



# Apprehension Engines

## The New Independent 'Prestige Horror'

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UNEARTHLY DRONES, metallic whines and ominous clanks emanate from a contraption consisting of several wooden boxes with a guitar-like neck, onto which are affixed magnets, metal wires and coils, and a hurdy-gurdy crank (Figure 1.1). The 'Apprehension Engine' is the nickname for this unique musical instrument, commissioned by Mark Korven, composer of *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015), and designed/built by guitar maker Tony Duggan-Smith. As its name suggests, the foreboding ambience created by this device is intended to instil anxiety and dread via eldritch sounds that cannot be easily associated with conventional musical instruments or arrangements. Inspired by his score for *The Witch*, Korven commissioned this experimental instrument to lend his film scores a more original sound than the overused digital samples previously at his disposal.<sup>1</sup> Both the ethos and the effects of this device provide a useful way to approach a new breed of independently produced horror films that merge art-cinema style with decentred genre tropes, privileging lingering dread and visual restraint over audio-visual shock and monstrous disgust. As 'apprehension engines' in their own right, these films represent 'a new-wave horror that diverges from the assembly line and strays from

overpitched archetypes', sharing with Korven and Duggan-Smith's instrument a sense of handmade artistry, low-budget ingenuity and striking originality – all in the service of producing affective tones that unsettle both viewers and the genre itself.<sup>2</sup>

The recent rise to prominence of films such as *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *The Witch*, *The Blackcoat's Daughter* (Osgood Perkins, 2015), *I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House* (Osgood Perkins, 2016), *It Comes at Night* (Trey Edward Shults, 2017) and *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018) is among the horror genre's most widely discussed recent developments. Variouslly dubbed 'prestige horror', 'indie horror', 'smart horror', 'quiet horror', 'elevated horror' and 'post-horror', all emerged from the crucible of major film festivals like Sundance and Toronto with significant critical buzz for supposedly transcending the horror genre's oft-presumed lowbrow status. Heralded for possessing an aesthetically higher tone than the average multiplex horror film, these films have received disproportionate critical acclaim for catering to more rarefied tastes, even as casual viewers and even some horror fans have proved more ambivalent towards these films' aesthetic strategies. In this chapter, however, I will engage most prominently with the films' critical nomination as 'prestige horror', since this particular nomenclature helps us not only to situate them within a longer history of horror texts that have seemingly risen above the genre's disrepute, but also marks them off as a different development due to so many of these films originating from the independent production/distribution market during a close cluster of years.

Film critics have deemed various productions 'prestige' in earlier periods of horror film history, usually based on some combination of high production values, the presence of an established auteur or major star, or an adaptation from middlebrow, often literary source material. Some of the more canonical horror films – including *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931), *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931), *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942), *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963), *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1990), *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) and *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) – emerged from such industrial and publicity strategies. In many cases, critics claimed these films to be oriented more towards 'adult' viewers than the genre's dominant reputation as juvenilia, more attuned to the pleasures of female viewers or worthy of participation by above-the-line personnel

