

MED3282: Horror & Fantasy

Lecture 6

Webs of simulation: horror in the postmodern

This lecture deals with claims that horror discourse underwent some significant transformations in the late twentieth century which ought to be understood in relation to wider changes in society and culture. Isabel Pinedo suggests that contemporary horror discourse constructs a much more insecure and fragile sense of the world than previously:

The universe of the contemporary horror film is an uncertain one in which good and evil, normality and abnormality, reality and illusion become virtually indistinguishable. This, together with the presentation of violence as a constituent feature of everyday life, the inefficacy of human action, and the refusal of narrative closure, produces an unstable, paranoid universe in which familiar categories collapse. (REF)

Now, we should be wary of making monolithic and overly neat periodizations of horror. Horror is prone to, and indeed thrives upon, unpredictable transformations and ambiguities. Also, a range of different forms of horror can be found co-existing at any given time (Hutchings, REF). Nevertheless, it does seem to be the case that, from the 1960s onwards, and already evident to some extent in 1950s 'creature features', we can identify a heightened sense of paranoia in horror; there does seem to have been something like a paradigm shift. Peter Bogdanovich's film, *Targets* (1968), can be seen as an exemplar of the transition. This film, in which a blank and apparently motiveless young man with a rifle picks off people attending a gothic horror drive-in movie (Boris Karloff, virtually playing himself as a fading horror actor, is in attendance at a screening of his latest work) explicitly situates itself on the cusp between classical gothic horror and the new psycho-horror.

Paranoid Horror

Tania Modleski, in 1986, was one of the first to identify a number of films which she argued were 'engaged in an unprecedented assault on all that bourgeois culture is supposed to cherish'. Films from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) to *Videodrome* (1982) challenged comfortable narrative pleasures, refusing to

sustain middle class values and norms around family life and proper sexuality, etc. (such as those itemized by Robin Wood, as detailed in Week 5's lecture). They tended to be open-ended, refusing to put their threats definitively to rest. In the case of the 'slasher' subgenre there was a disregard for conventional plotting, with 'virtually no building of a climax – only variations on the theme of slashing, creating a pattern that is more or less reversible' (REF). Modleski aligned the contemporary horror film with transgressive, oppositional forms of art, arguing that it is 'as apocalyptic and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure, and the specious good as many types of high art' (REF).

Three years later, Andrew Tudor's *Monsters and Mad Scientists* developed this notion of a new assaultive horror, which he dubbed 'paranoid' horror. Tudor notes that, up to the 1960s, 'an ultimately secure world in which the monstrous threat was finally defeated and order restored' was fundamentally taken for granted in horror discourse (REF). Horror discourse was characterized by a basic faith in the (desirability) of the hierarchical social order and in the reliability of the paternalistic establishment (comprised of those legitimate institutions and authorities upon which we depend – government, armed forces, the police, science, the church, etc.) It was these central institutions, and the forms of expertise associated with the centre, which guaranteed safety and protection. The centre secured clear boundaries between normality and abnormality, order and disorder. There was confidence in the centre's ability to explain any threat (always from 'outside') and intervene effectively to abate it. There were frequently complicating secondary identifications (eg. with Dracula's sexual charisma) and an attractive frisson associated with disorder, but, generally speaking, we knew where we were: 'Genuine doubt is almost entirely absent'.

In the world of paranoid horror, however, order proves impossible to reassert. The monstrous threat is uncontrollable and frequently remains unvanquished by the end of the narrative. We can no longer rely on established authorities and experts to intervene and successfully address the threat. The centre does not hold in paranoid horror. Things fall apart, and we find resistance only on the part of bands of disparate victims. Above all, the threat emanates from an internal source as opposed to an external. The monster emerges from within (as in the killers of landmark movies such as *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* (both 1960)) and, indeed, the boundaries between what is known and unknown, normal and abnormal, become fuzzier. 'Body-horror', emerging in the early eighties, is also a paranoid phenomenon in which internality is foregrounded. In short, paranoid horror is a discourse of radical doubt and uncertainty.

