AFTERWORD

Memory, Genre, and Self-Narrativization; Or, Why I Should Be a More Content Horror Fan

—David Church

As a child inexplicably drawn to the morbid and macabre, I recall a time when the Universal horror classics were just no longer enough, but I was forbidden from watching R-rated films—thus banning the "bad" horror that intrigued me all the more through its prohibition. For sleepovers at a friend's house, my comrades and I routinely trekked down to "Family Video," the local small-town video store, and perused the "Horror" section located just adjacent to the flimsy wooden screen hiding the store's porn offerings from common view. Being a semi-dutiful child, I followed my parents' strictures and intentionally opted for renting those horror flicks that were technically "unrated," shielding myself from self-incrimination with a convenient half-truth that often exposed me to far more violent films than the R-rated alternatives.

From my own skeptical position toward American horror today, however, even this small memory seems quaint when viewed through a more mature awareness of studios' current marketing tactics; the word "unrated" no longer appears in the small print on the back of video boxes, but is typically splayed across DVD covers in dripping red letters, suggesting that this viewing experience will offer something markedly different from the theatrical release. And the films that I surreptitiously viewed as a child—*Maniac* (1980), *The Evil Dead* (1982), *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984)—those early artifacts of the VHS age are now the stuff of seemingly endless remakes, rip-offs, sequels, and throwbacks as the genre lumbers on indefinitely like a zombie with an intact brainstem . . . or so goes the lament.

Of course, as a genre very much driven by profit margins, modern horror has always been prone to such incestuous tendencies, so much so that it can be difficult to distinguish innovations from repetitions—a rhizomatic map would better fit the genre than a straightforward model of evolution. But isn't that precisely part of the genre's charm (and frustration) for those of us with more than a purely academic

interest in its intricacies? Although our own engagement with horror films may develop in a linear fashion across our lifetimes, the genre itself seldom follows any such teleology, often to the consternation of fans. One might, for example, deride *Cloverfield* (2008) as a big-budget descendent of *Gojira* (1954), and of *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), by way of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), yoking together the mockumentary format with the spectacle of a giant monster undertaking urban destruction, but such sentiment does a disservice to the relative value and historical specificity of each film. Because cinematic horror (especially that produced since the mid-twentieth century) is primarily directed toward a youth market, we may spend time gaining (sub-)cultural capital surrounding the genre, only to eventually find ourselves distanced in age and (sub-)cultural competence from the audience currently being catered to—hence the tendency to distrust current trends and seek refuge in nostalgia.

Even if they are separated by only a few years, there is often a cultural divide between "seasoned" fans (and scholar-fans aiming for legitimacy in the academy) who will happily recite the virtues (and the scholarly appraisals) of canonical works like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and teen viewers whose limited experience with those films comes through their contemporary iterations. But we can hardly blame audiences themselves; much as 1930s horror failed to frighten me after a certain age, so do 1970s and 1980s horror films apparently fail to unnerve today's teen viewers accustomed to the quicker editing, higher production values, slicker special effects, and more attractive casts endemic to Hollywood cinema in general. Meanwhile, horror aficionados often struggle for a sense of cultural distinction by retreating into genre currents—independent horror, foreign horror cinemas, historically marginalized horror trends—seemingly less penetrated by "mainstream" consumerism, disavowing the fact that most of these "other" films were likewise made to maximize potential profits.[1]

These comments about the genre and its various audiences are broad strokes, to be sure, but their broadness points to the dilemma addressed in the introduction to this book: how does one interpret recent generic threads without the requisite historical distance for narrativizing them (and, in so doing, ignoring some of their complexity)? How can we speculate about whichever trends will bubble up next without the larger perspective in which to locate current ones? In our attempts to understand the present, we often seem compelled to draw upon the rosiest of personal and cultural memories (as in the brief personal recollection I opened with)—anything to insert artificial chunks of distance between our contemporary selves and some romanticized past when we were perhaps more easily frightened, when the genre still seemed (to us, at least) fresh and new. In conjunction with these autobiographical narratives, we traditionally try to historicize the genre as a linear continuity between individual or clustered texts—much like classical Hollywood

narrative continuity attempts to conceal the unavoidable seams and potentially estranging moments that would otherwise threaten any sense of monolithic unity. And yet we should increasingly resist that discursive urge. Magnifying the many fractures and slippages between disparate historical moments, which are productive of unexpected generic tangents and hybrids, is a way of destabilizing notions of generic continuity and interpreting films on their own terms, becoming a task less intimately entangled with the (sub-)cultural valuations of "authenticity" and "originality" that often infect horror fans (and arguably, scholars too) with nostalgia for perhaps a less complex, cynical time in their own lives.