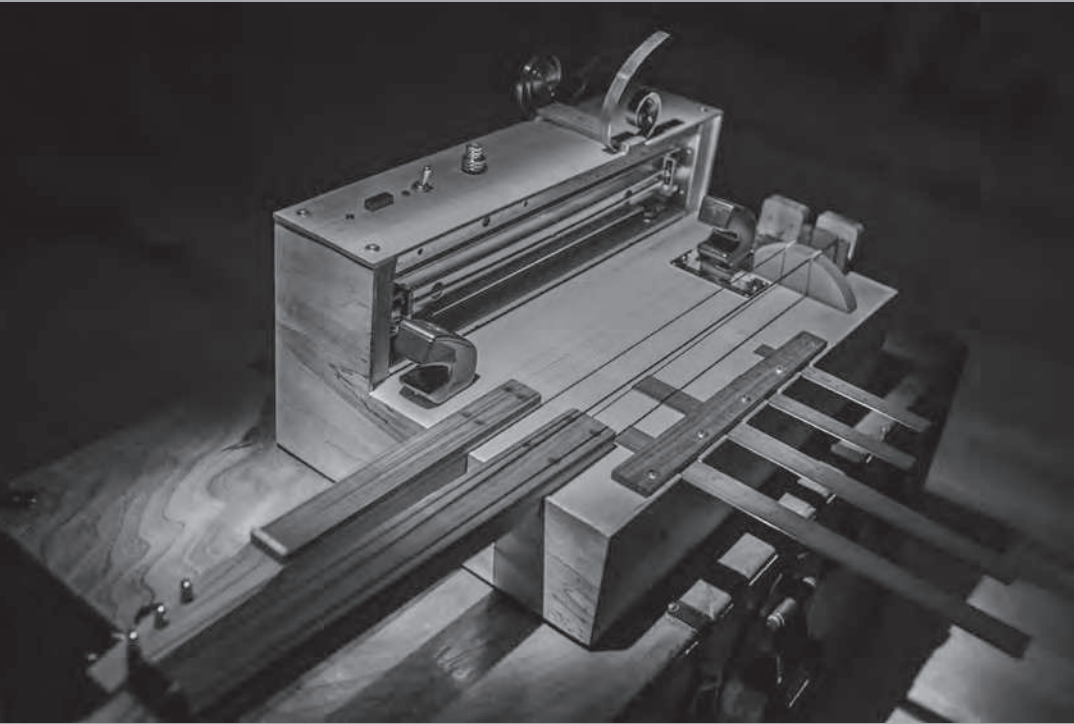


Figure 1.1. Mark Korven's 'Apprehension Engine'. Photograph, Kai Korven.

who might ‘elevate’ such an otherwise lowly genre.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the ‘prestige-ness’ of horror has generally been constructed against the monolithic image of relatively young, male, uncouth viewership. This is not to say, of course, that prestige horror films are bereft of shock value or have enjoyed unanimously positive critical reception – witness Michael Powell’s career implosion for directing *Peeping Tom* (1960) or the various controversies about lewd and sacrilegious imagery in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), for instance – but that the above qualities of prestige-ness frequently serve as mitigating factors against negative criticism. And importantly, most of these earlier films predominantly obey classical narrative conventions, not the qualities of art cinema seen in the new wave of independent ‘prestige horror’. By occupying a stylistic position closer to ‘difficult’ art cinema than populist genre cinema, yet being marketed and released to multiplexes as potential crossover films, the new prestige horror offers wider audiences an expanded view of what the horror film can feel like, but – as Rotten Tomatoes reviews and CinemaScore audience polls reveal – at the cost of potentially alienating many of the genre’s quotidian viewers.

### Minimalist art-horror

Horror cinema has long been a consistently popular but critically denigrated genre, often derided for its corporeal appeals, fantastical conceits and thematic focus on evil, monstrosity and death. Accordingly, it is a critical commonplace for reviewers to celebrate horror texts that privilege haunting atmospheres and indirect chills over shocking spectacles and visceral disgust. Joan Hawkins has argued that, despite the cultural stratification of tastes that privilege cognition over bodily sensations, art films trade in many of the same capacities to shock, disgust and offend as horror films – albeit framed for supposedly different purposes (e.g. symbolism over literalism). For Hawkins, then, ‘art-horror’ films represent a key site for levelling the taste hierarchies between so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.<sup>4</sup> Although Hawkins is primarily interested in comparing the shock effect of taboo spectacle and avant-garde distanciation, she also notes how an art-horror film’s ‘affective properties tend to be divorced from its “artistic” and “poetic” ones, so that it’s difficult to find a critical language that allows us to speak about the film as a whole’.<sup>5</sup> Hence, even when horror films bear the more subtle qualities of art cinema, as outlined by David

Bordwell – including drifting and open-ended narratives, ambiguous and psychologically complex characters, and spatial/temporal manipulation (e.g. continuity violations, durational realism)<sup>6</sup> – critics often downplay such traits in order to preserve the hierarchies that keep the horror genre near the bottom of the ladder of cultural taste.