Secure Horror	Paranoid Horror
Successful human intervention	Failed human intervention
Effective expertise	Ineffective expertise
Authorities as legitimate	Authorities as unreliable
Sustainable order	Escalating disorder
'External' threats	'Internal' threats
Centre-periphery organisation	Victim groups organisation
Defined boundaries	Diffuse boundaries
Closed narratives	Open narratives

In this paranoid discourse, horror's proclivity towards metamorphosis (discussed at length in the first lecture) is writ large. Where the threat of metamorphosis was typically closed off in earlier horror narrative (eg. the eventual repression of Mr Hyde; the werewolf's destruction by the silver bullet), in its paranoid form, the monster is a much more intractable problem. In *Psycho*, the seemingly sane Norman Bates metamorphoses into the proto-slasher figure of 'Mother' and ultimately stays that way (remember the final scenes of the movie). Metamorphosis can also take the collective form of an epidemic (eg. zombification in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), the parasite-borne sexual epidemic in *Shivers* (1976)), and 'the running battle against zombification, disease or mass insanity reflects the apocalyptic despair so plausible within the assumptions of paranoid horror, a battle which – in its most extreme manifestations – must always be lost' (REF).

Paranoid horror's internal and metamorphic focus can be seen in body-horror films from Cronenberg's *Videodrome* through to Robert Pratten's *Mindflesh* (2008). In the latter, the central male protagonist obsessively surrenders to fantasy erotic visitations by an alluring succubus, sex with whom is violent, connoted as traumatic and abusive rather than innocently pleasurable. These episodes are related to guilty (and unreliable) memories of abuse at the hands of the protagonist's mother (there is a strong resonance with Creed's notions of the monstrous feminine) and it becomes clear that they are not purely fantasy, but have the ability to bleed through into the real physical world in various ways, including manifestations on the protagonist's body. The film emphasizes the permeability of mind and body, fantasy and reality, focusing paranoiacally on the irruption of a more violent and indifferent universe and the material force of psychopathological (or demonic) impulses. In this film, it is as if the mind were itself become demonic.

Tudor somewhat reluctantly makes the link between such paranoid horror and postmodernity ('the parallels were too obvious to resist and the cultural resonance too rich to ignore', REF). 'Secure' horror belonged to a stable, coherent world in which there is widespread confidence in tradition and established authority (however, as Jancovich (1996) shows, this shouldn't be overstated. Many of those features we have identified as characterizing postmodern horror could be considered to be radicalized manifestations of phenomena already present in earlier horror). In the sixties, this confidence shattered in the face of a much less reliable, less coherent experience of the world in which to trust is to take a risk. This applies at the individual, the group and the societal level. At the level of the individual, trust in one's body and mind (as in *Mindflesh* and *Videodrome*) is often misplaced. At the group and societal level (as in *The X-Files*), to seek the assistance of authority is to risk entanglement in foul conspiracy and corruption: 'It is as if we have been cast loose in a world for which we no longer have any reliable maps, in which once-clear landmarks are not what they seem, and in which we know we must seek new shelter or perish' (REF). Why do older structures and authorities seem so incoherent, untrustworthy and illegitimate from the sixties onwards? How can we make contextual sense of this paranoia?

Postmodernity can be understood as a crisis and transformation of those systems of regulation and control that characterize modern societies and culture in the post-war period. Amongst other phenomena, David Harvey and others describe the emergence of 'Post-Fordism' from an overly rigid and inflexible Fordist focus on mass production and consumption which led to the overproduction and saturation of markets, together with a decrease in consumer spending power. The capitalist response was to move towards more flexible production, exploring the potential for growth in niche marketing aimed at a more differentiated range of consumer lifestyles. The response of the state was to roll back its blanket of regulations to permit more freedom in the marketplace: 'As a result, standardized forms of mass production give way to constantly changing markets, fleeting cultural goods, and a greater emphasis on difference' (Jancovich, REF). Culturally, this resulted in an exacerbation of the sense of fragmentation, uncertainty, risk and superficiality that already characterized modernity to some degree. Fuelling these growing anxieties in the West were events such as the Civil Rights struggle in the US, the horrors of the Vietnam War, the shooting of students in American university campuses, a number of traumatizing assassinations, the rise of the counterculture and associated sexual revolution, drug culture, etc. In summary, this gave rise to an all-round crisis of legitimation and a challenge and interrogation of modern rationality, science, expertise and institutional authority.

