

A TELLTALE NARRATIVE:  
AMERICAN HORROR FILM AND METACINEMA

by

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One common misconception about horror fans that I experienced in online forums and dark film club rooms over the last twenty years is that we love “trash” cinema. Horror fans do not thrive on trash; we find genuine love for the labors of the macabre, even when those efforts do not produce a critical darling. After all, how many films in the horror genre were once deemed indecent throwaways yet are now counted amongst cinema’s classics and deemed worthy of respect by film academics and critics alike? These are the works of Tod Browning and James Whale through George A. Romero and Wes Craven, and there are newer works that deserve the same treatment. Consider this, then, my love letter to American horror films – the good, the bad, and the hilariously awful – and to its unwavering spirit and all the frights to come.

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## ABSTRACT

The film genre of horror will not and possibly cannot die. The genre's metacinema tradition existed in the first flickers of the motion picture industry with its reliance on adaptation and serialization, and it continues, producing along the way an expanding range of scholarship. To understand the trajectory of current genre trends is to examine horror's inherently meta nature—its need to reference itself and its audience's growing awareness of horror's intertextuality.

With metanarratives as the focus of analysis, a singular, linear progression of the genre emerges. This progression links films to one another through their reflexivity; it relies less upon historical categorizations that group films on the basis of dates or production cycles. Metatextual remnants, such as characters like Igor in any *Frankenstein* iteration, carry on through decades of films in the form of references, adaptations, and fourth-wall breaks, resulting in a visible metanarrative within the horror genre. By confronting tropes self-referentially, meta becomes a language that horror filmmakers use to speak to their audiences, to other filmmakers, and to the genre itself.

*Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006) achieves meta status by creating multiple points of view through careful camerawork that invites an audience to examine its understanding of horror. Films like *Scream 4* (2011), however, demonstrate the risk of relying too heavily on a metanarrative to stand in place of a coherent story, especially with an audience aware that certain meta elements are expected in a film franchise. A crucial difference between most of the overt meta-horror films of the 2010s and their predecessors, including *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994) and the original

*Scream* (1996), is the purposeful use of meta. Whereas horror films of the 1990s and 2000s use meta to engage audiences with reminders of the real world, meta-horror films of the 2010s devolve into satire without advancing a metanarrative conversation.

The horror genre is still recovering from its most meta era of the last three decades with a better appreciation for what meta can do when employed strategically and with knowledge of its various imitations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Horror is the Schrödinger's Cat of film genres, seemingly neither dead nor alive but in a constant state of dying. However, whether one looks to the films themselves or their critique, horror has been very much alive and thriving since Thomas Edison produced *The Execution of Mary Stuart* (1895), one of the first film sequences intended to produce a sense of dread in its audience. The simple editing technique used to depict the monarch's public decapitation led to more advanced special effects that future filmmakers would expand upon, including Edison himself with the production of the first American horror film, *Frankenstein* (1910), a fitting choice given the amount of adaptations and re-imaginings that would follow throughout the century. Despite the lulls in quality and commercial viability, American horror's lasting presence should be celebrated rather than mourned as it continues to persevere with a diverse range of films released each year without signs of slowing.

Over a decade ago, Steffen Hantke outlined the perpetual anxiety surrounding horror films in "Academic Film Criticism, the Rhetoric of Crisis, and the Current State of American Horror Cinema." When examining critiques of the genre, Hantke pinpointed the singular issue that hinders progress within the field of study and furthers the notion that American horror is dying out: Horror academics and professional critics are typically fans. This would not be such a drastic statement if it were not for the compounding factors of shame and overall displeasure with the genre. The fact that academics who cannot shake feelings of embarrassment associated with their chosen field, and who are also dissatisfied with the caliber of horror films produced, are fans themselves is the

reason for the ever-present accusations of stagnation in American horror discourse. Negativity from those who, however ashamedly, admit to enjoying the genre keeps critique focused on a select group of canonical American films and directors without moving forward. The solution, then, is a shift in critical paradigms “[if] not in their role as academics, then in their role as fans” (Hantke 200). Simply, it is time for American horror scholarship and its critics to progress beyond the need to legitimize the field in the eyes of other scholars and to follow the precedent put forth by the genre itself, to accept that negativity may always surround how the field is perceived, and to take up Hantke’s challenge.

This spirit of re-evaluation and expansion of the canon with a new critical lens allows the horror genre the same intellectual treatment granted to other contemporary films, i.e. the application of structuralism and post-structuralist analysis, specifically and most tantalizingly the use of meta-narratives. More than any other genre, horror tends to fall within a meta-cinematic tradition, meaning that a film’s plot or characters are in some way self-referential to the genre or to films in general and rely upon the audience’s pre-existing knowledge. While film scholars or historians may not use the term “meta” ubiquitously, most do acknowledge horror’s ability to provide social commentary along with cultural analysis. Meta-narrative horror films are not a modern subgenre of American horror; they are the genre, and that can, at best, create a legacy of intertextuality between films but, at worst, perpetuates reductive criticism that cements tropes in public opinion even when the films no longer rely on them. Meta is not unlike cinematic sound. Sound that occurs within the world of a film is diegetic, such as footsteps or music playing on a radio; it has a logical reason to be present. Non-diegetic

sound is that of the soundtrack and other sounds outside the film's diegesis, or its immediate narrative. Meta functions in both diegetic and non-diegetic ways. Characters watching a horror film within another horror film constitute diegetic meta, representing a desire to communicate with the genre. Non-diegetic meta is the reflection of cultural issues, such as race or gender, that are not directly addressed within the film but are immediately recognized by the audience's experiences.

Thomas Edison's work in the film industry's infancy, for example, perfectly encapsulates the development of horror films in the United States: With the tendency toward and necessity of this intertextuality of genre and subject matter (an existing cultural artifact, like an adapted novel, for example), American horror cannot exist without external cultural connection, be it a narrative, a trope, or anything that forms a sense of familiarity within the genre itself. While all cinema requires resonance of some kind for an audience to connect to the images onscreen, horror is unique in that the formulas used to define most genres are not enough to garner that reaction from viewers without a cultural element for them to latch onto as they watch a film. This is why remakes of Japanese horror films, such as *Ringu* (1998) or *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2002), do not reach the same level of success as the originals do in their home countries. However, a film like Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961) can receive a Western coat of paint from an Italian director, becoming *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), and results in something more culturally relevant than the Japanese horror remakes of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The jumpscare, stingers, and all the right visuals can be present that should scream "Horror movie!" but, without the meta aspects of horror to latch onto, those cultural markers that exist beyond the formula, a horror film will falter to maintain significance to



audiences. American horror relies on meta-cinema to flourish. This is not an inherently new idea among academics. Writing in 1983 and later expanding on these ideas in 1985, Philip Brophy explored the intertextuality of American horror films in *Horrrality*, a word, like its subject matter, meant to convey a range of meaning – “horror, textuality, morality, hilarity”:

It is not so much that the modern Horror film refutes or ignores the conventions of genre, but it is involved in a violent awareness of itself as a saturated genre. Its rebirth as such is qualified by how it states itself as genre... The textuality of the modern Horror film is integrally and intricately bound up in the dilemma of a saturated fiction whose primary aim in its telling is to generate suspense, shock and horror. It is a mode of fiction... engaging the reader in a dialogue of textual manipulation that has no time for the critical ordinances of social realism, cultural enlightenment or emotional humanism (3).

Brophy’s sentiments could easily be mistaken for those of contemporary critics of horror films, especially those that have moved beyond traditional publishing to find outlets for critique through online platforms like Youtube. The oversaturation of media itself can explain horror’s familiarity to the public, but that familiarity has bred contempt largely based on preconceived expectations of what a film will have to offer its audience before it is even released. Horror’s occupation is to scare, but it cannot do so if everyone in the audience can pick up on telegraphed cues that a scare is coming. Before the close of 2020, dozens of horror films will have been released in the United States with many being sequels to existing franchises (*The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*, *Candyman*, and *Halloween Kills*, just to name a few), or at least pertaining to folklore (*Gretel & Hansel*). While 2020 films with more original subject matter, such as *Bad Hair* and *Last Night in Soho*, receive likely receive both critical acclaim and positive scholastic

attention, enough space exists in academic circles for more study and appreciation of films that lack that award nomination sparkle.

**Chapter One** (“Time Warp: The Intertextuality of Western Horror Films”) proposes a new timeline of horror cinema that reflects the interplay between adaptation and culture. For many critics, the framing devices used for a progress of one horror movement to another have been related to major historical periods and events rather than the films, effectively relegating study of the horror genre to cultural trends rather than a continuous pedigree of intertextual films in conversation with one another. Much as Robin Wood posits in “An Introduction to the American Horror Film,” culture is intrinsically linked to how American horror monsters are born; they reflect aspects of Western culture most would prefer to keep hidden. As society grows more complex so do the fears that must be expressed on film (2018). It is that complexity that requires an understanding of metanarratives to periodize and distill over a century of films into a digestible format.

In *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (1991), Andrew Tudor draws sharp distinction between pre- and post-1960s horror. Pre-1960s horror films rely on “secure horror,” utilizing plots during which the external threat to the characters is identifiable and, therefore, controllable. Post-1960s horror, however, involves “paranoid horror” in that the supernatural threats are beyond control or understanding (1-7). A vampire in a Universal picture of the 1920s could be staked through the heart or exposed to sunlight, and, though that vampire might return for a loosely connected sequel, the characters could be sure that they would know how to fight that creature again. In contrast, the slasher villains of the 1980s can be set aflame,

beheaded, impaled, hung, and dispatched in any number of methods, but they will always return with unrelenting force and ever-increasing power for reasons beyond most of the protagonists' understanding. Though these distinctions are helpful in placing films in a larger cultural context, Tudor's argument does not take into account meta aspects directly nor could he predict the issues that would arise with the oversaturation of metanarratives: What happens when horror must contend with an audience that believes that it can outsmart the threat based on previous cinematic knowledge before the film has already begun, taking away much of the suspense? With audience reactions leaning toward prediction rather than anticipation, Tudor's distinctions become cyclical rather than linear, but it is a cycle that craves further exploration before it can be made satisfying. Noël Carrol argues that this is horror's greatest paradox: Horror is omnipresent, both real world threats (terrorism, disease, social inequity) and imagined (those presented in fictional works), but that omnipresence breeds nihilism ("The Paradox of Horror"). If taken to its extreme, Tudor's historical framework could follow the trajectory Carrol describes with the end result being that horror, as a genre, self-destructs. Horror films have yet to cease production since their inception, so this framework proves less useful to unifying a growing genre.

Jonathan Crane Lake argues against a singular, linear narrative in *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film* (1994), promoting two distinct patterns of progression within the genre, delineated by World War II and the coming Atomic Age. Crane concludes that horror films strove for a return to normalcy prior to the 1960s and then veered toward themes of ultraviolent nihilism and the need for meaning post-1980s (vi-vii, 109-116). While compelling, Crane's film analysis falls into

the psychoanalytical without much to unite the films within his dual patterns beyond the historical and cultural events happening while the films were produced (140). In 2018, Murray Leeder's *Horror Film: A Critical Introduction* attempts a more diverse narrative, charting the growth of a rapidly expanding genre. As in-depth as Leeder attempts to be for both a non-specialist and scholarly audience, his analysis relates films to the cultural context rather than to intertextual relationships. Leeder admits that it is impossible to be as inclusive or as exhaustive as one might like because of the genre's dynamic nature.