The new wave of prestige horror films exhibits many of the art-cinema traits noted by Bordwell, but without so many of the genre's critically countervailing traits like graphic violence/gore, unrealistic monsters and so on. Indeed, these films' difference from the mainstream horror film is primarily one of *tone*. As Douglas Pye argues, a film's tone resides in how its dramatic content is stylistically conveyed via the construction of an overall mood that shapes our affective horizon as viewers. For Pye, tone can register through a film's apparent generic or formal/stylistic distance from established norms – and is especially apparent when alternative uses of film form unsettle our conventional ways of approaching generic material.<sup>7</sup> Stylistically, these particular horror films favour minimalism over maximalism, eschewing jump scares, frenetic editing and energetic and/or handheld cinematography in favour of cold and distanced shot framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movements and unhurried narrative pacing. This tendency towards a 'vulnerable stillness' increases the viewer's dread that something might occur at any moment, affectively stretching out the temporal experience of the film.<sup>8</sup> In *It Follows*, for instance, David Robert Mitchell uses slow 360-degree pans, static long shots and slow zooms that allow the viewer to share the protagonist's paranoid searching of her visual field for a perpetually approaching monster that can take anyone's form, while *The Witch* presents interiors as chiaroscuro tableaux and exteriors as distanced vistas where even a waving tree branch conjures supernatural fears among its family of early American colonists. As critics observe, these films avoid 'the annoying modern tendency towards wobblicam and over-editing' and 'don't fit neatly into the "rising action, jump scare, rinse, repeat" model' of mainstream Hollywood horror.<sup>9</sup>

In many respects, these stylistic choices recall the American 'smart films' described by Jeffrey Sconce as an 'indie' aesthetic developed in the late 1990s that favours 'long-shots, static composition, and sparse editing' to suggest a hip, ironic distance from white, middle-class conformity and the 'horrors of life under advanced capitalism'.<sup>10</sup> Although film-makers like Todd Solondz, Paul Thomas Anderson and Alexander Payne used this style to produce a quirky or dark comedic tone, Todd Haynes's deadly serious

*Safe* (1995) perhaps comes closest to evoking the nebulously defined (and possibly imagined) threats, the overwhelming dread and the narrative ambiguity seen in the new prestige horror films. Their visual style and slow pace thus suggest a cool and ironic distance from conventional horror tropes themselves, as though the film-makers are visually signalling the space they wish to occupy between the art/indie film and the mainstream Hollywood horror film. After all, these are not ‘smart’ horror films in the winking sense of humorously oversaturated references to genre conventions – see the heavily allusive intertextuality of ‘smart’ meta-horror films like *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (Wes Craven, 1994), *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2012) or *The Final Girls* (Todd Strauss-Schulson, 2015) – and hence they seem less blatantly indebted to popular horror cinema for direct inspiration. That is, these latter films use self-reflexivity to ‘smartly’ play with the genre’s more tired conventions. By contrast, *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) has been critically dubbed a ‘smart’ horror film less for playing with long-time conventions (though it does that as well) than for using the horror genre as a timely platform to ‘smartly’ intervene in American racial-equality debates during the Black Lives Matter era – albeit remaining a more populist intervention by evincing fewer of the art-film stylistics that mark the new prestige horror films under discussion here.

Confirming Hawkins’s argument, critics often highlight the poetic and dream-like qualities of such films, while typically downplaying the more visceral moments. For instance, *I Am the Pretty Thing* is described as ‘a tone poem’, ‘almost pornographic in its portent, every second of it seductive and ripe with tension, promising money shots that never come’,<sup>11</sup> while a representative review of *The Blackcoat’s Daughter* observes, ‘To call the story a slow burn would be a mischaracterisation of the word *slow*. It’s more like a meditation or a waking nightmare, the kind you’re not actually sure is a dream at all until it’s over and you’re safe again.’<sup>12</sup> Of course, not all films critically ascribed to the new wave of prestige horror share all of these stylistic traits, nor are these traits wholly new or exclusive to the films clustered beneath that banner. Told from the perspective of a female-presenting extraterrestrial who seduces and consumes unsuspecting men, *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) shares the hypnotically languid pace, long shot durations and unsettling musical score of many of the new prestige horror films, albeit in a more science-fiction context. Meanwhile, *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) and *Get Out* bear a less minimalistic style than *It Follows* or *The Witch*, but close temporal proximity to the