...the postmodern world is an unstable one in which traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall into question, Enlightenment narratives

collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (read male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates. Consensus in the possibility of mastery is lost, universalising grand theory is discredited, and the stable, unified, coherent self acquires the status of a fiction (Pinedo, REF).

John Carpenter's 1982 movie, *The Thing*, can be used to draw out some of the ways in which this situation found expression in horror. It begins with a husky dog racing away from a Norwegian helicopter and finding a safe haven in an American research base. The Norwegians, appearing to attack the US personnel, are killed. The Americans journey to the nearby Norwegian base to follow up the incident and find it incinerated. They recover a huge carcass and examine it back at the base, discovering that these remains are those of an alien organism capable of taking on the exact form of other beings. In fact, the dog that fled to the US base is this alien, having evacuated its earlier form: 'Although the Thing reveals various alien forms throughout the film, it is unclear if any of these is its "real" or original form. They may simply be forms of prior conquests. The Thing is the ultimate simulacra, constantly generating copies without originals' (Pinedo, REF). The alien infiltrates the Americans, taking on human form. Pinedo relates this to Vietnam, where a major difficulty was knowing which of the Vietnamese were innocent peasants and which Viet-Cong soldiers. The knowledge of infiltration tears apart the base community, fostering paranoia and mutual suspicion. They resort to an anxious series of blood tests. Ultimately, the Americans destroy their base, hoping to also destroy the alien but also consigning themselves to death. Whether or not the alien is in fact killed is not established. *The Thing* is a paranoid, postmodern horror film, and a good example of what Tudor would describe as an 'open metamorphosis' narrative.

Meta-slashers

The inter-related phenomena of sequelling, remaking and franchising are also greatly stepped up in the postmodern. Together with the appearance of greater reflexivity and self-referential, knowing humour, it is in fact these innovations, rather than the 'paranoia' paradigm that are at the forefront of people's minds today when they reflect on postmodernism in horror (Tudor, 2002). One of the best cases for a genuinely postmodern feature of horror is the proclivity for reflexive genre-bending that films such as *Scream* demonstrate together with a concomitant sophistication and media literacy amongst horror audiences and fans. Philip Brophy presciently described this tendency back in 1975: 'The contemporary Horror film *knows* that you've seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen, and it knows that you know it knows you know'

(2000, 279). Pinedo, in her discussion of the relation of postmodernism to popular culture, also points to a new audience expectation to see an overturning of genre conventions, to acknowledge the rules of the game and to see them put to the test. This 'insider knowledge' dimension, in addition to a new campness, becomes itself the new convention in horror cinema. Most recently, Andy W. Smith, discussing developments in the slasher subgenre, comments:

What the *Scream* films demonstrate is the generic identification between audience and the subject matter. The film nerd Randy is, in effect, one of the audience members transplanted into the film's diegesis; he knows the plot contrivances, the technical effects and the underlying structural mechanisms of the subgenre. It is this 'knowing' audience that best exemplifies the direction that 'postmodern' horror has taken between 1975 and 1995. (2007, 84)

The conventions of slasher movies were established in the 70s and became very familiar in a short space of time – teenage audiences quickly became 'smarter than the movies they went to see' (Wee, REF). Referring to the horror movie quiz set-up of the introductory scenes of the relatively fresh (at the time) approach of *Scream*, Steven Jay Schneider notes that this 'satirical spin on the murder-as-artistic-performance trope is in a sense characteristic of the postmodern treatment of cinematic horror generally, whereby audience overfamiliarity with character types and narrative conventions is offset (in theory, if not always in practice) by the knowing laughter generated from self-referential dialogue and plot devices' (REF). *Scream* and its ilk hit upon the successful formula of more explicitly exploiting the genre literacy of teens by building it into the movies as a central textual feature. Valerie Wee characterizes this as a bump up from 'early postmodernism' to what she dubs 'hyperpostmodernism'. She thinks that the *Scream* trilogy constitutes an advance upon the earlier tendency already noted by commentators such as Brophy, Tudor and Pinedo. Where we find plenty of intertextual referencing in earlier slasher movies (eg. *Nightmare on Elm St.*), this never adds up to more than 'passing allusions'. With the *Scream* trilogy, however, the intertextuality in effect constitutes the text itself: 'The *Scream* films...take the previously subtle and covert intertextual reference and transform it into an overt, discursive act' (REF). The films are populated by numerous scenes in which examples of slasher movies and their rules and conventions are self-consciously discussed by highly media literate characters, whose smartness matches and reflects the teens in the audience (They could be thought of as *meta*-slasher films). In the sequels, the 'rules of the sequel' are explored. The second and third sequel each ratchet up the self-reflexivity a notch further, through, for example, the *mise en abyme* device of the *Stab* movies-within-the-movies. Thus, 'numerous scenes in the third instalment directly echo those from the first, except that they are played