It is too easy, for instance, to reject much of recent American horror (and, by extension, its audiences) by stacking it up against fans' and scholars' longtime investments in the genre's "progressive" thread of the 1970s—a thread that only really lingers within a few seminal films—and conveniently neglecting the larger share of "undistinguished" horror films produced during that same period. Meanwhile, some of those neglected films have been reanimated in recent years as "paracinema" and the recent trend in neo-exploitation or "grindhouse chic," providing a refuge for disgruntled horror fans with subcultural capital to burn. In the same vein, the mediocre horror of today may become ironically celebrated as the camp of tomorrow, serving the specific interests of genre devotees. Likewise, in any period, there will be a handful of films pushing the envelope of "good taste" in terms of violence; the controversy surrounding the current trend in "torture porn" is little different from that surrounding Herschell Gordon Lewis's films during the mid-1960s, for example.[2] And peering from another angle, the optimist in us may overreach, prematurely reading historical significance into certain texts against our better judgment; one might, for example, strategically ignore the blatant homophobia and xenophobia of Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) in the interest of reading it as a symptomatic post-9/11 horror film—only to have one's worst suspicions confirmed by its sequel.

In any case, it would be difficult to speculate with any degree of confidence about future directions for American horror cinema without falling back upon all-too-familiar discourses about the sameness between texts—at the expense of those smaller, potentially transformative differences that are often subsumed by a historicizing sense of generic continuity. For genre observers, the "return of the repressed" may not just involve the eruption of specific cultural fears at any given historical moment, but also the uncanny reappearance of once-passé horror trends themselves, threatening the tidy chronological categorizations we have previously made for them. Recent years have seen the apparent wax and wane of Asian horror remakes, "torture porn," 1970s and 1980s horror remakes, supernatural horror, zombie films, horror mockumentaries, neo-exploitation, and so on—though these may reappear sooner than expected, not as mere atavisms of continuing historical anxieties, but as temporal ruptures opening toward a multiplicity of diverse generic

possibilities. At the time of this writing, for example, the residual effects upon American horror of a national trauma like 9/11 have yet to be adequately explained, but its aftershocks may reverberate within the genre for years to come. It is impossible to tell exactly what this will look like, though I strongly suspect that it will not occur in directly causal ways suggesting a linear generic evolution, but rather by chaotically sowing the seeds that may spawn or revive generic tangents or anomalies which today might seem largely irrelevant to our current cultural unconscious. Unlike the monstrously exaggerated sense of trauma constructed by more culturally "acceptable" media sources through endless video loops of collapsing buildings and barely veiled expressions of jingoism, the horror genre seems only capable of passively registering the pain. In recent horror films, the very absence of more telling clues about the American mentality in the post-9/11 period is itself perhaps indicative of the extent of the trauma.[3]

Yet, we might also question whether it is even historically valid to claim a select few films as symptomatic of the supposed zeitgeist in any given period—especially when such selections are often based more upon retrospective and highly personal assessments of "quality" than actual audience response to said films. Case in point: if I—unable to fully extricate myself from "within" the discourses of generic continuity structuring my performed self-identity as a fan—attempt to predict anything about the array of tendrils sent out by the American horror film in coming years, I often find myself chasing my own tail, narrativizing the genre in linear ways despite my best efforts to the contrary. As an extended example, I might posit that our conception of the genre in this post-*Scream* (1996) era will remain chiefly haunted by the specter of irony, which has survived more or less unscathed the hasty declarations of its demise in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Irony is certainly nothing new in the horror film—a genre in which viewers may already seek distance (ironic or otherwise) from particularly shocking or ludicrous images—but the locus of irony has increasingly shifted in recent years from audience reception to the texts themselves. When horrified (adult) critics of early-1980s slasher films wrote about teen audiences laughing and cheering at the dismemberment of their on-screen surrogates, they apparently overlooked the possibility of teens' ironic responses to the very excessiveness of those films' conservative ideologies. Viewed at an age when their parents often attempt to instill the mantras of discipline, young audiences already familiar with the so-called subgeneric "rules" of slasher films (drugs, sex, bad behavior = gory death)—"rules" which may actually exist in far fewer films than prevalent stereotype of the subgenre suggests—can mock the ridiculousness of these "fatal," parental-revenge fantasies, making the thrill of horror spectatorship *seem* all the more "transgressive." Later films like *Scream*, however, seem to prepackage that irony as a preferred reading, wresting it away from the avid horror viewers who grew up during the heyday of slasher films (and who might assume themselves