Studies like Crane and Leeder's work well in situating films within a historical timeframe, but they do little to allow the horror genre to exist beyond designated compartments that result in films being solely about one type of fear (i.e. the "big bug" movies of the 1950s must be about Cold War/atomic fears; post-9/11 movies must be about existential dread). Wheeler Winston Dixon comes closer to unifying the periodization of the genre through meta-analysis by suggesting that horror can best be understood through its establishment, its translation (into adaptable formulas), its collapse through oversaturation, and then its resurgence. However, Dixon's historical framework leaves out the creative aspects that feed into intertextual analysis of present meta, viewing it as pure commodification (2011). Room must be made for a linear narrative that allows for historical complexity without being reductive and allows for the flexibility of the intertextual influence films have on one another. This narrative structure can be achieved by recognizing three overlapping periods: (1) The Adaptive Period, (2) The Audience Reactive Period, and (3) The Meta-Cinema Period. The Adaptive Period refers to early cinema with its heavy reliance on literature followed by sequel production. The Audience Reactive Period, beginning during WWII, occurs with the development of fan culture,

continuing sequences, and the production of films that, while always intertextual with previous media, began to branch into original plots and characters. Lastly, the Meta-Cinema Period, heavily concentrated in the 1990s through the 2010s, occurred when audience awareness of tropes had completely permeated the genre and its methods of production, resulting in works that bordered on the satirical.

**Chapter Two** (“The whole self-aware, Postmodern meta shit’: *Scream 4* and the Death Knell of Self-Referentiality in American Horror Films?”) argues that while all horror films display intertextual elements to source material, other films, or both, the overt attention paid to those elements now devalue horror as a genre. Utilizing Wes Craven’s *Scream* franchise as a framing device, this chapter focuses on how self-referentiality has been, until recent years, an integral component of the horror genre since the inception of Western cinema. Though Wes Craven used an overt meta-narrative in *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (1994), it would be two years before he would find commercial success with the same concept when he released *Scream*. By highlighting the predictable tropes of horror films, Craven approached an audience that he knew expected nothing new from horror by the mid-1990s and turned those expectations back on that same audience to produce an original film that was both humorous and frightening. However, by the time *Scream 4* (or *Scre4m*)’s release, the franchise that prided itself on its ability to respond to the genre suddenly had nothing left to say, becoming what it mocked as it lost its original purpose and instead turned on its audience, mocking viewers for daring to care about the genre at all.

Even though the *Scream* franchise eventually lost control over its use of meta-narrative elements, descending into self-parody more than producing something new for

the genre, the saving grace for horror came from filmmakers willing to continue a self-examination of what the use of meta-narratives and Postmodernism had to offer audiences. *Behind the Mask*, the subject of **Chapter Three** (“Ahab’s, Turtles, and Survivor Girls: Postmodernism in *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon*”) asks horror fans to examine their own love of the genre without an accusatory tone. *Behind the Mask* provides no finger-wagging condescension for being someone who loves horror, but the audience may find its inability to find a concrete answer to the posed quandary uncomfortable. Writer/director/producer Scott Glosserman situates viewers in a conversation with horror itself through a careful use of camerawork. As the plot surrounds a documentary crew following a preternatural masked killer named Leslie, the audience gains different perspectives from Leslie himself, from Taylor Gentry (the film’s “Survivor Girl” and the documentary’s director), and from the camera’s lens as the documentary’s intended audience. This approach creates a meta-narrative that does what the *Scream* franchise no longer could. Much like this dissertation, *Behind the Mask* is a critical love letter in that it redirects the audience from feeling guilty about liking horror and refocuses that energy into reclaiming the genre as fans and media consumers. In producing such a worthwhile scope from which to examine one’s own fan ownership of the media, *Behind the Mask* also urges scholars to embrace newer horror films not because they may fall into familiar paradigms but because they contain intertextual elements that speak to the positive, lasting power of horror.

**Chapter Four** (“‘Is it a story?’ ‘Yeah, it’s a story’: The Vitality of Metanarratives in Future Horror Films”) examines, arguably, one of the horror genre’s first and most successful uses of overt metanarrative, *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare*, in comparison to

one of the more recent forays into the tradition, *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012).

Intertextuality will never disappear from media; culture, politics, and world events will always find their way into whatever creative endeavors human beings produce. While this interplay of life and art may not be escapable, the overt use of metanarratives may no longer be viable given its saturation in current horror films, such as *New Nightmare* and *The Cabin in the Woods*. While *New Nightmare* uses a metanarrative to increase a sense of dread and terror, *The Cabin in the Woods* uses its metanarrative to dissipate its use of gore and violence, removing much of the horror for its audience. If producers want to continue utilizing overt meta-ness in their plots, then the only solution is to be purposeful with it and to work with the genre rather than against it. For example, in *New Nightmare*, when Heather Langenkamp, who plays a fictionalized version of herself, is accused of causing her son's mental instability by allowing him to watch the horror films she previously starred in, her experience directly correlates to the public discourse surrounding children's access to violent media in the mid-1990s. Her anxiety and fear that her son might be taken from her custody reflects the fears of horror fans when faced with defending their love of the genre while not condoning violence. The choice to include this element in the narrative heightens tension and connects the viewer's real-life experiences with Langenkamp's in the movie. However, when *The Cabin in the Woods* depicts secret operatives happily betting on the fate of the hapless young adults who are about to be slaughtered, it draws the audience's attention away from internal reflection that corresponds with the emotional tone of narrative and instead asks them to laugh at the gauntlet of horror movie tropes that are being quipped about by characters with whom the viewer has no connection.

Metanarratives are inherently ingrained in American horror films, and the inclusion of those metanarratives should be utilized by scholars to classify movements and trends within the genre. Though contemporary horror films are more transparent in their use of metanarratives than films of the past, that does not mean that the genre must fundamentally change in order to progress, but it does mean that writers and those involved in film production must respect the genre savviness their audiences may have. Metanarratives (whether in passing reference or through use of a well-established trope) are a necessary element of American horror films and, at this juncture, are inescapable. However, the unnecessary anger, often directed toward the audience for its awareness of tropes within the genre, leads to satire rather than horror. Understanding how these metanarratives developed within the genre means moving forward with acceptance of “the meta” rather than trying to push it aside at the cost of a larger connection to both the audience and the horror tradition.



## CHAPTER ONE: TIME WARP: THE INTERTEXTUALITY OF WESTERN HORROR FILMS

When is a zombie not a zombie? More specifically, how do characters within zombie films know to call the walking dead “zombies?” It is obvious when characters in movies, video games, and television shows go out of their way to avoid that term, i.e. *The Walking Dead* (2010-2020)’s “Walkers,” *The Last of Us* (2013)’s “Clickers,” and *28 Days Later* (2002) and *Resident Evil* (1996-2020)’s “The Infected.” Audience expectations form the moment the film’s main antagonist is revealed to be a horde of the living dead. A movie-goer’s point-of-view generally is: If it shuffles like a zombie and eats brains like zombie, the screen writer and director should probably call it a zombie.<sup>1</sup> However, this would not have been the case prior to 1932’s *White Zombie*, starring Bela Lugosi, as concepts like voodoo had not reached popular knowledge. Though the usage of “zombie” in the English language predates film as a medium, the term’s popularity rose in the early days of cinema, growing with each decade until it is now synonymous with the depiction of a ghoul, revenant, or other animated undead creature on screen. Subsequent films – from *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936) to simply *Zombies* (2018) – can trace their linguistic and intertextual lineage back to *White Zombie* and decisions made to appeal to audience expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> *Shaun of the Dead* (2014) lampoons this newer trend with the infamous line—“We’re not using the Z-word!” Also, see: *I Am Legend* (2007) as an example of how to infuriate an audience by misuse of the word “zombie” when a director’s featured creatures are, in fact, vampires.

Though it might seem trivial, production decisions, such as whether to use the term “zombie” in a film, epitomize an unbroken meta-cinematic tradition that invites film scholars and historians to move beyond a model of canon chronology that separates films by production cycles or by significant historical events (the cycle of monster movie production at Universal Studios in the 1930s or the advent of the Cold War, for example) rather than examining the intertextuality of genre trends that create a comprehensive chronological model for analysis and pedagogy. Whether a medium uses the term "zombie" gives insight into how the production team (the writers, directors, etc.) wants its audiences, carrying with them all their preconceived notions about zombies, to interact with that medium. This is the foundation of a meta-media experience in that this decision is directly influenced by a purposeful consideration of audiences' knowledge of pre-existing media while constructing an anticipated engagement with new media. This construction then continues when the next cycle of media production begins anew. These decisions that began in the earliest horror films influenced over a century of creative development and audience engagement.

As defined by Robert Sklar, film, including the horror genre, represents a “bottom-up” rather than “top-down” kind of cultural awareness, as the cinema was “the most popular and influential media of culture in the United States” before the wide availability of television, reflecting the tastes of the masses rather than the elite (3). Sklar states that films, serving as an excellent primary source for historians and non-academics alike, help people to understand their world, affect change, and challenge what they see. However, even decades before Sklar’s writing, William K. Everson warned that critical derision of horror films, in their inception, limited the ways that the films could reach

their audiences due to public perception along with preventing films from being studied to their full potential. “Critics were genuine in their concern... In light of the world we now live in, these films are no longer frightening—real life has overtaken them” (218). Everson refers to the fear that horror may one day be overtaken by the terror of living in a modern world, but, given that wars and natural disasters have done nothing but give more fodder for horror writers to work with, that fear seems unfounded. Narrowing down the “stuff” of history of any topic into a cohesive narrative is no simple task. Like many areas of cultural analysis, inclination towards critique of the subject itself hinders the historical narrative, and film is no different in that regard. While one’s personal tastes and preferences cannot be avoided, the pursuit of the narrative within the study of American horror films suffers from extreme biases, both from those who consider themselves fans of the genre and those who do not.

Since the 1960s, exploring the relationship between horror films and the culture that creates them has occupied the minds of scholars of popular culture. Horror is one of the oldest genres of Western cinema, and, not surprisingly, the United States quickly capitalized on terrorizing audiences at the beginning of the twentieth century. From the rise of the classic Hollywood monsters in the 1930s to the slasher flicks of the 1980s and beyond, the horror genre tends to reflect urban legend, popular literary culture, and significant world events – World Wars I and II, the Civil Rights Movement, the Cold War, the economic uncertainty of the Reagan era, and post-9/11 Nihilism. However, horror’s reliance on itself as a genre is what makes it both unique and difficult to assign historical system of categorization. Rather than a technical or cultural responses dictating categorization of horror films for study, the history of horror cinema, specifically in the

United States, can be divided into three categories based on the “meta-ness” of the films themselves: “The Literary Adaptive Period (1919 to 1950s),” “The Audience Reactive Period (1950s-1990),” and “The Meta-Cinema Period (1991 to 2015)” that link all American horror films in an unbroken thematic chain than trying to force delineations on them that do not allow for a crossover of periods due to the intertextual nature of the films.

Before delving into these categories in depth, it is important to note that the very nature of horror’s intertextuality allows for flexibility when it comes to these periods. Some films could fall into multiple periods by definition, despite the specified timeframe. While not perfect, these categories are broad enough to encompass a huge body of work with the acknowledgement that certain films will deviate from certain patterns. Being able to pinpoint those deviations allows for further contemplation of horror film’s complex nature and only adds to the argument that William C. Siska advanced in the 1970s: Metacinema is a necessity of modern films, and nontraditional films, like horror, can best utilize them because they allow the audience’s attention to focus less on the production of a film and more on the film as an object (285-286).

Beginning with the early German Expressionist films of the 1920s and the Universal Studios monster movies of the 1930s, horror cinema in the first half of the twentieth century heavily relied on source material, namely literary works from the mid-to-late nineteenth century. This marks the beginning of “The Literary Adaptive Period.” Both F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) and Tod Browning’s *Dracula* (1931) are derived from Bram Stoker’s 1897 Gothic novel, *Dracula* (both with and without permission of the Stoker estate). While Stoker’s tale was woven from folk legend, the film versions

moved away from the myriad of revenant creatures from Eastern Europe in order to mimic Stoker's vision of what it was to be a "vampire" (along with what was being used for the stage play). Similarly, James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) could not have existed without Mary Shelley's 1818 novel of the same name. While these adaptations take leaps from their source material (Whale was kind enough to leave out what could have been an hour-long scene of ships stuck in the Arctic ice while Frankenstein and his Monster have a final confrontation, for example), they rely upon them and upon audience recognition of the titles.

