions. So where did the definition of different genres come from? This question is a formulation of that philosophical conundrum, 'Which came first, the chicken or the egg?'

For more details on this paradox see pages 57–9. Here we shall accept the child's view of genre and state that we understand genres from the texts.

Ur-genres

John Cawelti suggests there are 'five primary moral fantasies under which all the [genres] ...can be subsumed' (1976: 39) These are Adventure; Romance; Mystery; Melodrama; and Alien States of Being. Of these, Adventure and Romance are probably the most influential:

The adventure story is perhaps the simplest fantasy archetype. Appearing at all levels of culture, it seems to appeal to all classes and types of person, though particularly to men. The feminine equivalent of the adventure story is the romance...[in which] the organizing action is the development of a love relationship.

(Cawelti, 1976: 41)

While it is probably true that the majority of popular culture narratives, including adventure stories, include heterosexual romance, it is only in Romance genres that it is at the centre of the narrative's development.

Action movies dominated Hollywood's blockbuster production during the 1990s, and the first decade of the twenty-first century seems destined to be no different. Action films (see pages 66–8) usually draw upon other genres. For instance, *Face/Off* draws upon science fiction (the face/off operation which is filmed as 'horror'), the cop genre (Archer's quest to capture Troy), family melodrama (in the representation of Archer's dysfunctional family), thriller (the races against time that punctuate the narrative) and the prison movie.

See pages 48–53 for an examination of genre's repertoire of elements.

Defining the horror genre through the repertoire of elements

Here is a sample of the repertoire of elements for the horror film:

Iconography

Blood; monsters; religious relics (including crucifixes); kitchen knives in a wooden block; creaking doors; screams; skulls; thunder and lightning.

Characters

Monsters; ghosts; vampires; werewolves; mad scientists; ignorant villagers; 'maidens in distress'; zombies; experts in 'supernatural science'.

Settings

Castles; old dark houses; suburbia; Transylvania; cellars.

Narratives

Vampires: 'creatures of the night' who need to drink blood to survive. (Werewolves have their own set of characteristics, including the inability to be killed unless they are shot by a silver bullet, and affection for the full moon.)

Haunted house: restless spirits need exorcising from a building;.

Possession: an evil spirit needs exorcising from a body.

Creation of monster: a 'mad' scientist tries to create a life form.

Slasher: a psychopath terrorises a small community or group of friends.

Rape-revenge: a victim's rape leads to revenge.

No film will include all the above elements, although spoofs do include more than most. Films therefore combine a number of the elements which are then organised by the narrative into a more or less coherent text.

Iconography

The term 'iconography' derives from art history, where it refers to visual signs. However, it is likely that most horror movies have a scream in them somewhere, so it is appropriate to extend the concept to include aural signs.

Objects, or sounds, in themselves do not necessarily connote a genre. For example, a crucifix is more readily associated with the church as a symbol of Christ's resurrection. However, in the *context* of a horror film the visual sign of the crucifix takes on an added meaning. Obviously it is still associated with Christ, but it is also seen as a weapon against evil.

Similarly, a sharp knife in a horror context is likely to be used to eviscerate somebody; in a television cookery show the only thing it is likely to cut is food.

Many of the elements listed above are present in *The Mummy* (1999), but in themselves they do not make the film a horror text, as the emphasis in this film is on action-adventure, although the 'death by beetles' and the mummy's appearance do add horrific elements.

Setting

Setting is probably the loosest of the four elements. For some genres, particularly Westerns, which are usually set on the American frontier between 1865 and 1890 (see pages 68–9), the setting can be very specific in terms of time and place. However, horror movies can have a wide variety of settings including Transylvania (and numerous other mittel-European settings, evident in 'Dracula' movies such as *Nosferatu*, *A Symphony of Horrors*, 1922), suburbia (*Halloween*, 1978), and outer space (*Alien*, 1979, an SF-horror hyphenate – see page 55).

However, the 'old dark house' setting (which was the title of a 1932 Universal movie) is specific to the genre. Films such as *The Haunting* (1963, remade 1999) and *The House on Haunted Hill* (1959, remade 1999) use the house as a character; it is the narrative villain. This type of horror text, like those including vampires, can be considered as a sub-genre.

Characters

Characters are rooted more strongly in horror than setting. They are often used to articulate a vital opposition in the genre, that of human/inhuman. If there is a monster in a text, it is very likely to belong to the horror genre; *Freaks* (1932) and *Nightbreed* (1990) are two exceptions where the 'monstrous' characters were shown to be human.