latter's critical and commercial success has sometimes caused the former to be retrospectively lumped in with them. By contrast, *The Invitation* (Karyn Kusama, 2015), *Don't Breathe* (Fede Álvarez, 2016) and *mother!* (Darren Aronofsky, 2017) initially share their claustrophobic ambience and shortage of jump scares, but eventually turn towards faster, action-oriented pacing in their final acts. Likewise, *House of the Devil* (Ti West, 2009) predated many of these films but foreshadows their atmospheric restraint, its frequent comparison to the films of John Carpenter another common motif in critical praise for the new prestige horror. Nevertheless, I would posit that the films most often identified as the core examples of new prestige horror bear a distinctly slow, austere and minimalist style for their duration.

Although these films occupy established horror subgenres (ghostly hauntings in *I Am the Pretty Thing*; supernatural curses in *It Follows*; post-apocalyptic survivalism in *It Comes at Night*; demonic possession in *The Blackcoat's Daughter* and *Hereditary*), familiar genre tropes are decentred, making space for characters and viewers alike to soak in contemplative or emotionally fraught moods, not to be shuffled along to the next abrupt scare. As Osgood Perkins, director of *I Am the Pretty Thing* and *The Blackcoat's Daughter*, notes,

I find myself much more turned on by mood and colour and shadow and being observational . . . But I think I couch these movies enough in [genre] – ‘oh, it’s a demonic possession movie’, ‘oh, it’s a ghost story’ – so you can kind of feel the edges, and then be inside that with the character, and feel the human experience within that framework.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, one of the major characteristics of these prestige horror films is a thematic exploration of other negative affects (such as grief, sadness, loss, guilt), with fear serving as a platform for shifting to affects that might be more closely associated with serious dramas. The alternate nomenclature for these films, ‘elevated horror’, speaks to this idea of ‘elevating’ the genre to the higher aesthetic plane that other genres are more likely to call home – hence, genre-mixing in these films can serve as an indicator of their apparent transcendence of ‘pure’ horror – much as Steve Rose’s epithet ‘post-horror’ attempts to distance these films from their capacity to scare.<sup>14</sup> *I Am the Pretty Thing* and *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), for instance, use the figure of the ghost for poetically meditating on mortality, memory and time, while other films have more worldly concerns. *It Follows* explores

issues of sexual shame, the constraints of monogamy and the ethics of sexual communitarianism, sometimes hedging closer to a coming-of-age drama than a horror film, while *The Witch* uses its teenage protagonist's budding sexuality and growing defiance of her family patriarch as a quasi-feminist exploration of puritanical paranoia about unruly female bodies, as though contextualising the historical roots of the sexual shame and control depicted in *It Follows*.<sup>15</sup> *Hereditary*, meanwhile, reworks elements of *Rosemary's Baby* and other occult films via a dysfunctional family drama about a mother's resentment of her children as displaced resentment of her own mother, while *Under the Shadow* (Babak Anvari, 2016), like a more politicised version of *The Bababook*, uses its ghost story to explore the trauma of war and post-revolution life for Iranian women.