This trend of literary reliance continued through the 1960s and early 1980s, including but not limited to: Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960, adapted from the novel by Robert Bloch), William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973, adapted from the novel by William Peter Blatty, who also wrote the screenplay of the film), and Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975, based on the novel by Peter Benchley), Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976, adapted from the Stephen King novel), and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980, also from a King novel). Thus, a metacinema chain emerges where these films, produced over the course of decades, can be analyzed individually as well as in groupings, particularly when a piece of source material is remade several times, as in the case of *Frankenstein*. Deviations between source material and text can give scholars potential insight into an auteur's vision, expectations for audience reception of the film, and expectations of a pre-existing relationship between audience and that source material.

During the following period ("The Audience Reactive Period"), like the films of the early 1900s, directors took liberties with the source material, moving from classic literature to books that topped best-seller lists, but the motivation behind keeping or

changing elements from the source began to be more heavily influenced by audience expectations. For example, with *Psycho*, Hitchcock made the decision to include the final scene with a lengthy psychoanalytic explanation of why Norman Bates killed. Though it existed in the original book, it feels clunky and tacked on to an overall well-crafted film. Hitchcock's insistence on keeping the scene relates to his desire to remain faithful to his source but also because he felt the audience needed that information because they would be largely unfamiliar with conceptions of multiple personalities. Conversely, Kubrick, when adapting *The Shining*, angered author Stephen King by refusing to include certain elements from the book, including direct evidence of Jack Torrance's physical abuse of his son, Danny (Fleming). This choice made the film's supernatural elements more concrete, forcing the audience to draw conclusions about the brokenness of the Torrance family through the context of the film. The conclusion that the supernatural happenings at the Overlook Hotel destroyed a relatively happy family becomes just as valid as a more psychological interpretation (that the hauntings and possessions of characters are manifestations of darker secrets that the family is keeping).

"The Audience Reactive Period" also saw the advent of more "original" titles in horror film, born free of literature as a source material and that instead relied on real life events. As an example, critics interpret the "big bug" genre of science fiction horror in the 1950s and the 1960s as relating to Cold War hysteria (the infiltration of American soil by a powerful, foreign entity). William M. Tsutsui adds to this argument by debating whether those films were so much about anxiety about a foreign enemy but more about concurrent domestic fears, such as the widespread use of chemicals (DDT) and its effect on crops meant for human consumption (240-242, 246-247). In any interpretation, the

audience's direct connection to contemporaneous historical events/political happenings is necessary. There is an expectation of emotional fear rather than an expectation of a relationship to popular culture, such as literature.

Lastly, the 1980s brought about the final discernable stage with the horror genre's development – “The Meta-Cinema Period.” Rather than relying upon literary sources for their subject matter, horror films moved into the realm of the meta, requiring a level of self-awareness on the part of both the film and the audience in relation to the genre. In short, horror films in the “Meta-Cinema Period” require the existence of the films that were created in the previous two periods to exist themselves. As Skal argues in *The Monster Show*, Count Orlock from *Nosferatu* “later [influenced] countless other movie monsters” (48). As an example, the physical appearance of Radu, a vampire in the *Subspecies* series (1991-1998), would not appear as it does, with the withered face and long, tapered fingers, without F. W. Murnau's make-up and prosthetic choices for Orlock. Radu's long, tapered fingers unmistakably harken back to Orlock's shadow creeping along the stairwell wall.

Isabel Cristina Pinedo writes in *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing*, “Playing on more contemporary audience members' knowledge, *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night II's* (1987) intertextual references cannibalize *Carrie* and *The Exorcist*... [The] cannibalization of past productions [is, as Fredric Jameson describes, a] pastiche, an ironic self-awareness that calls attention to its own constructedness” (46-47). Overt intertextuality would become a hallmark of horror by the 1990s when openly meta films, such as *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994) and his *Scream* franchise, posing both as critiques and defenses of the genre and its enjoyability.

Even the horror auteurs and the making of horror films themselves have become a source of new material for adaptation. Both Bill Condon's *Gods & Monsters* (1998) and Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) harken back to the auteurs of the Literary Adaptive Period to produce their films, fictionalizing real events into a source of horror and fantasy.

Again, it must be acknowledged that there is some crossover between periods. George A. Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* would not exist without films such as Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). Likewise, *Silence of the Lambs*, directed by Jonathan Demme in 1991, requires its source novel to be a film at all. This melding of ideas and concepts within the genre reinforces what Mark Jancovich's argument in his introduction to *Horror: A Film Reader*: "Standardization in production allows for the rational and efficient streamlining of techniques of mass production, while familiarity in consumption creates a situation in which the public" can feel satisfaction in what is a dearth of originality for horror concepts, instead taking comfort in the reuse of the same elements ad infinitum (11).

With so many potential avenues for a crossover of periods due to metacinema traditions and this inherent intertextuality, how then does this new chronology of horror film analysis work in practice? There is no better place to start than to examine the strange case of Igor, Dr. Frankenstein's hunchbacked, simple-minded lab assistant/henchman in countless iterations of *Frankenstein* within popular culture from cartoons and films to breakfast cereal. Igor, however, does not appear in Shelley's novel, and the answer to how this character entered the cultural zeitgeist can be found through



an understanding of the importance of metanarratives within American horror film, especially with the reliance on adaptation throughout the genre's history.

Returning to the 1910 *Frankenstein* as an example, Thomas Edison, when first producing films, was interested in the process of cinematic storytelling, and his adaptation of Mary Shelley's work is only fifteen minutes long, a relatively short time for an audience to engage with the film in comparison to the source novel. Simone Murray, in *The Adaptation Industry*, argues that, out of the six industrial components for an adaptation to exist, one of the most important elements is that of the reader (73). The reader (or, in many cases, those that are aware enough culturally to identify characters, plots, and tropes, even without having read the book) acts as a ready-made audience/hype machine. Though they may come upon an adapted film with preconceived expectations about what they do and do not want to see retained from the original text, the idea is that they are in the audience to begin with from a financial perspective (Murray, 157-160). Their previous enjoyment of a source text can also encourage others, who might not be familiar or interested with the text, to see the film even though they might never read the book.

From a more negative perspective in the seminal *Novels into Film*, George Bluestone contends that time posed a significant threat to a film's ability to be a successful adaptation in that a reader spent vastly more time with a novel than with a film, allowing them to build worlds within their minds that the film could never sufficiently capture. However, Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo counter that this kind of thinking is merely an elevation of the verbal/word (logophilia) together with anti-corporeality and iconophobia (fear of having a new visual standard for a character, for

example, that competes with one's own and the erroneous thinking that literature and film have to compete for their viewers' affections) (5-7).

Edison's film as well as James Whale's *Frankenstein* series that followed in the 1930s fall into "The Literary Adaptive Period" in that they cannot exist without their source texts whether the reason to make the films was born out of creativity, a love of that source material, or for financial purposes that relied on audience recognition. The 1910 version of *Frankenstein* has not maintained its significance to a wider popular culture. Whale's *Frankenstein*, however, is one of the rare adaptations that is just as iconic (if not more so) than its original source material, despite heavily truncating the novel's plot. In public consciousness, Frankenstein's creature is the flat-topped, neck-bolted child-like monster portrayed by Boris Karloff and not the educated, calculating villain that the creature becomes in Mary Shelley's novel. Windmills, rioting peasants with pitchforks, daisy chains, and "It's alive!" are considered synonymous with the novel, even though they make no appearance in the text. One reason for this is commitment to the story that James Whale wanted to tell despite deviating from his source material. He deliberately humanized the monster, not by appealing to the audience by demonstrating that he was capable of advanced intelligence, rhetorical skills, and theological knowledge (as is in the novel) but by showing a childlike innocence. The question left to the audience is that, if Henry Frankenstein had nurtured the creature he "birthed," would the creature have caused such havoc as he did? In the same vein, Whale's *Frankenstein* is less a monster himself and more of a misguided man, who, as in Edison's version, is redeemed through love and marriage rather than the mutual self-destruction of maker and creature in the book. It is no shock (pun intended) that Whale's

film, due to its success, spawned a sequel in 1935.

Considered to be one of the rare instances where a sequel surpasses the quality of the original, *Bride of Frankenstein* is James Whale's masterpiece. Stylistically, the film stands on its own without much need for reference to its source material. However, the framing device used for the film is the introduction of Mary Shelley as storyteller in the opening scene. The audience learns that the first film took place in Mary Shelley's imagination as she continues her story, which is humorous given how much it deviates from her work. *Bride* does take an element from the novel that was left out of the first film – the creature had asked for a mate so that he might know love, given that Frankenstein had done nothing but fear him since his creation. Throughout the film, the creature struggles with his emotions – anger at those who shun him, kindness for those in need, and acceptance of his own need to die given his unnatural existence. Despite its deviation, *Bride* remains within the larger “Literary Adaptive Period” because it continues to need both Shelley as a historical figure and elements from the source material to legitimize itself.

Igor appears in neither of Whale's *Frankenstein* films, both of which cemented iconography into the minds of audiences for generations to come. Whale did, however, give Frankenstein a hunchbacked lab assistant (named Fritz, not Igor). After *Bride*, Universal Studios produced a bevy of sequels for most of its monster-related horror films. 1939's *Son of Frankenstein* (directed by Rowland V. Lee) introduced Ygor, a grave robber with a crooked neck, played by Bela Lugosi. Ygor would make a second appearance in 1942's *The Ghost of Frankenstein*.

The hunchbacked Fritz and the creepy, graverobbing Ygor merged in popular consciousness with another horror film character – Ivan Igor from *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933), a tale, based on an unpublished story by Charles S. Belden, of a mad sculptor who murders people so that he can turn them into creations in his museum. By the time *Mystery of the Wax Museum* was remade in 1953 (with Igor removed as the story’s main character and relegated to henchman status in *House of Wax*), the figure of Igor, the disabled servant of a mad scientist/creator by grave robbing and other nefarious tasks, was complete in audiences’ minds. The character of Igor best represents where the shift between “The Literary Adaptive Period” and “The Audience Reactionary Period” can be understood. By the 1950s, connections to source material became less important than meeting audience expectations; Igor is there because writers and directors assume that audiences will expect him to be there, regardless whether they actually care. If a film featured a mad scientist archetype, then there would be an Igor archetype to serve as comic relief and grotesquery, and to elevate the apparent genius of his master by comparison.

Skipping forward in time to 2015 and nearing the end The Metacinema Period, *Victor Frankenstein* was released to theatres to less than stellar reviews. Despite the title, the film’s protagonist is Igor, played by Daniel Radcliffe. With Victor Frankenstein portrayed as a mad hindrance rather than a genius, Igor is given a full-fledged adventure of his own along with a sympathetic backstory and a love interest. The film itself is littered with references and homages to previous *Frankenstein*-related works, including the source novel and previous films. For example, Victor is blamed by his father for the death of his older brother, Henry. While Victor has brothers in Shelley’s novel (the

youngest murdered by his Creature), the only Henry is his kind-hearted friend who tries to act as Victor's conscience. This is one reason Whale renamed Victor "Henry" in his adaptation, one that showed a definitively more likable version of Dr. Frankenstein than Shelley's original. In connecting back to the source novel in its naming of Frankenstein, *Victor Frankenstein* keeps "Henry" close as an homage to Whale's iconic film.

