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The Golden Age of Horror

While his date is slumped in her seat bored silly by the twenty-foot bi-pedal insects, the teenage boy in his brand-new 1952 Cadillac Seville, is rowdily entertained by the drive-in's Friday night showing of Red Planet Mars perched on the big screen. In past flicks, the couple has seen similar giant beasts clad in red jump-suits chasing mindless heroines, but the characters, story, and political under-tones are not what beckon these viewers to come back time after time; rather the exoticism and pure whimsical entertainment produced by the 1950's American horror film. (Hendershot 57). Flashing forward eight years later, the now-married couple sit gasping and terrified, as Norman Bates, conducted by the will of his dead mother, murder young women who occupy the rooms of his hotel. Initiated by Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho, the direction of the next twenty years of American film, in particular the horror genre would experience a revolutionary change of course. Characteristic of America's ideological transition from 1950's innocence, to 60's expressionism, Psycho, unlike its genre predecessor Red Planet Mars, clarifies horror as a raw art rather than manufacturing it as exploitive propaganda. Post-Cold War nuclear hysteria, domestic tumult, and the imperialist war in Vietnam, stimulated young film makers to break free of this classic cinema model, and begin to portray their post-modern perspective of American culture (Waller, 12). These socio-political issues combined with cable television's debilitating grasp on the film industry,

forced studios to look for innovative ideas, thus giving these bright-young American directors funding to share their visions. These pioneers ushered in the “Golden Age of Horror” and notably contributed to popular post-modern American cinema (Wood 2). The radical direction taken by independent horror films including, Hoper’s Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, and Craven’s Last House on the Left, engaged in psycho-analytic investigation, broke gender boundaries, and incorporated socio-political undertones which helped define the post-modern movement, and set the standard of filmic expression.

Parallel to the transformation of the communist invasion film Red Planet Mars to Hitchcock’s American introspective take on family and murder, contemporary horror derives from a geographical swing from east to west (Wood 77). Beginning with post-WWI, the United States dreaded a monster with a clear identity: European progression symbolized by Transylvanian Nosferatu, and Soviet Frankenstein (Magistrale 34). After WWII, America’s fear of Russian communist development in the west embodied itself in movies like It Came from Outer Space, where seemingly human species land in the Arizona desert, only to reveal themselves as an “encephalic mass with one blinking eye in the middle” imposing its will on the world (Clarens 124). Continuing from the distant European monster, to the cold-war invader, the encroaching fear would finally develop itself inward. Violence plaguing the United States in the form of Vietnam, race wars, Kent State Rebellion, and the Iranian hostage crisis, paired with political strife exemplified by Watergate, the assassination of JFK, women’s rights, and oil shortages began to manifest themselves as real horror (Magistrale, 16. Waller, 12). “The General

mood of America... [was] a place that had lost touch with its core values and optimistic spirit” (Maigstrale 167).

The post-modern horror movement, beginning in 1968, coincided with (ironically) the inauguration of Richard Nixon, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, and the MPAA’s institution of the “Industry Code of Self-Regulation”. Despite the two commission’s insistence on the censorship and strict regulation of violence in the media, the lenient guidelines of the reformed “R-rating” allowed films to expression themselves in a variety of ways, and also provide the opportunity to reach public channels (Waller 2, 5). These creative rights along with commercial viability allowed popular outlets for directors seeking to vent their social frustration and criticize the dark involvement in Southeast Asia.

The graphic violence found in Wes Craven’s Last House on the Left actively questions involvement in the Vietnam War, and through the idea of censorship, implicitly comments on the sociopolitical violence in 1970’s United States. The movie poster informs the audiences of its intentions, “Violence and bestiality are no condoned in Last House on the Left – Far from it! The movie makes a plea for an end to all the senseless violence and inhuman cruelty that has become so much part of the times we live” (Lowenstein 112). As portrayed explicitly by the advertisement, Wes Craven uses the “slasher” film to vent and reflect on the crisis in Vietnam (Magistrale 167). Craven criticizes the political demonology endowed to the Vietcong by the Nixon Administration and American media (Lowenstein 113). By utilizing ordinary Americans as the givers and takers of extreme acts of brutality, Craven wishes to demonize and highlight American violence in direct correlation to political conflict. Not only does the poster call

for the end of violence, but an accompanying advertisement contains a picture mirroring the famous photo of a dead student, shot by National guardsmen during the Kent State Riots (Lowenstein 114). *Last House* pushes to expose the senseless violence occurring at the home front and over-powering political agendas that accompany them. The grainy news-reel camera, stylizes the violence as all-too-real which is further developed by the murders within teenager, criminal and parental demographics (Lowenstein 116). By making such a raw and violent film and marketing it as an extension of our twisted world, Craven flips the idea of censorship and spins a provocative and enlightening take on American violence.