The characters who are experts in 'supernatural science' refer to individuals such as Bram Stoker's Van Helsing, who possesses the specialist knowledge needed to (in his case) conquer Dracula. These are the characters that are capable of nullifying the threat of the monster, so they are usually the narrative heroes:

the narrative process in ... horror films tends to be marked by a search for that discourse, that specialised form of knowledge which will enable the human characters to comprehend and to control that which simultaneously embodies and cause its 'trouble'.

(Neale, 1980: 22)

The psychopath, evident in the 'teen horror' cycle – which includes films such as *Scream* – is an amalgam of the human and inhuman. While psychos are usually human beings, as they do not have a monster's supernatural abilities,

their morality is inhuman as they show complete disregard for human life. The psychopath does not need specialist 'supernatural' knowledge to be defeated; it is the knowledge of detection that is required in order to work out 'who is doing it?' (the *Scream* series) or 'where is he?' (Michael in the *Halloween* series). As noted above, the monster is the focus of the 'inhuman' and 'it is the monster's body which focuses the disruption' (ibid.) This 'disruption' is the narrative problem that needs resolving.

Narrative

Narrative is the way in which the other three elements are combined, giving both context to the signs deployed and a framework for audiences to use to make sense of events. Conventional narratives are structured by an equilibrium–disruption–resolution pattern described by Tzvetan Todorov (see pages 78–84).

The 'disruption' refers to the narrative problem that must be overcome; once this is done, the narrative ends. Genres can, in part, be defined by their narrative disruption. For example, if the problem is aliens invading Earth, we are likely to be reading a science fiction text; a drug baron trying to take over an area probably refers to a gangster (or gangsta) text.

Of course, because of the fluid nature of genre, narratives can belong in more than one genre. For example, a murderer is on the loose can be resolved by several genres, including cop, detective, thriller and horror.

Narrative in horror, as in thrillers, engages audiences in a particular relationship. While audiences know something horrible is going to happen in a horror text, they do not know when it will happen. This suspense is one of the pleasures of the genre, and is most obvious in the convention of having the monster come back from the dead after it appears to have been despatched at the end.

Non-diegetic (that is, not part of the narrative world) music is often used to connote a threat to the character(s) – a threat they are ignorant of. However, this also can be used as a red herring, where the music connotes a problem, such as an intruder in the house, but it transpires that the person is a friend of the protagonist. The best horror texts catch the reader, as well as the protagonist, unaware.

The 'fantastic'

Tzvetan Todorov has described a particular form of horror text, the fantastic, which spans the uncertainty between the rational and irrational:

In a world which is indeed our world ... without devils ... or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained.... The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses ... or else the event has indeed taken place ... this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.
(Todorov, 1975: 25)

Pure examples of the fantastic are relatively rare. Most of the events in *Final Destination* could happen without the intervention of Death, but a close-up of water that has leaked out of a toilet flowing backwards, after the victim has

died, compromises the suggestion that these events could have happened naturally. *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) maintains doubt over whether Rosemary has been unhinged by pregnancy, or has actually been impregnated by the devil, until the film's final scene.

Generic evolution

The repertoire of generic conventions available at any one point in time is always *in play* rather than simply being *re-played*.

(Neale, 2000: 219)

This 'play' occurs in two ways: the choice *and* combination of elements. Each new expression of a genre is likely to be different in some way from previous examples. For example *Psycho* (1960) introduced a particularly visceral form of horror in the shower slaying of Marion Crane. Such was the impact of this film that virtually all subsequent horror movies have been influenced by it. This influence, of course, is directed through the *generic* change that *Psycho* wrought. It is difficult, possibly impossible, to understand the paradigm shift that film had on audience expectation 40 years after the event.

Linda Williams has suggested that:

Psycho introduced, long before the blockbusters [such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)], what might be called a roller-coaster concept to the phenomenon of film viewing. For *Psycho* the ride began ... with ... its anticipation of terror. It continued in the film proper with an unprecedented experience of disorientation, destabilization, and terror.

(Williams, 2000: 358)

This roller-coaster ride, which is still evident in 'blockbuster' cinema, might best be characterised in the context of horror as the ghost train. In many horror texts the repertoire of elements is mobilised in order to give visceral shocks to the audience, just when they were not expecting it, allowing the spectators to experience fear in safety. However we must not forget such horror films as *The Sixth Sense* (1999), which underplay visceral shock in favour of psychological investigation. This film was popular with a wide audience, whereas the attractions of 'gross out', or body horror, appears to lessen with age.

References

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