Ultimately, decisions like these homages and the use of Igor as a main character encompass a metanarrative. Audience expectations about Igor – deformed, bumbling, deviant – are reversed, giving viewers a handsome, empathetic hero. In this production move, *Victor Frankenstein* goes beyond its source and audience engagement to begin a dialogue with other films within the horror genre. By taking a trope, acknowledging it by showing Igor's disabilities not as grotesque but as legitimate medical maladies, and then upending that trope, the film asks the audience not only to engage with *Victor Frankenstein* as entertainment but to recall every instance they have engaged with Igor as a popular culture figure.

Understanding the intertextuality of American horror films extends beyond fidelity to sources or pre-existing films. As Thomas Leitch argues in *Film Adaptations and Its Discontents*, all texts are intertextual (6). Inspired by scientific advancements and by processing her own personal tragedies, Mary Shelley penned *Frankenstein*. Almost sixty feature-length films feature Frankenstein's creature two centuries after the novel's original publication. A framework that highlights intertextual elements and recognizes metacinematic elements within American horror films serves to further discourse through an appreciation of the evolution of how these films are made, regardless of whether a film is the fourth remake of a series and regardless of perceived quality. Many, if not most

horror films can fit within the chain of “The Literary Adaptive Period,” “The Audience Reactive Period,” and “The Metacinema Period.” How films link within these progressions and where overlaps occur can only add to an appreciation of a genre that exists to engage with itself as well as its creators and its audience. The American horror genre is a wonderful Frankensteinian amalgamation of itself with disparate bits cobbled together to create lasting impressions on those willing to engage with it, and to study it. The only real question left is: Why isn’t Frankenstein’s creature called a zombie?

## CHAPTER TWO: “IS IT A STORY?” “YEAH, IT’S A STORY:” THE VIABILITY OF METANARRATIVES IN FUTURE HORROR FILMS

The term “video nasty” is likely unfamiliar to Americans beyond horror movie buffs and media scholars, but its popularization in Great Britain marked a turning point in how horror films were scrutinized by legislators and the general public. A video nasty refers to any film or piece of media, available for home video viewing, that contains obscene material, deemed too unsavory even for adult consumption, resulting in censored material or outright criminalization of that material. The “nasties,” including pornography, Blaxploitation films, and, of course, horror movies, were not relegated to British productions; Italian exploitation films, such as those by Ruggero Deodato and Bruno Mattei, along with American-made horrors, including *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Driller Killer* (1979), and the *Child’s Play* franchise (beginning in 1988), made their way onto lists of banned or censored content (Jancovich 6).

Horror became the scapegoat for a rash of sadistic crimes in Britain in the early 1990s, such as the murder of toddler James Bulger and the kidnapping and torture-murder of teenager Suzanne Capper. In the case of Bulger, news sources falsely reported that his two assailants (both aged 11) had been inspired to murder Bulger by the *Child’s Play* films. Similarly, *Child’s Play* took part of the blame for Capper’s murder because her kidnappers used music that sampled audio from the film as part of their torture (Davis 298-304; Nowicka). Though Britain may have given a name to its condemnation of horror films, its need to blame a rise in adolescent crime on an outside media-driven force

can be found within the U.S. contemporaneously, particularly in regard to school shootings. This trend of blaming media for the actions of individuals continues even as studies show little evidence that a film can force an individual into action. Stetson University psychology professor Chris Ferguson states, “The data on bananas causing suicide is about as conclusive. Literally. The numbers work out about the same” when comparing the links between violent media and violent behavior (Draper). The American Psychological Association, after over fifteen years of study, concludes that consistent exposure to violent media may cause a rise in aggressive thoughts and feelings in children, but that evidence does not support any indication that a child would be spurred to act on those feelings. The results are compounded by the fact that people, at any age, do not consume media in a vacuum. Factors beyond consuming violent content play a greater role in determining if someone will eventually act on aggressive impulses in a violent manner. Because of the complexity of everyday life, it becomes easy to link almost anything (from consuming bananas to watching *Sesame Street*) to violent behavior, given a large enough data pool (“Violence in the Media”). Despite the nuances of these studies, they would come many years too late to stop the continuing negativity surrounding horror films.

The growing animosity towards horror films, sentiments that have been brewing in public opinion since the very first black and white forays into the genre, peaked in the early to mid-1990s. This climate, though it would eventually extend to blaming video games for the violent and/or reprehensible behavior of perpetrators (most of whom were young white teenaged boys and young adults), intensified as school shootings became more and more commonplace in the United States. Rather than looking internally at



society's problems to find the root causes of these acts of aggression, the public, as well as pundits and politicians, sought to lay blame solely at the doorstep of films that only reflect the troubles within society. Much as Prohibition did nothing to address the causes of alcohol abuse in the United States (economic disparity, social inequity, and lack of mental health care) and instead blamed an effect of those causes, singling out films as a cause rather than an effect of social ills has proven equally impotent.

To varying degrees of success, horror films have always used metanarratives to address the very fears that society holds. Fears of Cold War invasion resulted in films about snatched bodies, aliens, and the like while similar worries about the disintegration of the American family are found in movies such as *The Stepfather* (1987). When the object that society fears turns out to be horror films themselves, the themes of the movies would follow suit, referencing themselves. For example, *Trick or Treat* (1986) combined the age-old belief in a linkage between teenaged delinquency and rock music with the increased scrutiny faced by horror filmmakers, featuring a rather on-the-nose cameo from Ozzy Osbourne (someone who grew accustomed to public backlash for his onstage antics) as a rock-decrying preacher. Director and writer Wes Craven rose to become the true master of confronting public outrage against horror, finding ways to weave metacommentary about horror into his films. When horror was the subject of scrutiny, Craven made that scrutiny part of the horror, integrating it into the plot to heighten fear, pushing his characters closer to the line where screen ends and audience begins with his film *New Nightmare* (1994). William C. Siska argues that, by its reflexive nature, metacinema is "a modern necessity" in that it allows filmmakers to make aesthetic

choices that not only enable them to reflect on film itself as a form of expression but also permit filmmakers to reflect on themselves and their experiences (285).

Craven accomplished both, producing an aesthetically superb work that does not forget its status as a film that requires a cohesive and engaging narrative. This, however, is where later meta-horror films would falter. Narrative cohesion dissolves in favor of a comedic tone and fourth wall breaks, as is the case with Joss Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods* (2002). "Narrative is rendered intransitive when the chain of causation that motivates the action and moves the plot is interrupted or confused, through spatial and temporal fragmentation, or the introduction of alien forms and information" (Siska 286). While *New Nightmare* exudes its purpose in every scene, carefully building to a satisfying conclusion, *The Cabin in the Woods* lacks the self-awareness to know what its purpose is; rather than being purposeful, *Cabin* is merely referential, interrupting its narrative to constantly remind its audience of its contrived and tedious existence.

Horror films cannot exist without a metacinema tradition to link the genre together, and a horror film that uses an explicit metanarrative around the genre must engage with the genre as a whole and with the fear held by the public towards horror in general. If a film cannot engage the meta, it fails on a cinematic level. To embody a metanarrative is to be purposeful; to do otherwise is to make references and in-jokes to titillate the viewing audience. The need for purposefulness with a metanarrative emerged with a growing savviness that audiences have demonstrated with meta-horror since the mid-1990s. To understand an audience's relationship with meta and the reasons why the usage of meta in contemporary horror films has to be scrutinized more carefully, one must examine the origin of the overt use of metanarratives in horror cinema. Most

viewers would be forgiven for assuming that *Scream* (1996) paved the way for meta becoming a household term in the genre, but *Scream* merely popularized the terminology. It is another Craven film, *New Nightmare* (1994), that explored meta to its fullest extent. *New Nightmare* uses meta as the core of its plot, anchoring the fantastical horror of the film to the horrors that exist within the real world and offering societal and structural criticisms. Craven's attention to the interplay between meta and plot never allows the characters and situations within the story to be overshadowed by references or in-jokes. It is sadly this detail that would be sorely missed in the ensuing decades as horror films continued with the overt meta trend. No film typifies this oversaturation more than Whedon's *Cabin*, a film so lacking in love for the genre that it inhabits that it has nothing to offer in the way of scares and instead relies solely on dark humor to engage its audience. The legacies of both films and their approaches to meta are what the horror genre must reconcile before it can move forward and find its footing in the cinematic landscape once more.

The original idea for the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise began as a metacommentary of sorts. According to commentary made for the DVD commentary for *New Nightmare*'s DVD, Craven's inspiration came from his nightmares, both from his childhood and adulthood, ranging in subjects from a terrifying old man that Craven encountered in his youth to a schoolyard bully to a mysterious illness killing East Asian immigrants in their sleep in the 1970s that Craven read about in news articles. Craven may even have taken inspiration from his students at Clarkson College of Technology (now Clarkson University) as they created a student film mocking the horror films of the late 1960s (Marks). The style of Craven's writing is best described as reactionary due to

the seemingly random way he cobbles together inspiration for his work, even recycling from past efforts if the point of reference is strong enough, to create something that will eventually resonate with audiences. This unique approach may explain why the use of metanarratives works so well for Craven; he is driven to engage his audience as well as himself, to explore concepts that resonate for him with hope that audiences too find meaning or emotion in what appears on the screen.

When creating Freddy Krueger, the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series' villain, Craven did not want a mute, masked killer that had been used in other slasher films, like *Friday the 13th Part 2* (1981), *Halloween* (1978), and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). While the image of a hulking, featureless shape silently stalking someone in the night is fear-inducing, Craven desired a lithe villain, crude and jovial in his nightmare murder sprees, who could “talk and taunt and threaten” his victims as they ran for their lives. Craven originally envisioned Krueger as a child molester who had escaped justice through a legal loophole only to be captured and burned alive by a mob consisting of the enraged townsfolk of Springwood, Ohio. Craven recalled, “He's the boogey man and the worst fear of children – the adult that's out to get them” (Van Hise 74-75). Upon learning of the high-profile “Satanic Panic” molestation scandals sweeping the United States in the 1980s, Craven removed any explicit reference to Krueger as a child molester and replaced them with statements about Krueger being a child murderer; Krueger's vulgar behavior toward young girls in conjunction with those contemporaneous events led many audience members to conclude that Krueger was a sexual predator without need of any lurid details of his crimes. These elements of

Krueger's development as a character show the deliberateness that Craven took with his script and his narrative engagement with both the horror genre and societal influences.

By the time of *New Nightmare's* development a decade after the first installment of the franchise, Craven had had little involvement in the series, except to help with scripting *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987), as he had been displeased with the decision to turn his film into yet another line of slasher sequels (Marks). During the scripting process for *Dream Warriors*, the idea of Krueger finding a way into the real world came to Craven, but his pitch was rejected by New Line Cinema (Farrell). Though he would have to wait until the sixth sequel to use his metanarrative, Craven clung to it, refining the idea as each passing sequel put Krueger onscreen as a wisecracking buffoon who just happened to gut teenagers with his bladed glove; in short, Craven watched as film executives made the decision to make Krueger the star rather than the villain, complete with Nintendo Power Glove tie-ins. With the desire to return Krueger to his original, more villainous state and with a need to explore a metacinema experience, Craven wrote the screenplay for *New Nightmare* with cautious support from New Line Cinema (Marks, Farrell). He used three anchoring points within his script to make *New Nightmare's* metanarrative so successful that he would later repeat in his work on the *Scream* franchise: 1) criticism of the toil actors experience from being involved in horror, 2) Craven's own criticism of the Hollywood structure, and 3) public criticism against horror films. These meta anchors help to ground the narrative with social commentary while also furthering the plot of the film so that that audience remains connected to the story and the real-world events surrounding the making of horror films.