older and wiser than most teen audiences today)—effectively transplanting irony from the films' external reception to a central position within the text itself, hence the backlash from many horror fans threatened by their subcultural competences being spread thinly across the wider viewing public.

Though slasher films often originated as mainstream Hollywood products (despite their wide disrepute, which has frequently rendered them niche objects today),[4] *Scream*'s self-reflexive parody allegedly mainstreamed the subgenre in a way that many horror fans forgave of neo-exploitation pastiches like *The Devil's Rejects* (2005) and *Grindhouse* (2007). Where *Scream* and its sequels disparage the conventions of 1980s slasher films (even as they ironically play by those same rules), the recent wave of "grindhouse chic" blatantly celebrates the pleasures of 1970s sleaze, often through aggressively ironic appeals to political incorrectness aimed primarily at male horror buffs. Though their respective tones and intended audiences may somewhat differ, we might see the prepackaged textual uses of irony in both cycles as roughly comparable, each alternating between tongue-in-cheek intertextuality and straight-faced brutality. With these films intentionally playing to viewers' (sub-)cultural competences, horror audiences may increasingly negotiate their own distanced responses in highly contingent ways, depending on how they wish to perform a sense of subcultural "authenticity" through accepting or rejecting certain elements of the films' ironic modes of address. For example, in conversation with avid horror devotees about *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003), one might play "spot the semi-obscure intertextual references" for subcultural one-upmanship, or privilege the film's hallucinatory, down-the-rabbit-hole tone through comparisons to the disjointedness of low-budget exploitation films; however, when talking with supposedly less "seasoned" viewers, one might declare the film a "sell out" for "exploiting" exploitation (if such a thing can be said without, dare I say, a trace of irony), or criticize as too "mainstream" the same music-video-style editing and garish *mise-en-scène* that help create the film's disorienting effects.

My point here is that such situational contortions—which should also be growing readily visible in the tortured logic of this pseudo-fannish scribble—can be as much inspired by our personal self-histories as the misleadingly linear conceptions of generic history we are inclined to interpret. As younger generations of horror viewers grow older and move into increased positions of sociocultural capital (e.g., as tastemakers or even as fans-turned-filmmakers, such as Kevin Williamson or Quentin Tarantino), they may look back toward horror's cherished place within a pop-culture wasteland tenuously associated with romanticized memories of youth. These ironic-cum-nostalgic celebrations of horror's past may partially account for the cyclical trends in recent American horror—from revisionist takes on the 1980s slasher cycle (which was never as formulaic as films like *Scream* would like us to recall) to slumming through fetishized cultural memories of a thriving

1970s grindhouse scene (with which few contemporary viewers had actual contact). But however appropriate I find it to cite *Scream* and *Grindhouse* as bookends for recent American horror, that choice also unduly narrativizes the genre, stressing broad similarities between rather disparate texts according to qualitative criteria springing from my own taste for certain horror varieties. My broad interpretation assumes (correctly or not) that the slasher film, and the exploitation aesthetic in general, still casts a long shadow over our current conception of American horror—a shadow that temporally overlaps with my personal history as a twenty-something horror fan—so that I tend to neglect other subgenres less inflected with ironic or exploitative connotations, to say nothing of anomalous films that belie any stable sense of generic continuity.