out on a movie set'. The (hyper-) intertextual tendrils reach out *within* the trilogy as well as outwards into the subgenre's history.

Wee identifies three major factors motivating these developments. Firstly, the availability of new media technologies and delivery platforms foster increased access and a more rapid circulation of movies and images. Secondly, nineties teens were already more textually 'hyperaware' than earlier generations, steeped as they were in highly self-referential and remedial media forms. Thirdly, the movies were tied into a promotional culture of music soundtracks, music video, magazine features, etc., all of which fed into their style and aesthetics. Similarly, P.D. Marshall (2002) has argued that new commodity forms emerge as aspects of an 'elaborate intertextual matrix' which, deeply informed by the rapid growth of the computer and video games industry in particular, capitalizes upon the appeal of interactivity and the play aesthetic for contemporary audiences. The play aesthetic has been strategically colonized through the cross-linked marketing of media products in a development that has been fostered by the increasing concentration of media ownership and convergence of media forms.

For some critics, the game-like character of the films renders them conservative and trivial. Paul Wells (2000) damns them as the 'McDonaldization of horror'. Despite this, and also the 'colonialist' implications of new intertextual commodity strategies, Wee finds cause for celebration in terms of the politics of the meta-slasher. She draws on Linda Hutcheon's argument that the typical postmodern textual strategy is a process of parodic/ironic 'doubling', simultaneously installing and subverting an interpretive frame. Self-reflexive intertextual evocation of the conventions, representations and ideologies of the slasher genre occurs in order to critically interrogate them. In particular, the *Scream* films critique conventions around gender, race and sexuality (for example, the 'final girl' is revised – Sidney is not a pariah, not a virgin, and not, despite her name, boyish. There are, in fact, two final girls – Gale, the TV journalist, is initially an enemy of Sidney, but they ultimately work together to triumph over the killers, truly empowered females who do not accept the role of victim). Nicholas Rombes also sees *Scream* as something of a trailblazer here, the movies constituting a kind of parodic film theory, engaging in ironic analysis and 'demystification' of the rules of its genre and key reference points (thus, *Halloween* is watched by the characters and one of them gives an impromptu 'lecture' on the rules it observes – survival hinges upon no sex, drink, drugs, or arrogant claims of being 'right back'). This in-movie 'theorizing' allows the usual genre thrill but adds on the extra thrill of supplying a 'meta-ironic position of superiority towards the exhausted genres on the screen' (REF).

Webs of Simulation: Postmodern Gothic

It is often noted that there are strong resonances between postmodernism and the gothic. To recall my earlier lecture, in the Gothic, identity is decentred and unstable. I cited Patrick McGrath's observation that 'the Gothic recognizes the fluidity, the multiplicity, the contingency of identity' (1997, p.156). Just as in gothic narrative, eg. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, we get troubled and divided subjectivities, and the prevalent motif of the double, so in the postmodern we also find identity play. A good source of examples of postmodern gothic play with notions of unstable identity would be the work of David Lynch (see *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Dr.*, and *Inland Empire* in particular. There is some discussion of Lynch in this context in Botting). In the earlier lecture, I also noted the Gothic's revelling in artifice and counterfeit and the recycling of existing fictions. In the postmodern, we find this writ large in the reflexive and self-referential games played by meta-slashers.