*New Nightmare*'s character names can be confusing as real-world actors play fictionalized versions of themselves as well as fictional characters within the film. For example, Heather Langenkamp plays the character of Heather Langenkamp and the character of Nancy Thompson, the original heroine she portrayed in the first *Nightmare on Elm Street* film and in *Dream Warriors*. Heather Langenkamp will be referred to as "Langenkamp," and the character of Heather Langenkamp will be referred to as "Heather." Other actors will also follow this same convention.

*New Nightmare* opens with, aptly enough, a nightmare. Heather dreams that she is starring once more as Nancy in a new, unnamed *Nightmare on Elm Street* film when an on-set accident occurs, killing two crewmembers. An earthquake interrupts these terrifying visions, and these natural disasters re-occur throughout the film to signal danger to the audience. In her waking hours, Heather is tormented by the aftershocks of both the nightmare and the earthquake and is further unsettled by the phone call and letters she receives from an obsessive fan who pretends to be Freddy Krueger as he stalks her. This is the first instance in the film of a meta anchor beyond the use of actors playing themselves; this anchor roots the central theme of the story around the actors and their experiences working in the horror industry. Celebrity stalking is sadly all-too-common and is not isolated to actors of horror films; however, being stalked because one has been in a horror film invokes a new layer of fear due to the rationales of the stalkers. Are they hoping to imitate a horror movie villain? Or, does their obsession involve the desire to cause physical harm? In the early 1980s after the success of *Friday the 13th* (1980), a stalker terrorized Adrienne King, who played the film's "Final Girl" Alice Hardy. When Hardy went to the police for help, they only laughed, not taking her seriously. In a time

before cellphones and commonplace surveillance, stalking was a hidden crime and hard to prove until a stalker made a physical threat, but waiting for that sort of escalation proved fatal as many actors would tragically learn. Along with making harassing phone calls and sending letters, King's stalker photographed her as she went about her life in New York City, followed her to London, and held her at gunpoint after breaking into her apartment. Traumatized by "a nightmare within a nightmare," King still wanted to be a part of 1981's *Friday the 13th, Part 2*, but she asked that the role be minimized. The filmmakers decided that Alice would be killed at the beginning of the film with a heavy dose of meta, playing out as the worst-case scenario of what could have happened to King herself had her stalker succeeded in killing her. Jason Voorhees invades Alice's home without her knowing, watching her from the shadows. He shanks Alice in the temple just as King's stalker held a gun to her head. King left on-camera acting behind for over a decade after the stalking, choosing to stay behind-the-scenes by doing voiceover for many high-profile films, including *Titanic*. Even after the encounter that nearly ended her life, King later stated that police told her, "Well, what would you expect? Look at the movie that you did" (Burns). The police laid the onus of being victimized on King and characterized her stalker as a crazed horror fan. However, when the stalker was arrested, it turned out that he was not a horror fan nor did he target King because she was in a horror film; he simply saw *Friday the 13th*, and King reminded him of a woman he wanted to hurt (Burns).

Along with King, Heather Langenkamp also dealt with a stalker in the late 1980s after her television show, *Just the Ten of Us* (1987-1990), was cancelled (Dickson). Until 1990, no state in the U.S. had a stalking law in place, and very few states had resources

for those who were stalked since it was considered a non-crime. Police, when they did try to help, relied on trespassing laws and restraining orders to fill in the gap left by a lack of legislation. Public outcry and publicity surrounding the death of actress Rebecca Schaeffer at the hands of a stalker in 1989 resulted in California establishing the first anti-stalking law in the U.S. in 1990. By 1994, every state followed California's example, passing new statutes regarding "criminal harassment/menace." However, laws do not change individual opinions, and many stalking victims, especially women, face victim-blaming. For actresses, it is the belief that they somehow deserve this treatment because they have chosen to be in the public eye. Stalking victims receive little sympathy when targeted, just as King experienced ("Culture of Patriarchy in Law"). In *New Nightmare*, Craven uses experiences like Langenkamp's and King's as a framing device but chooses not to make the stalker an actual character, leaving the truth of his existence for the audience, which must decide if the stalker is a manifestation of Freddy Krueger or an actual person (Dickson).

Though Heather collects evidence of her stalking, she is aware that the police are not interested in actively helping her, so she does her best to ignore it. Heather catches her young son, Dylan (played by Miko Hughes), watching a scene from the first *Nightmare* film on television. He panics when she turns off the TV, screaming until another phone call from the stalker snaps him out of it. Heather struggles to balance motherhood and acting, almost giving up on an interview with a talk show because of Dylan's outburst. During her interview, the conversation veers away from her current projects to *Nightmare*, completing derailing as Robert Englund (played by himself, of course) appears in full Krueger make-up to surprise her, meant to mimic the 1989



appearance of Jason Voorhees on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. The studio audience, many of whom don Freddy merchandise, become enlivened, chanting for Krueger as Robert hams it up. With the harsh studio lights in front of Robert, his gloved hand outstretched, Heather finds herself quite literally in Freddy Krueger's shadow. She is constantly reminded by those around her that, even though *Nightmare* will be the only role she will be remembered for and the only one people want to talk to her about, most audience members, outside of die-hard fans, care more about Krueger than they do about Nancy.

The second meta anchor is the criticism of the Hollywood horror structure. After watching Robert sign autographs with no one asking for hers, Heather is invited to an impromptu meeting with executives at New Line Cinema to discuss doing another *Nightmare* sequel already in production. Heather is reluctant, always reiterating that the story had killed Krueger off in the sixth installment. She learns that Wes Craven is penning the script for the new film after moving away from horror, that his newfound inspiration stems from a sudden spate of nightmares, and that he wants her to star. Though Heather tries to come up with excuses (one of which she is a reluctance to continue doing horror when she has a child), all of her concerns are brushed off in favor of potential profits by Robert "Bob" Shaye (founder of New Line Cinema) who touts "marketing studies" about all the money they will make on a new film. In order to entice Heather, Bob informs her that her husband, Chase, is already working on special effects and a new prototype Freddy glove for the film, even though the script has not been completed. Though obviously exaggerated and scripted with Shaye's agreement to be in the scene, Craven's attempt to portray the production of an early 1990s horror film is critical. Shaye's office, wall-to-wall with horror merchandise from his studio's films,

offers a visual representation of what Alexandra West describes in her study of the emerging 1990s' Teen Horror Cycle that Craven observed prior to *New Nightmare* and would wade into after its release: "In the 1990s, films were no longer just films; they were soundtracks, fashions, slang, award shows and identities" (10). This expansion of horror as a product rather than a genre already appeared in the *Nightmare* franchise with obvious product placement and oversaturation of its own merchandise. With tie-in deals, New Line Cinema licensed Freddy Krueger as a character for multitude of products from t-shirts to his own rap album. As studios marketed their films beyond theatres with increasing ferocity, the more outraged parents became convinced that horror films were specifically targeting children rather than the audiences of ages suggested by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

Added to the excessive marketing, many studios began churning out a sequel for major franchises annually. Between 1984 and 1994, the *Nightmare* franchise boasted seven films in comparison to *Halloween's* five and *Friday the 13th's* nine up to that point. While all the sequels from these franchises have objective hits and misses among fans, a significant drop in the quality of the films continued due to short production times and tight budgets in order to maximize profits. Craven's criticism in *New Nightmare* is less interested in critiquing the other films in the franchise he started or the franchises of others; his writing reflects a dissatisfaction with the studios who insist they are making what audiences demand without the concern that filmmakers are, at best, providing the possibility for enlightenment and ethical commentary) or, at the bare minimum, providing an entertaining product for consumers.

Craven's critical approach to horror storytelling is more subtle and less referential than name-dropping other films to mock them. *New Nightmare* attempts to reverse the trend of the supernatural slasher becoming the story's sole survivor. In 1988, *Rolling Stone* offered its denouncement of the trend: "Eventually, Freddy Krueger *always* wins, and perhaps the greatest obscenity of all—he is the one character in the series who continually survives" (Gilmore). With the first *Nightmare* film, Nancy is resilient, fiery, and clever, devising ways to directly confront Krueger within her dreams and to force him into reality so that she can defeat him. However, the sequels put more emphasis on Krueger as a character. "Throughout these franchise sequels it was the killers whose stories and mythologies evolved, not the survivors' or the victims'" (West 5). While Jason's sad childhood is built into *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween* explains away the horror of Michael Myers spontaneously killing of his sister by revealing that his need to kill is spurred by the machinations of a cult. Similarly, Krueger is given his own tragic backstory filled with abuse and abandonment by Craven in the third installment, *Dream Warriors*, and expanded upon by Rachel Talalay and Michael DeLuca in the fifth, *Freddy's Dead* (1991). Craven corrects this misstep by meticulously constructing a plot for *New Nightmare* that refuses to let Krueger take center stage and by making sure that the story belongs to Heather and, by extension, Nancy. The audience empathizes with Heather's pain as she struggles with her career, as she is victimized by a stalker, as she loses her husband in a traffic accident (caused by Krueger), and as she tries to help her son who is slipping further into disturbing psychological episodes. Heather's confrontation of these events results in her reclaiming power and taking the spotlight from the boogeyman that had stolen it from her. The Wes of *New Nightmare* reiterates as

much, telling Heather that she has a choice once she realizes that Krueger's popularity has made him manifest in their world, threatening their lives and targeting Heather and Dylan especially. When Heather, angry that he dismissed his nightmares as just ideas for a movie, asks what kind of choice, Wes responds, "Whether or not you're willing to play Nancy... one last time." Wes admits that he may have written Nancy, but it was Heather who gave Nancy her strength. Heather has to become the hero of her own story again, the one who survives, and be the hero that horror films needed to evolve in the new millennium.

As Heather prepares for the most important role she will play to save herself and her son, she is confronted with the third meta anchor wherein the plot allows for a rebuttal to criticism against horror films. As Heather struggles to get help for Dylan, whose insomnia due to Krueger-induced nightmares has left him near a psychotic break, she is constantly berated for her involvement in horror films. The one thing that consistently saves Dylan from collapse is the presence of Rex, an adorable stuffed dinosaur who guards the foot of his bed to prevent Krueger from trying to pull him into the dream world. Dylan's doctor, Dr. Hefner, who had already been suspicious of Heather's "horror stuff," states with authority, "I'm convinced they can tip an unstable child over the edge." When Heather attempts to explain the significance of Rex to Dr. Hefner, she lets it slip that Rex is an anti-Freddy ward.

Dr. Hefner: "The man from your films? Freddy Krueger with the claws? Is that who he's afraid of? You haven't let your child see your films, have you?"

Heather: "Every kid knows about Freddy! He's like Santa Claus or King Kong!"

Heather's angry response to the accusation is one that many horror fans have experienced themselves as they defend their cinematic sensibilities. Watching as a medical professional disregards obvious signs of trauma (the death of a parent) as an explanation for Dylan's instability, outbursts, and insomnia in favor of blaming a horror film may seem farfetched, but, as the murder cases of Capper and Bulger exemplify, there are those that will blame media for just about anything because it is a simple and convenient answer to complex problems. When Heather compares Krueger to other pop culture icons, she is not condemning horror for having villains that are well known; she actually highlights that familiarity breeds comfort. The scenes of her interview feature young children surrounded by images of Krueger and crowded around Robert for his autograph, showing no signs of fear. In the same way that very small children will cry upon sitting on a mall Santa's lap, older children will beg to get their picture taken with Jolly Ol' Saint Nick. Exposure to the unfamiliar or initially frightening can lessen the fear they produce. One only has to look at *The Munsters* (1964-1966) or *Monster High* (2010) for further proof that popular monsters lose their bite once that level of comfort has been reached.