Although technically approached very differently, The Night of the Living Dead like Last House on the Left delivers a critique on the Vietnam War by employing various elements of style and implicit commentary. The film which was shot on an extremely limited budget is presented in low-fidelity black and white. Associated with the same colors as 1968 newscasts, this graphical approach forces the audience to interpret these zombies as if they were a realistic news story. At the end of the film, the credits roll with photos of dead citizens and zombies, eerily similar to the horrifying pictures taken by photojournalists in Vietnam (Harper 3). The movie scenes along with the Vietnam photos produce an unsettling realization in those who view them. The powerful message portrayed by the film can be described by, "...the film's impact as 'cathartic for us who forget about the horrors around us which aren't, alas, movies,' ... Lyndon B. Johnson might 'have never permitted the napalming of the Vietnamese' had he seen Night of the Living Dead" (Waller 16). Romero positioning of the American flag at the graveyard where the zombies emerge, highlights the film's anti-patriotic theme. Unlike in the 1950s,

how communist anxiety forbid political dissention, the 1960's engaged in actively questioning institutional injustices. Romero's manifestly American zombies represent a United States provoked nuclear holocaust which profoundly comments on the consequences of war sought by an imperial superpower (Harper 8). Instead of relying on popular artistic style to portray its postmodern vision, Night of the Living Dead simplistic spirit, akin to its "Red Invasion" predecessors, reveals the inevitable destruction of American culture; however the society's ruin is developed not by flying saucers, but within the reemergence of its own dead.

Similar to the undead and psychopathic murderers of the previous two movies, the cannibalistic family of Tobe Hooper's The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, presents the disparity of an apocalyptic world. The movie, released in 1974, coincided with scandals in the Nixon presidency, and near the peak of the Vietnam War, when American's ideological confidence had hit rock bottom. "*Chainsaw* came out of the heavy times in the Nixon administration. In that sense, it's allegorical. Times were turbulent, we were all low on fuel and the outlook was bleak" (Becker 12). *Texas*'s criticism on the capitalist institutional effects of the slaughterhouses can be seen as commentary on Nixon's Watergate disaster and effort to stay the course overseas. An institution which provoked the discontinuation of human labor for that of automation, thus leaving a generation of useless specialization, is the same system which was committing senseless violence and inexcusable corruption. Tobe Hooper expresses his discontent towards the American establishment by presenting the family as a product of America's self-righteous economic system, and faltering government. Vietnam brutalities also play a major roll in many of *Texas*'s events. The extreme violence shown in the movie, like in scenes where

Leatherface uses meat hooks to subdue his struggling victims, utilize unadulterated special effects which give each butchery an eerily real-world feeling. Celebrated make-up artist, Tom Savini, who worked on set of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre, served in Vietnam as a photo-journalist, and attributes much of the work he did on the movie to the violence which he photographed during the war (Schneider 253). Along with Last House on the Left, Night of the Living Dead and Texas Chainsaw Massacre "...managed to capture the general mood after the crippling double blow of Vietnam and Watergate. A place that had lost touch with its core values and optimistic spirit" (Magistrale 157). These movies didn't just reflect a period of turmoil in America, they actively made strives for change. Hooper, Craven, and Romero depicted the societal crisis with a completely annihilist attitude, which gave the public ability to reinvent their cultural philosophy (Wood 76). These directors would take their visions one step further by taking their commentary on a different course, towards the human mind.

"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. This is coupled with a sense that it becomes in the 70's the most important of all American genres the perhaps the most progressive" (Wood 76).