Because the horror genre fuels the (sub-)cultural competences that we acquire over time to legitimize our interests in it, we may interpret its history as a linear narrative so that it conforms to our own linear conceptions of identity; in other words, feeling our remembered personal histories structured by the genre, we can justify those histories by projecting them back onto the genre. As a discursive entity, the genre is partially constructed by our subjectivities, just as the genre itself partially constructs our subjectivities—hence our ever-threatened desire to make chronological sense of the genre based on concepts like "authenticity" and "originality" that we would like to see ourselves performing as individuals or fans or scholars. Challenging generic continuity by treating horror texts as historically specific fragments can likewise threaten to fragment the sense of self constructed through our academic knowledge of genre history or our techniques of subcultural belonging. Of course, we cannot step outside discourse, but perhaps we can work to modify it by resorting less to habitual experiences of pastness, and instead increasingly amplify those moments of difference within and between texts: those oft-fleeting cracks in historical or narratological coherence, which we may only instinctively perceive, but which radiate potentiality in non-linear directions across (and against) time.[5] In focusing on how horror is always in a process of becoming other than its current incarnation—with repetition understood less as stagnation than as the eternal return of difference—we can examine how its texts work uniquely in each historical moment, without fetishizing generic continuity as a primary source of symptomatic readings or standards of value.

More than one director has called horror a forgiving genre: give audiences some guts and scares, and they'll forgive some rough edges along the way. Though we, as scholars and fans, may hope to demand a bit more than that from the films we love, just as we demand much of ourselves, we might as well learn to be similarly forgiving of the genre and its seeming discontents—especially the ones that stare back at us as we stare into the cracked mirror of horror. Recognizing our own embeddedness in self-narratives need not erase our compulsive desire to construct them; rather,

in gaining a critical awareness of the "generic" patterns that we re-present to (and about) ourselves, we might pleasurably mutate our self-conceptions in creative ways by embracing the fluidity of those numerous historical moments through which our identities are constantly re-formed. If we expect the horror genre to keep revitalizing itself with fresh pulses of creativity, even when current demands for "authenticity" and "originality" remain dubious at best, we should not neglect a corresponding aesthetic in our ongoing projects of piecing together those multiplicitous fragments that, for better or worse, make us who we are.

Another small memory now: in those first few months after the Twin Towers fell, I found myself an incoming college freshman, moving away from the comforts of home and out into what seemed a rapidly changing world. During that time, I first saw *Donnie Darko* (2001), a horror/sci-fi/teen-romance hybrid that has since become inseparable from my personal recollections of those strange days. Although filmed at least a year before 9/11 and set in 1988, the time-bending story of a young man's impending personal apocalypse felt especially prescient at the time. Re-watching the film today is itself an exercise in time travel for me. Its evocation of free-floating teenage angst is tempered by an equally ironic and nostalgic sincerity linked to its many intertextual references to 1980s music and cinema. It is this overarching sense of tension that always reminds me of the emotional numbness I forced upon myself as a defense against the ceaseless post-9/11 media barrage. In a particularly memorable scene in a near-deserted movie theater, a temporal portal opens in a screen showing *The Evil Dead*—one of the beloved horror films from my childhood—while Donnie receives an ominous premonition, his love interest sleeping peacefully beside him all the while. In contrast to much 1980s revivalism of recent years, the *Evil Dead* reference here seems neither cloyingly ironic nor mocking in spirit; instead, it resonates with my own fond memories of the genre. By using the horror film as a potential site of wistful emotion, not just a source of fear or humor, *Donnie Darko* momentarily pierced the strong cynicism that partially comprised my self-identity in the immediate post-9/11 moment. In fragmenting and rearranging horror's generic conventions, collapsing the temporal and generic distance between these two very different films, a relative anomaly like *Donnie Darko* has come to movingly embody the liminal space I experienced during that brief but violent rupturing of national and personal narratives. Recent American horror films may mean many things to many people, but perhaps these films might hold overlooked potential for personal and cultural memory to encourage productive transformations, if only as a way of reconciling within ourselves our fraught relationship with the genre we love.

NOTES

1. See Mark Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital, and the Production of Cultural Distinctions," *Cultural Studies* 16.2 (2002): 306–22.

2. Perhaps it is little coincidence that several of Lewis's films have also been remade in recent years, including *2001 Maniacs* (2005) and *The Wizard of Gore* (2007).

3. The frequent conflation of absence and loss in trauma is examined at length in Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 43–85.

4. See Matt Hills, "Para-Paracinema: The *Friday the 13th* Film Series as Other to Trash and Legitimate Film Cultures," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 219–39.

5. In the spirit of speculation, my cues here are vaguely inspired by Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and by Robert B. Ray's use of the Surrealist strategy of "irrational enlargement" upon those strange and unexplained details in Hollywood films that inadvertently inspire reflection upon the multiplicity of creative possibilities that are commonly subsumed by traditional narrative choices and generic constraints. See Robert B. Ray, *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 64–68.

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