During the final confrontation with Krueger, Heather reprises her role as Nancy, returning to the set of the first *Nightmare* film. She enters into a hellish realm of Krueger's creation, like the mythic temple of a terrible god, to save Dylan. Krueger attempts to cook Dylan alive in his furnace, but Heather and Dylan manage to push Krueger inside his own creation, destroying him, like Hansel and Greta burning the witch who tried to eat them. *New Nightmare* ends with a happily ever after, one that many horror protagonists do not receive. Heather and Dylan emerge from Krueger's world to

find Wes's finished screenplay for the new *Nightmare* film with a note attached to thank her for all that she has done.

When Wes asks Heather if she has the courage to play Nancy one more time, it is a not just a wink-and-a-nod to Craven asking Langenkamp to do the same; it is Craven asking the audience to find the courage to say goodbye to a particular moment in the horror genre, a moment when horror films, in retrospect and with nostalgia, felt more original, more genuine. If sequels return to being a consequence rather than an eventuality, there is still a chance to leave behind the trends of the late 1980s and early 1990s for something, hopefully, entirely new. Craven would take what he started in *New Nightmare* and begin his work on the *Scream* franchise, a series that features a consistent cast that manages to survive their encounters with the Ghostface killer. His rhetoric of both criticizing and defending the horror genre remained relatively unchanged. However, these later films lack the meta anchors of *New Nightmare* and instead take a formulaic slasher plot and enhance it with meta elements, such as defining the "rules" by which horror movies must abide. This approach is much more comedic in tone but is still effective because the plot is grounded. Craven defended his choice of a dark comedy slasher: "[Kids] need a way to process their terror in a positive and funny manner" (Robb 178). His criticisms became less pointed as he relied more heavily on the comedic elements and over-exaggeration that feed comedic portrayal. The success of *Scream* would make meta a household word in the world of horror, but it would set up the genre for one of its worst downturns, culminating in Joss Whedon's *The Cabin in the Woods*.

The world of *Cabin* is ruled by the Ancient Ones, mythical deities ruling over humanity's fate, requiring ritualistic sacrifices throughout the world each year, or else the world will be destroyed. For the United States region, the sacrifice of five archetypes (the Whore, the Athlete, the Fool, the Scholar, and the Virgin) is required. An underground organization carries out these sacrifices, rigging locations with traps, providing alcohol and drugs, and releasing the slasher monsters to carry out the ritual murders. The employees of the organization glibly discuss the murders to come over the watercooler, making bets on which monsters their victims will accidentally unleash.

Following *Scream* logic, the order of the kills is ultimately unimportant as long as the Whore dies first and the Virgin either survives or dies last. This, of course, ignores the fact that *Scream* does not follow its own logic. The audience is never given any indication that Casey Becker, who dies first in *Scream*, is promiscuous, and Sidney Prescott, who has survived the entire franchise, loses her virginity before the end of the first film. *Cabin* thus begins trying to make a meta out of rules that were meant to be taken, at least initially, as comedic exaggeration.

A group of college students unknowingly travels to a cabin that the organization has already pumped with hallucinogenic chemicals that will make the average twenty-somethings take on their archetypal roles more readily. The ensemble characters are introduced in an affable fashion, genuinely friendly toward one another, but any endearing qualities they have quickly disappear as the unseen chemicals take effect. During the time in the titular cabin, the friends find mysterious objects in the attic. Activating one of these artifacts will choose the monsters they will face with the organization's employees taking bets about which horror will be unleashed.

The survivors of the initial attack on the cabin are Dana (the Virgin) and Marty (the Fool), who manage to infiltrate the organization before releasing the monsters, ranging from a family of cannibal hillbilly zombies to a murderous unicorn. When it is revealed to them that Dana needs to kill Marty to stop the apocalypse, Dana decides that humanity deserves to die out, allowing the Ancient Ones to destroy the world. Kristopher Karl Woofter observes that “the horror genre—caught its own vacuum of prepackaged, ritualized formula—must self-destruct before it can be ‘reborn’” (270). In this view, Whedon’s work is not far off from that of Craven. The difference is, however, that Whedon delights in how much he despises horror. After working on the screenplay for three days with writing partner Drew Goddard, Whedon describes the finished product as a “loving hate letter” in order to save the genre (13; “Joss Whedon Talks”). Though he claims that the film was intended to highlight what he loves about the horror genre, little love is to be found. Woofter highlights the issues behind this reductive attitude:

The problem with such a framing of horror (or any genre) as Whedon describes here, and as *Cabin* enacts through its thematic parallels between genre decline and apocalyptic excess, is threefold. First, it derives from the persistent elitist perspective in journalism and popular culture that sees horror as a crude, degraded genre appealing only to the most primitive desires and emotions and always in danger of going off the rails. Second, it belies the horror genre’s *inherent* reflexivity and consequently upholds outdated theoretical constructs of horror viewership as passive consumption of prepackaged genre commodities. And third, it follows retroactively assigned narratives of genres as



“progressing” through clearly marked evolutionary stages of development that tend to skirt notions of variation and hybridity (271).

Even with the most generous viewing, *Cabin* turns into seeing a series of aesthetically pleasing tableaux that remind the audience of other films that they have seen before or at least are familiar with through pop culture osmosis. At its worst, Whedon’s work with *Cabin* is the film equivalent of gaslighting, asking the audience to trust his referential form of meta as evidentiary of horror movies as a whole rather than what is observable in the hundreds of horror films made over the last century in the United States alone. Few horror films fit into Whedon’s narrow examination of what is wrong with horror. For someone who has critiqued the nihilistic aspects of “torture porn” and other subgenres of horror, Whedon drags away the interesting and likeable characters the audience barely got to know, lumps in horror industries from other countries with those in Hollywood as if they are the same, and puts the most effort into creature design that serves as the film’s visual meta (13-20).

Whedon’s approach is not about a wider cultural context but about indulging in witticism for those who consume in horror films. The metanarrative becomes: It is okay to like horror film as long as you are aware that all horror films are terrible. This view breeds only more animosity toward the genre. The meta inflates the audience’s ego while simultaneously and mean-spiritedly it accuses the audience of stupidity. Joss Whedon is not a horror fan. He seems to have built a career on mocking it while trying to explore it. His abilities are stunted by his own narrowminded view of the genre. He goes for comedy when he should be going for something meaningful. Unsurprisingly, Whedon believes in the logic described in Craven’s *Scream* without criticism of its limited scope. *Scream*’s

“rules” about how horror films operate and the expansion of those rules to apply to never-ending sequels pertained to specific types of horror films that Craven himself was directly involved in the production of during the late 1970s and 1980s, films of varying quality that Hollywood studios would not let die. Whedon, however, views all horror films with disdain, lumping together horror films of all eras and from outside of the U.S. film industry.

Those who value horror for all that it is and despite its flaws should accept the undead nature of the genre, embrace that it cannot be killed though its popularity and viability may not always “wow” critics or even fans. However, successful horror has to contend with the legacy of this most meta period in the genre’s history. In *New Nightmare*’s final sequence, as Heather hugs Dylan with faithful Rex at his side, Dylan looks at Wes’s script and asks Heather, “Is it a story?” She responds, “Yeah, it’s a story,” and the story is that of the horror genre as a whole with all its highs and lows. The story never stops as long as fans believe in the best that the genre can offer, fans who grow into filmmakers, and fans who offer thoughtful critique when the genre errs and when it succeeds. The story, of course, is the point that falters for *The Cabin in the Woods*. There is no story because the audience is told to simply wait for the inevitable because the script says that all horror movies are the same, and Whedon believes he can prove this point by shoveling reference after reference at the audience. This technique serves to show how shallow his reasoning is as he grasps across sub-genres of horror and even across cultures just to cobble enough evidence to prove that horror movies are predictable and, therefore, awful. *Cabin* lacks the purposefulness of *New Nightmare* in that its meta is not anchored to anything, save for its need to criticize.

The most egregious error for producing a horror film meant to “save” and rejuvenate the genre from the brink of collapse is that Whedon never offers a solution. *New Nightmare* gives an answer – survival over death, agency over complacency, a happily ever after in the face of insurmountable odds. *Cabin* chooses nihilism and apathy. Though *New Nightmare* provides less critique toward horror films themselves, it instead places critical focus on the world that horror must contend with for its very existence – studios running the genre into creative bankruptcy and those within the viewing public who blame media for all social ills, especially when those issues pertain to children. *The Cabin in the Woods* is less about making a commentary on the culture surrounding its production and more about providing a series of references that the audience can feel witty for “getting.” This approach to a metanarrative exists to hide the shallow and contrived nature of a film meant to mock the predictability of other films in the genre. The success or failure of a meta narrative comes down to purposefulness in its reflexivity. When meta is used as a tool to fuel a purpose, it enlivens a story and helps an audience to connect with the characters and the action; when meta is used as a purpose on its own, it may provide an interesting viewing experience, but it lacks the resonance to be considered a successful narrative.

## CHAPTER THREE: “THE WHOLE SELF-AWARE, POSTMODERN META SHIT:”

*SCREAM 4* AND THE DEATH KNELL OF SELF-REFERENTIALITY IN

## AMERICAN HORROR FILMS?

Self-referentiality has been an integral component to the horror genre since the inception of Western cinema. By 1996, however, the slasher genre, always teetering on the excessive and seeking to hold onto its early 1980s popularity, was thought all but dead until it was revitalized by Wes Craven with his film *Scream*, a movie that made a point of noting how the horror genre had suffered from reliance on predictable tropes and clichés until the audience had nothing new to expect, especially in the wake of sequels that typically followed. The final film in the *Scream* franchise, *Scream 4* (or *Scre4m*) took what had made the original clever and turned the franchise into a parody, much more akin to the satirical *Scary Movie* series that followed the release of the initial film.

Because the genre saw a renaissance (for better or worse) after the success of the first *Scream* film, horror movies contended with a new threshold of disbelief from an audience growing more genre savvy. From the teen slasher to violent, hyper-realistic “torture porn,” the genre morphed into something less campy and less fun, each film wanting to stand apart from the others, referencing older, better films to carve out its own niche. *Scream 4*, part of a legacy of films that prided itself on being creative and subversive, collapsed under the weight of reliance on the tropes its own franchise sought to point out as weak points in the genre. *Scream 4* marks an endpoint for self-referentiality in Western horror films since it had nothing left to critique but its own franchise (that, in turn, only succeeded in highlighting the film’s numerous flaws and

inconsistencies). It lost the ability to provide criteria for critiquing other films by falling into its own warnings against predictability and stretched the overarching metanarrative that marked the American horror genre since the late nineteenth century until it broke completely. Though films by the 2000s recaptured some of the cleverness that had existed in the teen horror films of the mid-1990s, these newer additions now require plots more akin to horror-comedy with less reliance on a sense of terror or dread due to the *Scream* franchise's effect on the genre as a whole.

Some academics, such as Steffen Hantke and James Francis Jr., have written detailed works that examine the current climate of horror movie production in the United States and its critical implications. Hantke's article "Academic Film Criticism, the Rhetoric of Crisis, and the Current State of American Horror Cinema: Thoughts on Canonicity and Academic Anxiety" provides a scholarly overview of the genre within the last two decades. He argues that the remakes, sequels, and "reimaginings" churned out by Hollywood have very little to offer, except to serve as a sounding board for inexperienced directors' stylistic approaches that too often collapse beneath their own weight in comparison to the public's nostalgia for the source material (Hantke 191-202). In *Remaking Horror: Hollywood's New Reliance on Scares of Old*, Francis Jr. provides a more structured history and analysis of the state of post-9/11 horror films. Francis Jr. contends the meta-narrative horror film has successfully created a genre that perpetuates its own stereotypes that only loosely existed in the first place. The stereotypes coalesced into tropes that persist in public opinion even when horror films no longer rely on them, creating a false memory of their presence due to the repetition of statements within media that those tropes appeared with frequency (175-181).