In these films, the appearance of the monster itself is frequently downplayed or presented only indirectly – whether turned into an invisible or abstract force (*It Follows*, *It Comes at Night*) or presented as a potential figment of a character's overwrought imagination (*The Witch*, *I Am the Pretty Thing*) or mental illness (*The Blackcoat's Daughter*, *Hereditary*). Even when the monster does appear, it often takes a recognisably human form, not that of a grotesquely inhuman creature. *A Ghost Story* takes this decentring of the conventional monster to an extreme, presenting its titular ghost as an actor under a white sheet with black eyeholes – thus replacing the horror genre's fear-inducing ghosts with a more comic image (à la *Scooby Doo*) that marks the film's closer generic resemblance to an existential drama, much as *Under the Skin* uses a seductive image in its generic border case with science fiction. Rather than the monster serving as the horror genre's conventional emotional locus of fear and disgust (as Noël Carroll has argued<sup>16</sup>), many of these films veer closer to Tzvetan Todorov's concept of 'the fantastic', as narratives rooted in epistemological hesitation over whether apparently supernatural occurrences can be explained away as mere 'uncanny' events with rational elucidation or whether something truly 'marvellous' is afoot.<sup>17</sup> *The Witch*, for example, creates considerable ambiguity about whether a witch has actually beset a colonial family (even when we see the witch early in the film, it is unclear whether these scenes are projections of the family's fears), whether the various travails (child disappearances, crop/livestock failures, etc.) of frontier life are mere projections of puritanical fears about Satan's invisible assaults, or even whether blame can be attributed to the rot on the family's corn (the hallucinogenic ergot fungus has been theorised as a possible scientific explanation for symptoms of bewitchment in early America). In classic art-cinema style,

then, these films predominantly filter their diegetic visions through the vagaries of characters' distressed psychological states, often refusing to confirm or deny the truth of their seemingly supernatural happenings.

Matt Hills argues that horror cinema may be organised less around the object-directed emotions that Carroll privileges and instead 'immerses its audiences in an "anticipatory" mood or ambience that endures across the text', an overwhelming affect of 'objectless anxiety' that may especially linger beyond the text when a film ends without clear narrative resolution.<sup>18</sup> For Hills, horror should be defined more as 'event-based' than 'entity-based', with narrative circumstances and the details of mise-en-scène/cinematography capable of generating horror even in films like *The Haunting* and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), where a monster is never explicitly manifest.<sup>19</sup> This fits the new prestige horror's lessened focus on the terror-inducing monster as the clearly defined locus for horror than on more ambient states of fearful unease; hence, in a film like *It Comes at Night*, there is no 'it' revealed over the course of the film, beyond the literal nightmares among a family of plague survivors. Even in *The Blackcoat's Daughter*, a film with multiple (if indirect) sources of horror, critics emphasise its 'suffocating mood' and 'stillness, quiet, and isolation – the elements that . . . feel like lying alone and awake in a dark house, letting your mind play tricks on you'.<sup>20</sup> As Robert Spadoni argues, atmosphere in horror cinema is often considered secondary and subservient to narrative concerns, but affective moods like dread prove that atmosphere is functionally inseparable from narrative – operating less as accompaniment than *culmination* of certain scenes – and thus 'may have as special a relationship to the *absence* of narrative as it does to narrative'.<sup>21</sup> He suggests that atmosphere and narrative exist in tension with each other, with one side filling in when the other is used more sparsely.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, I would also highlight the ambient scores and claustrophobic sound design used in these films, from Rich Vreeland's eerie retro-synth vibes in *It Follows* to Korven's more abstract, quasi-medieval noisescapes for *The Witch*. If orchestral scores traditionally cater to object/character-based emotions, then these more affectively immersive, dread-inducing uses of music underscore the films' apt description as 'apprehension engines'.

Much as horror films may shift from narrative to atmosphere, it is precisely this ability for horror to shift fluidly from objectless affect to object-directed emotion (and vice versa)<sup>23</sup> that, I would argue, allows the genre's traditional emotion (fear) to be shifted towards other negative

affects in these prestige horror films, as also illustrated by their open endings. Unlike the near-obligatory jump scares that abruptly punctuate the final frames of many recent Hollywood horror releases, the new prestige horror films extend their sense of fantastic hesitation and ambient affect by way of abrupt endings more akin to art-cinema ambiguity than delivering one last scare before the lights come up. In *It Follows*, Jay and her new boyfriend Paul walk hand-in-hand together thinking they have resolved the curse, but their 'happy' ending is ironically undercut by their ignorance that they are still likely being followed by the entity in the distant background, whereas *The Witch* ends with Thomasin, her family's sole survivor, joining a coven of witches in the woods and levitating into the trees (another ironically 'happy' ending?), but whether this is a fantasy sequence or an actual event is left unclear.