Gothic warpings of space and time find their resonance with postmodern spatio-temporality. The gothic is often associated with uncertain, labyrinthine spaces such as haunted castles. In the world of the gothic, space and time are prone to irrational and traumatic disturbances. Punter and Byron point out that 'no point on the map is exactly where or what it seems, on the contrary it opens into other spaces, and it does not even do that in a stable fashion...What we find in the numerous conjunctions of Gothic and the postmodern is a certain sliding of location, a series of transfers and translocations from one place to another, so that our sense of the stability of the map is forever under siege' (2004, 51).

For McGrath, the resurgence of interest in the Gothic at the present time can be understood in relation to a breakdown of structures in contemporary societies and an 'increasingly tenuous' sense of control. The indeterminacies, doubt and uncertainty of the present, as I have explained, have been described in terms of a shift to postmodernity. Alan Lloyd Smith argues that where the Gothic flourished in a period of confusion and disorder, ushered in by profound social changes at a time of rapid industrialisation, the postmodern is to be understood as connected to our newly informationalized society and culture: 'The information revolution, by providing too much information and boundless signs without referents, subjects the protagonist to a sensory disarray comparable to the confusions of a Gothic victim and promotes a similar sense that "they" somewhere, somehow impossibly in control of all this, are competently plotting like the Inquisition or a Gothic villain' (1996, 15). Citing Punter, he notes that we can't make sense of the Gothic without the concept of paranoia. As I have shown, the postmodern is characterized by paranoia in spades – paranoia about the collapse of boundaries, conspiratorial forces plotting against us, untrustworthy authorities, dangers from within, the risks posed by our own uncontrollable technologies, etc., etc. All of these connections seem to justify the idea of a postmodern Gothic.

It should be clear that the thrill of Gothic fantasy is something that contemporary art and culture still attempts to sustain. We could cite many examples in film, music, TV, videogames and art. Fred Botting, drawing on 'postmodern' theorist, Jean Baudrillard, suggests that, in the postmodern, the Gothic reaches its point of greatest influence but also its point of ultimate exhaustion. With examples such as the 'Disneygothic' plans for a Dracula theme park in Transylvania, we can see how Gothic has become an example and image of 'dead simulations living on vampirically, freezing all culture and history in their immortal bite' (2008, 3). Baudrillard argued that simulations draw out the real and attempt to enhance it in order to reach the 'more real than real' and boost our sense of the real's presence, but in doing so constitute a 'hyperreality' which replaces and supersedes the real. The contemporary plethora of gothic imagery (also, 'clothes, puppets, masks, lifestyles, dolls, sweets...in a thoroughly commodified context', 9) is in fact a panicky attempt to touch base, to reassert the real, to 'preserve the illusion of darkness, death, and sexuality in a world given over to the omnipresence of virtual light and life on screens' (3). Botting's claim is that contemporary Gothic forms, 'though celebrated for their subcultural and subversive status, for their fantastic disclosure of another, "realer" if darker reality are inextricably entangled in webs of simulation' (4). They exist to put us in thrilling touch with – and to confirm the continued existence of – violent and abject reality but are themselves now simulations which actually deter any such contact. There are many, for example, who seek to emulate vampirism in their real lives, precisely to provoke a bristling and charged contact with some authentic reality. 'But bloody, violent, horrifying reality – shaped by Gothic figures and horror fictions – is returned as Gothic horror by the media...What appear as counters to heritage or disneygothic, horror and abjection, remain tied to simulation' (5-6). The Gothic, always hitherto concerned with the limits of modern culture and identity, a crucial site at which the modern could be critically interrogated, 'begins to eat itself: consuming its own conventions in a highly reflexive play of recycled features. Wes Craven's *Scream* offers a good example of horror's "devouring and regurgitating" of its own history (Kermode)'. Everything is subject to gothicization (12). Ultimately, if we go along with Botting's Baudrillardian assessment of contemporary culture, this means that the gothic must lose its fangs, its transgressive power. Spreading like a virus throughout the culture it becomes generalised, all-pervasive, a familiar haunting, 'without limit, otherness, or difference' (11).

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November 2008