While American culture remained at the verge of collapse, the entwinement of media and philosophy would begin a decade long exploration of the human mind. Sigmund Freud, a pioneer in the field of brain investigation, remained at the fundamental base of the post-modern horror movement, with his research of the repressed, sexuality, and desires. Although critics interject that Freud's theories resemble phrenology rather

than concrete scientific evidence, there are major themes within post-modern horror which deny these accusation (Badley 15).

Although being accused of exploitive and excessive violence during its time of release, the Texas Chainsaw Massacre utilizes Freudian models to create a wonderfully woven commentary of American institutions. The film by Tobe Hooper is direct commentary of patriarchal capitalism and the degenerate qualities it carry. At the center of the story, a family of past-generation slaughter-house employees is forced out of their line of work by automated technology, and which leaves their isolated skills of killing unable to be supplanted (Humphries 123). When a bunch of teenage protagonists begin their journey towards their inevitable deaths, they reach a run-down slaughter house, owned by one the kid's grandparents. Immediately, we expect horrible images of creatures jumping out from behind the decaying walls with weapons, but instead, the heroines leave the house unscathed. Finally when they reach a home appearing to be one of "The American Dream", with a white picket fence and trimmed lawn, do the terrors arise. This ideal home and the horrors which surround it draw implications towards the breakdown of the American nuclear family. This bunch of murderous misfits struggling to integrate within the American economy, degenerately prey upon themselves. Their complete disassociation within societal normalcy presents them as a symbol of the apocalypse (Wood 82). The theme of cannibalism represents the pinnacle of the repression of capitalist ideology. The selfish, all-or-nothing qualities pushed by capitalism left its own bi-product for this family of degenerates. The family of displaced killers is forced to consume within the same structure which consumed them (Humphries 122). Instead of prospering off the market, they take the possessiveness preached by

capitalism and eat members of their own race (Wood 83). These same cannibalistic themes can be seen in a similar film where the apocalypse is presented by a more fantastical fear, our walking dead.

George A. Romero's Living Dead series, employs walking corpses and iconic protagonists to critically examine the entire nature of American ideal. In the first installment of the series, the family is a main focal point of critique. "The zombies' attacks, like those of the birds, have their origins in (are physical projection of) psychic tensions that are the product of the patriarchal male/female, or familial relationships" (Wood 103). Romero uses the father figure in the film as a direct opponent of racial integration, and the African-American protagonist to create interplay of deep-rooted and contemporary values. At the end of the film, the black character, despite surviving hordes of flesh-eating zombies, is shot by the police force, unable to survive the opposing racist institution. The theme of cannibalism amongst both Texas Chainsaw Massacre and Night of the Living Dead, serve to relate to various themes of gender and ideological consumption. Similarly, the ghouls of Night of the Living Dead devour the living they once were so they can continue to live as the undead.

"Like the domino theory of foreign policy, which posits the enemy's strategy as blind and unwavering incorporation and [Night] responds to it with exactly the same strategy, the overwhelming return of the repressed in the film becomes an extended narrative of consumption and, by implication, self-consumption"
(Newman 60).

This quote compares the invading zombies in Night of the Living Dead with the Freud's idea of the "repressed". These man eating creatures represent the darkest recesses

of the human psyche, devouring their idealistic counter-parts and from the inside out, ushering in the end of American civilization. The untainted American spirit instilled by post-war materialism and perfectionism turned in a new direction with Night of the Living Dead and Last House on the Left, as they show no mercy digging into Americans repressive minds. Along the same parallel of new critiques aimed at the American way of life, gender roles and patriarchal dominancy began to be questioned as a righteous model.

While the “sexual revolution” of the 1960’s marched forward, so did the sexual transformation in horror film, with taboo topics such as feminism, male masculinity, pornography, incest, homophobia, beginning to reach the main stream (Baldey 13). Instead of Freudian tactics used to interpret the brain, the sexual revolution in psychology along with post-modern structure, emphasized sexuality in horror in terms of anxiety, identity, gender, and power (Badley 14). None expresses these ideas so fluidly as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre.

Tobe Hooper, in his 1974 masterpiece, utilizes structures of sexuality in order to further demonstrate Leatherface’s twisted family as an apocalyptic structure. The pay within gender hierarchy along with male provoked deterioration serves to make feminist assertion. The main monster in the film mutilates the young women and uses their faces to add on to his “power mask” (Badley 82). This feature paired with the all-male ensemble of the degenerate family highlights the importance of a female role in American nuclear family. When the men are no longer needed to fulfill their capitalist drive to acquire means to support their family, the women and family itself begins to deteriorate. The grandmother within a glass display case in the monster’s home directly relates to this idea of female ruin (Wood 82).