#### Indie credibility as alternative 'prestige'

What separates the new wave of prestige horror from earlier 'prestige' productions are stronger affinities with the lower-budget, quasi-generic category of 'indie' cinema than with major studio productions. The term 'indie', as applied to cinema, largely developed from the 1990s rise of film festivals like Sundance and was subsequently adopted by the short-lived 'Indiewood' specialty divisions which developed within the major studios in the early 2000s, whereas the new prestige horror films have emerged at a moment when the majors have again retracted from the independent film market.<sup>24</sup> Yet, Jamie Sexton argues that the idea of 'indie-horror' serves as a conceptual Other to American independent cinema, since the various qualities attributed to indie cinema (e.g. authorial originality, formal innovation and self-consciousness, inclusion of marginalised characters/voices) are not often attributed to horror, particularly given the genre's popular association with well-trodden generic conventions, commercial motivations and lower bodily appeals. Indeed, apart from character-centred dramas, horror films constitute perhaps the most prolific genre within the annual output of American independent film-makers, but only certain types of films are discursively positioned as 'indie', regardless of whether truly produced independently from the major studios.<sup>25</sup> And yet, these films all managed to seemingly transcend their generic roots by evincing a contra-Hollywood style at the blurred borderline of art-cinema narration and indie distribution practices.

Whereas many of horror's earlier prestige films were promoted as singular, high-profile events transcending common generic mediocrity, often appearing years apart from each other, the new wave instead resembles an emergent trend, with multiple films largely following the same trajectory from festival to multiplex in close succession since 2014. Although some of these films also played at Fantastic Fest, Fantasia Film Festival and other genre film festivals populated by independent horror films, the fact that these particular films broke out at prominent non-genre festivals is noteworthy. Even as some of the major film festivals have sidebars dedicated to cultish genre films (e.g. Toronto's Midnight Madness series), many prestige horror films were screened in regular competition. This may stand as a testament to their inability to be qualitatively segregated based on genre alone, though former Midnight Madness programmer Colin Geddes deems this part of a longer pattern of cultural gatekeepers periodically flirting with the horror genre as a redeemable object.<sup>26</sup>

With more conventional generic appeal than the typical indie drama or comedy, these prestige horror films held more crossover potential than the average art-house offering and hence earned distribution deals for limited and expanded release into multiplexes. Genre-centric producer-distributors like Lionsgate and Blumhouse have been responsible for leveraging independently produced horror films into mainstream distribution deals, thereby helping shape several of the largest trends in twenty-first-century horror cinema (such as the 'torture porn' and found-footage cycles). By contrast, many of the new prestige horror films have instead used distributors with more cultural capital – such as rising indie distributor A24, which gained significant repute as the producer-distributor of best picture Oscar winner, *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016).<sup>27</sup> In 2016, for instance, A24's *The Witch* was the seventh-highest-grossing horror film of the year at the US box office, earning over \$25 million, well above more established properties like *Blair Witch* (Adam Wingard, 2016).<sup>28</sup> Hence, these independently produced, low-budget films clearly demonstrated their earning power (especially given their outsized budget-to-return ratios) by contending alongside major studio productions.

James Kendrick compares the American horror genre to a pendulum swinging periodically between spiritual/supernatural and materialist/graphic horror films, with the post-*Scream* neo-slasher cycle followed by an early 2000s trend towards ghost films (*The Sixth Sense*, *The Others* (Alejandro Amenebar, 2001)) that eventually yielded to the mid-2000s 'torture porn' cycle (*Saw* (James Wan, 2004), *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005)).<sup>29</sup> Focusing

primarily on independent films that did not achieve wide crossover visibility (such as the early works of Mike Flanagan and Ti West), Hawkins uses the alternate sobriquet ‘quiet horror’ to describe the post-9/11 return to the gothic as an outgrowth of indie horror production that only became a wider market trend circa 2013.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, compared to the mainstream horror genre’s most popular trends since the turn of the century, most of the new prestige horror films are considerably less violent and more supernaturally suggestive than the graphic gore of the post-9/11 torture porn (with some exceptions like *The Eyes of My Mother* (Nicolas Pesce, 2016) and *Hereditary*). Torture porn’s divisively violent and nihilistic tone ultimately proved less popular (and thus less profitable) with general audiences than supernatural horror films whose visual restraint was more broadly palatable.<sup>31</sup>