As early as 1984, Jean-Francois Lyotard introduced the concept of the metanarrative. Developed from both structuralism and structural linguistics, the metanarrative is a narrative about a narrative (or a story within a story) that relies on the reader's/viewer's pre-existing knowledge of any given topic from history to personal experiences. Though originally intended to describe literary works, the metanarrative became to be a way to further discourse on film. More than any other genre of American film, horror movies are likely to be self-referential and self-aware enough to comprise part of this metacinema tradition. Building upon this understanding prior to the revitalization of horror films, Michael Dunne's *MetaPop* explores a postmodern audience's relationship to the popular culture it creates and consumes. Dunne coins the term "metapop" to describe how the "fourth wall" that had previously existed between the audience and its media consumables had in fact crumbled by the 1900s. For the postmodern audience, there is no illusion of entertainment-without-cost; every show, every image has something to sell or a message to impart. A rhetorical language exists consciously or subconsciously within a community of viewers that allows for the reception and further communication of these messages that are in turn relayed as experiences that are either commonplace, widely experienced, or already established knowledge within the community. This cultivation of community creates a gatekeeping effect between media consumers, media producers, and the media consumers-turned-producers in that each new cycle of media production builds upon a context that was established in the previous cycle, creating the contents of the knowledge base that the new audience is expected to share.

*Scream* is best known for its self-referential nature and follows the plight of Woodsboro teenager Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) as a masked killer called Ghostface stalks her friends in the aftermath of her mother's murder. "*Scream*'s power comes from its ability to at once satirize the horror film, specifically the slasher film, as well as function as one" (West 68). Sidney, like the rest of her friends, are hyper-aware media consumers, aware of trends and tropes. When her friends readily discuss horror films after the murder of a classmate, Sidney states that she does not like horror films because they are too predictable. Her boyfriend, Billy Loomis (Skeet Ulrich), reminds her that, given recent events, they are essentially living in a horror movie. "You can't pick your genre," Billy warns, causing Sidney to lament that she was not in a romantic comedy.

Sidney's friend and self-professed horror movie geek Randy Meeks (Jamie Kennedy) gives "the rules" for horror films in *Scream*'s most infamous scene. The film and its sequel acknowledge the tropes that shape public opinion of horror films, including: 1) Those who do drugs and have premarital sex will not survive, and 2) The survivor of the killing will be a virginal young woman ("The Survivor Girl").<sup>1</sup> Ironically enough, *Scream* chooses not to follow its own rules with its subversion standing in for direct critique of the genre. Mark Jancovich notes, "Mass-culture criticism and auteurism had provided little space for an analysis of the genre: given that genres were largely seen

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<sup>1</sup> While *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (a newer attempt to reintegrate self-referentiality back into the genre) has optimistically described this type of character as the "Survivor Girl," Carol J. Clover calls this trope the "Final Girl," defining it as "one who encounters the mutilated bodies... and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; who is chased, cornered, wounded; whom we see scream, stagger, fall, rise, and scream again" (35).

as inherently simplistic and conservative forms, the implication was that they were too obvious for analysis” (12-16). Genre becomes what the audience either wants it to be or believes it to be, and the horror films released in the past decade have done more meeting of expectations rather than transgressing or blurring boundaries (Jancovich 16-17, 47-49). As Sidney’s gal pal Tatum (Rose McGowan) observes, “You can only hear the rumor so many times before it becomes true,” and the same adage holds true for the tropes of horror films. If enough of the audience believes a trope to be prevalent, it becomes ever-present throughout the genre, regardless if the trope is actually common.

Sidney receives support from Deputy Sheriff Dewey Riley (David Arquette) and crime reporter Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox) as Ghostface picks off her friends. The trio become the foundation of the franchise, surviving each film despite “the rules.” Ghostface is revealed to be Billy and Stu (Matthew Lillard) who both relish killing for the sake of it. They mock the necessity for horror movie villains to have reasons to murder, and a sentiment that Randy, a would-be victim, agreed with earlier in the film: “It’s the millennium... Motives are incidental.” The irony is that Billy does have a motive for the string of murders; Sidney’s mother slept with his father, resulting in a divorce, but his murder of Sidney’s mother was just one step in a master plan of making Sidney suffer with his final attempt to kill her saved until after they pair had consummated their relationship.

With Sidney, Dewey, Gale, and Randy surviving the first film, *Scream 2* (1997) continues their story as Sidney attends college and faces a new killer donning the Ghostface mask. Before his unfortunate off-screen death, Randy outlines additions to “the rules” in regard to sequels: 1) The body count is always larger, 2) The death scenes



are always gorier, and 3) The key to a successful horror franchise is to never assume the killer is dead. The final rule is not said in full within the film but was revealed during the promotional trailer. *Scream 3* (2000) reveals that Sidney went into seclusion after a film studio made a franchise, called *Stab*, about the Ghostface killings. The new “rules” are delivered to her via a video tape Randy made as he anticipated his death in the previous film: 1) The killer will now be superhuman and nigh unkillable, 2) Anyone can die, including the main character, and 3) The past always comes back to haunt you.

*Scream 4*, released in 2011, continues Sidney’s journey as she faces yet another killer donning the Ghostface mask as she returns to Woodsboro. The opening of the film features an unnamed blonde girl played by Anna Paquin critiquing the modern state of horror after viewing the opening scene for *Stab 6*, part of a film franchise that exists within the world of *Scream* that first appeared in *Scream 2*, based on the Woodsboro Murders of the first film: “It’s been done to death... The whole self-aware, post-modern meta shit!”<sup>1</sup> This remark is uttered moments before the character is stabbed in the gut and revealed to be not a character within *Scream 4* but rather part of the opening sequence of *Stab 7*. The characters within a franchise are watching and critiquing a film from that same franchise while existing within a different franchise as a work of fiction based on

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that Paquin’s appearance in the film as an “opening kill” is, in itself, a reference to the deaths of Casey (Drew Barrymore, *Scream*) and Maureen and Cici (Jada Pinkett-Smith and Sarah Michelle Gellar, *Scream 2*). Casting actresses who have more Hollywood clout and bankability than the current *Scream* cast (Campbell, Arquette, and Cox) and who get killed off quickly after being introduced has been a trope within the series since its inception. While in *Scream*, this was a shocking turn for audiences because all the 1996 pre-release advertising had misled viewers into believing that Barrymore was the star of the film (placing her as the main focus on the posters and only showing her scenes in the trailer). By *Scream 4*, that illusion is gone as the audience is well aware that Campbell is always going to be the star.

“actual” events. This nesting doll effect espouses enough meta-ness to make Regan MacNeil dizzy.

With each *Scream* sequel, “the rules” scenes are a chance to frame how the current killer operates. The “opening kills” provide moments to acknowledge changes to “the rules” from the previous installment and to situate the knowledge base of the characters with that of the audience watching the film. For the Paquin sequence, the topics range from online-based horror films to the paranormal/found-footage subgenre to “torture porn.” Emerging in the 1990s, “torture porn” refers to overly gory films that attempt to give the audience gratification with the creative murders of unlikable or unrelatable protagonists. Examples can be seen in the *SAW* and *Hostel* franchises. Another development in post-*Scream* horror was the concept of “found footage”/documentary style horror films, typically that focus on hauntings, exorcisms, and internet-based murders (*Paranormal Activity*, *The Last Exorcism*, and *FearDotCom*). The fiction-within-a-fiction *Stab* films with its copious sequels, outnumbering that of *Scream* itself, is the primary vehicle for much of Craven’s critique in the sequels. However, it is obvious that Craven places his own creation above the movies it references, that its purpose as a film is to subvert tropes; and yet, by the fourth film, it has fallen into clichés of its own making, such as the likable characters never dying. After the third film, the thought of Sidney dying became ludicrous (Persall). The ending of *Scream 4* tries so desperately to subvert about *Scream*’s original subversion of horror tropes that it becomes tiresome and wholly unthreatening. After surviving all the previous sequels with little consequences, the main protagonists and, by proxy, the audience has nothing to fear.

It is, in part, due to lack of critical expectations (both from film critics and the scholarly communities) that horror films “get away with” their metanarratives. They can be critical because the filmmakers themselves have something to say about the state of horror; meta-cinema becomes a way to express dissatisfaction with stereotypes the filmmakers feel exist within the genre or, at least, within positive and negative public opinion about horror. What the audience comes to expect is what studios feel safe in green-lighting, and, unfortunately, self-referential plot elements have become the new tropes of contemporary horror, oftentimes lacking the ability to prompt dialogue about the genre. These new tropes include: 1) Critiquing the current state of the genre, noting the canonicity of pre-1990s horror films and the lack of quality within the genre since then, and 2) Reinforcing the stereotypes of horror films that are actually less common to the genre as a whole and more reflective of the filmmaker’s interpretation of and personal relationship with the genre.

When Randy Meeks first announces “the rules” of how to survive a horror film in *Scream*, he does so in a room full of partying teens, who are drinking and watching John Carpenter’s *Halloween*. The scene, while Randy’s tone is serious, is played for comedic purposes as none of the teens take his warnings seriously, openly mocking the validity of the rules as they engage in the activities that should, according to Randy’s horror movie knowledge, get them killed. They drink alcohol and admit to engaging in premarital sex, two of the cardinal sins from Randy’s list. Only one of the teens from this group, however, will die by the film’s end; Stu, who breaks the third rule by shouting that he’ll “be right back” before leaving the safety of the group, is killed. This event, however, is not adherence to the trope that Randy talks about. Stu is one of the Ghostface killers the

protagonists are trying to escape, and his death after ironically breaking the third rule is also a subversion of that rule.

Whereas Randy originally offered these rules without believing he was in a horror film himself, the teens in *Scream 4* stoically sit in a classroom and listen to their fellow classmates, Charlie and Robbie, detail how the new Ghostface will likely behave—in accordance with newer trends in horror, such as “torture porn” and found footage. The new rules are much more specific: 1) Deaths have to be extreme, 2) Unexpected is the new cliché, 3) Virgins can die, 4) Technology may come into play with the killer’s activities, such as recording the murders and posting them online, 5) There has to be an opening kill, 6) “Don’t fuck with the original,” and 7) Only gay characters are guaranteed to survive a horror movie. The teenagers know that the killer(s) will operate on the horror movie logic from the previous films. However, while this awareness may make sense in the fictional world of Woodsboro where killers have, in the past, appeared to adhere to these standards, it makes little sense for the audience. While the original Ghostfaces (Billy and Stu) killed for both revenge and excitement (predating the teenage thrill-killers and school mass-shooters), the new Ghostfaces (revealed to be Charlie and Sidney’s cousin, Jill) kill simply because they want to “remake” the events of the first movie and gain Internet celebrity status.

During *Scream 4*’s rules scene, Robbie explains to Sidney, “There are still rules, but the rules have changed. The unexpected is the new cliché.” Charlie adds, “Modern audiences get savvy to the rules of the original, so the reversals become the new standard.” However, *Scream 4* has only *Scream* to blame for these changes to the rules. Its originality and creative use of horror movie expectations made it unique. *Scream 4*

cannot bring anything of its own. If the killer's identity is unexpected, the film is clichéd; if it is obvious who the killer is from the beginning, then that does not make for much tension or excitement throughout the movie. This quagmire of a writer's conundrum leaves little room for creativity. While many of the film's elements adhere to what Valerie Wee describes as the "hyperpostmodernism" of the original trilogy, such as reliance on popular culture awareness, "intertextual referencing," and "self-reflexivity" (self-referencing) along with the borrowing of stylistic elements from other media in order to further those self-reflexive elements, *Scream 4* ultimately fails because it had nothing left to critique other than itself and its franchise (44-47). While the *Stab* films allowed the original series to take minor pokes and pricks at the *Scream*'s premise, the seriousness of the regard for *Stab*'s rules in *Scream 4* negates all that intertextuality by completing eliminating the fourth wall. In "The Rules of Reviving a Genre: 'Scream' and Postmodern Cinema," Jon Lisi deconstructs *Scream*'s postmodernness, examining its plot's rallying cry for originality and finding it largely flawed. While exploring how Wes Craven developed the methods through which *Scream* could critique horror, Lisi also notes that Craven is simultaneously critiquing those who enjoy horror too much (like the killers within the first film) and the obsessive tendencies that many fans display for their favorite films. The film and its sequels offer instances in which cinephiles are both rewarded and punished for their pop culture and horror movie awareness. There is nothing left to enjoy if all the suspense and mystery is taken away, but *Scream 4* offers nothing to remedy that; it can only mock other films with its self-assured superiority due to the critical success of its franchise predecessors.