Some argue that postmodern horror film initiated a male coping mechanism for repressed femininity. “Men watch horror films to experience the masochistic “female” emotions denied to them in their gendered lives” (Badley 120). With the 60’s horror film, the male struggle with identity imposed by social ideals began to have an outlet to perceive feminine feelings. In the Texas Chainsaw Massacre, men could empathize with the girl screaming at the top of her lungs running from Leatherface, whereas before, they repressed these natural feelings of victimization (Badley 120). Although presented through a normal family instead of craze slaughterhouse degenerates, Wes Craven also points out similar structures of sexuality.

In Last House on the Left, familial roles are deeply examined and the sexuality is questioned through various paths of violence. In the opening of the movie, we are introduced to a teenage girl who, with her parents, discusses the technicalities of wearing a bra. Right off the bat our pre-conceived notions of gender are broken down. Instead of viewing the female heroine as a mindless beauty doll whose only destiny is to die ignorant of her assailant’s deviant motives, the girl openly discusses sexuality with her parents, which puts focus on the symbol of her body. This metaphor alludes to issues of sexuality within a family setting, and also the severance of gender specific roles. The story is based around the parent’s revenge on the criminals who raped their daughter. The rape and murder of the main girl Phyllis is a great example of Craven’s gender play. Instead of having just the male criminal rape and kill her, the scene also involves a woman stabbing the young girl. This places the woman within a role of power and whether that is motivated by homosexuality, identity issues, or sexual anxiety, she

commits an act linearly associated with male dominancy. (Clover 137). When Phyllis's corpse finally lay motionless, the killers act surprisingly shocked.

“They were disgusted at what they had done. It was if they had been playing with a doll, or a prisoner they thought was a doll, and it had broken and come apart and they didn't know how to put it back together again. Again, there were parallels with what I was seeing in our culture, where we were breaking things that we didn't know how to put back together (Wood 113).

This kind of reaction issued by the killers force the viewers to question what side they associate with. The criminals can't stomach the girl's dead body, so they simply leave it. The same can be said for us watching these horror films. The ideological boundaries which were so present pre-1960 were being maimed and mutilated, and Americans couldn't find a proper response. Wes Craven along with the other directors are asking us not to run from what they have created, rather, deconstruct and reevaluate their own status as Americans, so they could join the revolution for change.

As demonstrated by historical trends, culture breaks down in waves, with each new era's cycle bringing to the forefront disenfranchised artists' vision of the “real”. Similar to the concurrence of the Cold War situated “Red Invaders” and the nuclear apocalypse, Leatherface, zombies, and teenage murder accurately portrayed turbulent 1970's America. The dreams and subconscious which our culture strived to subdue began to rear their ugly head back in ways no one could imagine. Instead of revolting against the establishment by not conforming to dress styles, or associating themselves with a drug oriented music culture, the horror auteurs of the 70's chose a more meaningful direction. With the meltdown that was pushing Americans to rightfully question their

country's post-war self-righteousness, these directors dug as deep as they possibly could, evoking people to witness the realities of human nature, and the need for a sustainable direction. Whether it was the inequities of capitalism presented by the Texas Chainsaw Massacre, the racial and familial structures shown by Night of the Living Dead, or the severance gender rigidity in Last House on the Left, real issues that cried out for change, found popular outlets. The shock value which these movies utilized broke down the movie-goers guard, allowing a new radical paradigm to permeate their minds. Although the distinguishing features of the genre deteriorated near the end of the decade, (as Hollywood unmercifully destroyed the creativity of postmodern horror through proliferation of exploitive franchises in the 80's), we are still able to see the affects of these revolutionary films today. In our current global struggle when once again our country's legitimacy as a governing super-power is being questioned, artists and directors are using new technology to document the horrific realities many American rarely face. These modern films beckon us to recall the innovators who helped guide the "social revolution" which shaped the popular culture we know today. The masterpieces endowed to us by Hooper, Romero and Craven can be regarded as some of the most poignant and significant works in 20th century art.

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