Following Kendrick and Hawkins, we can likewise see a swing back towards supernatural topics in the post-torture-porn box-office popularity of films like *Insidious* (James Wan, 2011), *Sinister* (Scott Derrickson, 2012), *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013), *Oculus* (Mike Flanagan, 2013) and *Crimson Peak* (Guillermo del Toro, 2015). For my purposes, it is useful to see the new prestige horror films as an outgrowth of this supernatural revival, even as their austere style differentiates them from the more clichéd aspects of such mainstream horror films – especially the predominant use of jump scares as an accelerationist assault on the viewer’s senses.<sup>32</sup> As *The Telegraph*’s Anne Billson suggests,

Recent high-profile horror films such as *Annabelle* [John R. Leonetti, 2014], *Jessabelle* [Kevin Greutert, 2014] and *The Woman in Black 2: Angel of Death* [Tom Harper, 2014] founder on sloppy storytelling and an over-reliance on hoary old methods of making us jump, but are still a welcome sign of the decline of noughties torture-porn, an unremittingly grim ordeal not only for the unfortunate characters, but for audiences as well.<sup>33</sup>

Films like *Insidious* and *The Conjuring* actually received very positive reviews as gore-free throwbacks to old-fashioned haunted-house scares – including plaudits for *Saw* director James Wan finally ‘making good’ on his torture-porn roots with these two high-profile films – confirming the old pattern that horror films with higher budgets and less graphic violence tend to earn stronger critical acclaim. Yet, the fact that the overuse of jump scares quickly became target for criticism of these supernatural

films suggests how even more reputable productions like *The Conjuring* can be negatively affected by subsequent imitators, and hence how fragile the horror genre's reputability ever truly is.

### Prestige or pretension: critical vs popular reception

The art/auteur vs horror/genre divide is reflected most strongly in the notable disjunction between high praise from film-literate viewers (professional critics, genre fans) and disappointment expressed by more populist viewers as these prestige films crossed over to multiplexes. Whereas these films earned very strong reviews from most film critics on the basis of their distinction from more conventional Hollywood fare, broad-based websites like IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes, along with audience-polling services like CinemaScore, demonstrate far lower scores from general viewers: *It Comes at Night* and *Hereditary* respectively earned 'D' and 'D-' CinemaScore grades, for example, despite earning critical plaudits. According to reviewers, these are 'no jump-scare, teen-bait multiplex horror movie[s]', but instead 'make . . . the viewer work for gratification' and 'cherish . . . the intelligence of [their] audience'.<sup>34</sup> Negative reviews from casual viewers, meanwhile, criticise the films' slow pacing, ambiguous endings and lack of conventional monsters/thrills, deeming the films boring, confusing, not scary and utterly unsatisfying; indeed, the vast majority of audience criticism hinges precisely on the traits of art cinema that these films display. Misleadingly genre-centric trailers (especially by A24) have been suggested as one reason for this disappointment: 'One hallmark of the new wave of prestige horror is that the movies are often nothing like the trailers . . . Cutting together duplicitous trailers to bait a broader audience into seeing these very good movies seems like the best of a lot of bad options.'<sup>35</sup>

But even among the minority of professional critics who gave negative reviews of these films, the same traits that they might praise in an international art film – stylistic self-consciousness, mood over narrative, cryptic character motivations, depressive affect – are here deemed faults by virtue of their presence in a feature-length horror film. Hence, *The Witch* is a 'witches' brew of half-formed subplots, under-baked themes, a grating score and unlikable characters' that 'needs to be less proud of itself and yeah, it needs to be scarier'.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, *The Blackcoat's Daughter* is 'built around elliptical vagaries' but is unable 'to channel the story through

emotion, spreading itself thin across themes of alienation, mourning and fears of abandonment'.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, 'setting a bunch of people loose on the screen and telling them to mope until something supernatural emerges, then calling it a tone poem about loss, is no way to keep an audience entertained'.<sup>38</sup> And '[t]hose expecting a horror movie that's filled with a *lot* of those gross and scary moments will likely be disappointed' by *It Comes at Night*,

while those who might appreciate the film's less horrific storytelling will probably be scared away by the marketing. One thing's for sure: No one who sees this is going to come out of it thinking it was any kind of fun; it's one of the bleakest movies to be released this year.<sup>39</sup>

In short, for nonplussed viewers both professional and casual, these films may be stylish, moody and technically accomplished – but they are not conventionally 'fun'. Their affective tone may feel more oppressive or alienating than sensational, and their narratives may read as 'yet another would-be art piece that mistakes ambiguity for complexity'.<sup>40</sup>

Horror fans who self-identify with higher amounts of genre literacy and subcultural capital, however, are the ones most likely to be regular posters on horror-centric discussion boards and are more likely to rank these among the best horror films of the year. On Reddit's 'Horror' board, for instance, *It Follows* and *The Witch* topped the fan rankings of 'Top 20 Films' for 2015 and 2016 respectively, with the other new prestige horror movies ranking highly as well.<sup>41</sup> If these films' detractors cannot adequately reconcile art cinema with horror cinema, their high-minded defenders (in the words of one reviewer) 'argue that you need to reconsider your expectations for "horror", but I can understand if the mainstream movie-goer would take the upcoming *Annabelle: Creation* [David F. Sandberg, 2017] over a more contemplative film'.<sup>42</sup> As Hills observes, it is common for horror fans to justify their love for a devalued genre by privileging connoisseurship – whether framed through auteurism, aesthetics, genre history, etc. – and hence their ability *not* to be scared like more 'naive' viewers or non-fans. This often means privileging certain horror films for their capacity to inspire affects beyond fear, particularly when those other affects allow fans to uphold horror as more of a 'mind genre' than a 'body genre'.<sup>43</sup> It is not difficult to see how the new prestige horror films, with their minimalist emphasis on tone and

ambiguity over the crude mechanics of delivering scares, would seem ready-made for this fan-cultural rhetoric.

Yet, the outsized critical acclaim earned by these few examples of a genre that has been so often pilloried by critics has also inspired some backlash among long-time horror fans who either accuse these films of being overrated or being guilty of not representing ‘straight-up horror’ – a strategy of intra-subcultural distinction that largely hinges upon these films’ apparent distance from some imagined generic ‘core’. As one fan writer astutely observes, ‘By calling something “prestige horror” or “smart horror”, we [fans] are inadvertently (or maybe intentionally, for some) putting down other equally valid movies in the genre – and subsequently the fans who like them.’<sup>44</sup> In other words, by occupying the intersection of art cinema and genre cinema, these slow-paced and sometimes gore-averse films may have become ‘safer’ for middlebrow reclamation, albeit at the expense of films that may also be worthy of critical attention but lack such a rarefied aesthetic. On the one hand, then, some fans may prefer generically ‘purer’ horror films with more minoritising potential to *épater la bourgeoisie*; but, on the other hand, some fans resent how the critical praise lavished on these select films does not so much universalise the genre’s overall cultural standing as preserve the genre’s status as a ‘bad object’ transcended by the prestige few.

In sum, fans, critics and casual viewers all remain haunted by the dominant association of horror as a populist genre – albeit for different reasons. These films’ divisive reception demonstrates that art-horror’s disrepute may have less to do with horror’s appeals to the body than its expected appeals to entertainment value. If even viewers who self-identify as possessing high degrees of (sub)cultural capital are far more likely to engage with one side of the art/genre binary when considering culturally ‘lower’ genres than higher genres, then horror’s cultural disrepute will remain largely in place. But the fact that generic appeals can allow the new prestige horror films to find larger audiences beyond the art-house circuit does offer some hope that aesthetically different uses of the genre can achieve some (limited) mainstream visibility. Whether broader, more populist audiences will adjust their generic expectations accordingly, as the new independent prestige horror trend continues, remains an open question.

## Notes

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