The first *Scream* film produces much of its anxiety and terror because, once “the rules” are established with the audience, the victims are readily apparent to the audience but not to the characters, who carry on their activities as though they were not in a horror film (because, unlike its sequels, *Scream*’s characters did not delve into that level of meta). George J. Sieg calls this the “gnosis (knowledge) of the victim” and describes that there is something intriguing in knowing that something terrifying is potentially going to happen to a victim (29-31). While in the first film, there was fear from the audience that Sidney could be killed (particularly after she has sex, breaking the first rule that Randy outlines) that fear completely vanishes by the fourth film. When Sidney kills her would-be killer yet again in *Scream 4*, she quips, “You forgot the first rule of remakes, Jill: Don’t fuck with the original.” What was supposed to be a triumphant statement, likely meant to invoke a cheer from the audience, now rewarded for their franchise loyalty with the survival of their heroine, falls rather flat. The worry that Sidney Prescott could be killed never enters the mind of the audience, now savvy to *Scream*’s criticisms. Her continued survival is the only unique aspect that the films retain.

While some of the damage wrought to horror cinema’s self-referential tradition can be repaired and reintegrated back into the canon, *Scream 4*’s release marks the point when horror films cease to provoke a metanarrative while still offering something for audiences to fear. While other films have attempted to repair horror’s ability to be self-referential, the *Scream* franchise has damaged what was once the integral and fascinating ability for horror cinema to reflect upon itself. Newer films, particularly those produced outside the United States, such as *The Babadook* (2014) and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), are returning to older source material, folklore, and primal fear, the original

scars. Inside the U.S., however, films, such as *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), must continue to include elements of horror-comedy in order to be self-referential while still standing out in an over-saturated genre.

CHAPTER FOUR: AHABS, TURTLES, AND SURVIVOR GIRLS:  
POSTMODERNISM IN *BEHIND THE MASK: THE RISE OF LESLIE VERNON*

For those initiated into horror as a film genre, the sight is familiar: A young woman, fleeing for her life, runs through a foreboding copse of trees, searching for something, *anything* to use as a weapon against the mask-wearing, blade-wielding psychopath who pursues her. This description could apply to any host of slasher films; even novice horror viewers could name a few. Could the masked killer be Jason from the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* franchise, Michael Myers from the *Halloween* franchise, or even one of the many individuals who don the Ghostface mask in the *Scream* franchise? The answer for the purposes of this analysis, however, is none of the above. This supernatural/preternatural killing machine is Leslie Vernon, the titular focus of 2006's *Behind the Mask*, a mockumentary-style horror film that explores the very existence of horror as a cinematic genre. While watching *Behind the Mask*, the audience is confronted with the question of why people choose to watch horror films through a four-fold conversation that exists within the plot between Leslie Vernon and Taylor Gentry (the "Survivor Girl"), between the film and the audience (represented by the documentary crew's camera), between the film and the horror genre, and, last, between the film and scholars of horror. This approach culminates in an intricate metanarrative that, unlike other horror films that fall into the meta-cinema tradition, questions more than it mocks and entertains more than it references other films, providing a sense of genuine affection for the genre while asking questions of the audience that are less about guilt and more about actually caring about the viewers for taking pleasure in horror films and more about actually caring about the



answers potentially provided. *Behind the Mask* takes the idea that “genre is . . . an object that is composed of a collection of films that are related to one another through their common possession of an essentially invariant narrative pattern,” and it acknowledges that narrative tradition, follows it, and yet, somehow, manages to produce something wholly different (Jancovich 11).

Although not a barren wasteland, the available scholarship focusing on postmodern elements within contemporary American horror as a genre is limited but, thankfully, growing. While films gunning for Oscar glory or those being touted through the film festival and art house circuits may receive academic treatises that give them a postmodern theoretical treatment, horror films have lagged slightly in this scholastic trend. However, horror’s relationship with gender, psychoanalysis, technology, audience tastes, and narrative structure make it the perfect playground for those wishing to dig their toes into that postmodern sandbox. *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* typifies this opportunity. The questioning aspect of *Behind the Mask* resists what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner describe, in “In Search of the Postmodern,” as “easy dismissal or facile incorporation into already established paradigms” (1). Horror films can easily be overlooked and/or dismissed by critics and academics alike because the genre is seen as embracing violence, gore, and misogyny and focused toward an audience that somehow manages to be desensitized to these elements while simultaneously reveling in them. However, this view produces a strict binary between “good” films (worthy of discourse) and “bad” films (into which category horror falls) that contradicts postmodernism’s opposition to such distinctions. As described by Isabel Cristina Pinedo in “Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film,” “the postmodern horror

film transgresses the rules of the classically-oriented horror film, but it also retains the features of the latter, which form a backdrop against which violations of the rules are intelligible as such” (18-19). This audience awareness produces many metanarrative structures that can be seen in many contemporary horror films, such as the *Scream* franchise (1996-2011), *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), and *Behind the Mask*.

In anticipating the paradigms of classical horror films along with the conceived expectations of audiences and critics alike, contemporary horror can break the rules while acknowledging to the audience that the filmmakers are aware that such rules exist. In *Scream* (1996), for example, the character of Randy Meeks stands in for those members of the audience who have already become familiar with horror tropes. By explaining the “rules” of horror, Meeks establishes that the film (here defined as its writer, crew, and cast) is aware of audience expectations in order to later display that it can break convention or, rather, what is seen as convention by the viewing public. *Behind the Mask* takes this approach a step further by including fans, academics, and fan-academics in this conversation. The film begins with a documentary film crew, headed by the lone female protagonist, Taylor Gentry, who is working on the documentary as part of her thesis research, as she meets with Leslie Vernon, a self-proclaimed masked killer in the style of Jason Voorhees or Michael Myers as he prepares to select his victims--a stereotypical group of teenagers, later codified in *The Cabin in the Woods*, consisting of the popular/”slutty” girl, the virginal girl, the everyman, the jock, and a pair of stoners.

As Gentry and her crew follow Vernon as he makes decisions about how and when he will kill, the audience is presented with three modes of viewing scenes: the found footage scope, the reality scope, and the slasher scope. The found footage scope

consists of the camera feed as the documentary crew films, complete with narration from Gentry. This element within the film draws immediate connections to many post-*Scream* American horror films, such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1998) and *The Last Horror Movie* (2005), that rely on “found footage” as a gimmick (with part of the plot centering on the footage being discovered after some devastating event, such as the disappearance of a film crew). *Behind the Mask* predates the wave of found footage movies that followed in the years after its release (such as the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, 2007-2015) and yet still serves as a critique of those films. *Behind the Mask* never allows the footage to exist without some attachment to the universe within the film itself. The audience is never allowed to passively watch the documentary footage, which, consequently, is neither lost nor complete. Gentry and her crew must make moral decisions about whether to warn Vernon’s potential victims, choosing (until the end) to maintain (largely) a stance of objectivity/noninterference for which actual documentarians are often criticized.

The secondary point of view is the slasher scope. Seen only during descriptions of events that Vernon dictates will take place or when he is actively killing, this mode of viewing depicts Vernon as a mindless killer. The framing of shots, complete with fog and seemingly directed within Vernon’s mind, is reminiscent of innumerable slasher antagonists. The Dutch tilts (camera shots set at oblique angles) and low angles give the scenes a surreal quality while also making Vernon, who possesses a swimmer’s build, appear bulky and imposing (more akin to a Kane Hodder-esque physique seen in many slasher movie remakes and revivals). Both the Dutch and low angles allow the creation of tension and danger by placing Vernon high in the frame, creating a sense of dominance.

The slasher scope sequences are extremely brief and instantly derive a sense of unease from the audience. The personable tone that exists throughout the film suddenly vanishes with a brief moment of violence that jars viewers out of any comfort they might have felt “in the company” of Vernon.

Finally, the most important and most frequent scope is that of reality. When the cameras come down, the perspective of the film centers on Gentry’s point-of-view. She struggles with the moral implications of what she is doing and worries that she is encouraging a killer to murder innocent people. She can choose when filming will stop, even if Vernon will continue with or without her watching. Her questioning provides grounding for the reality of this universe and the way it functions: supernatural masked killers are real, but the moral obligations of an individual still exist alongside them. There are *rules*. Vernon has his own rules when choosing how and when he will kill, and Gentry has her morals as well as a conflicting desire to become a successful documentarian. Her perception of events and her decision to try to save the teenagers Vernon has targeted creates a shift in tone, and the film’s light-heartedness ends. Reality (specifically Gentry’s reality) fully grounds the scene, and the camera never shifts back to Vernon’s gaze. By choosing to engage, Gentry recognizes that, in addition to filming Vernon as he planned his murders, she had always been participating in his plot, despite her claims of objectivity, and could never claim to have been an innocent bystander.

Gentry’s conflict encompasses the importance of understanding the film’s metanarrative. When an audience consumes media, it engages with that media. There is no “turning your brain off” when it comes to viewing a film; tropes and visual shorthand, whether positive or negative, are processed and interpreted immediately upon watching a

film, commercial, or television program. Like the audience, Gentry is torn between how to perceive Vernon; with the mask, he is a monster, but, behind the mask, he is a likeable and gregarious goofball who keeps two pet turtles. However, Gentry is not a stand-in for all the audience members watching the film. The camera, instead, serves that purpose. She represents a very particular element of the horror fan-base; she is the female horror fan-academic. Gentry stands in for the Pinedos of the world, the ones who love horror but have to question it the more entrenched in academic discourse they become. Many horror fans have to confront the elements of the genre that are problematic—the perceived punishment of premarital sex, focus on the murder of women in various states of undress, and the voyeuristic manner in which those murders linger for the audience to view—and that creates a conflict between enjoyment and awareness, knowing that something is problematic and feeling the need to reconcile the conflict between knowing and enjoying. For many scholars, like Pinedo, the resolution of the conflict comes when viewers recognize in confronting the negative aspects that they can continue to enjoy the experience. For example, the ability to recognize misogynistic tropes within horror films helps fans, filmmakers, and scholars alike to engage in dialogue that might benefit the genre as a whole. Audiences advance the genre through their awareness, encouraging filmmakers to avoid reliance on dated and potentially harmful clichés.

Gentry questions Vernon's actions in just such a way, and she experiences anger at what Vernon intends to do while also seeing his humanity and humor. This situation is similar to a viewer balking at the excessive violence in a film like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) while being able to feel empathy with a character such as Leatherface, who interacts with the world with all the playfulness and selfishness of a rampaging

toddler. In *Behind the Mask*, Gentry represents the academic, and Vernon is her text; her engagement with him creates the movie's central conflict and its emotional resonance with the audience. Like Pinedo, Gentry feels the "tension between critical distance and passionate involvement in order to augment the power of [her] engagement with the genre" (5). Gentry is confronted with the misogynistic elements of what Vernon is doing, elements that Vernon is keenly aware of and chooses to do anyway while being able to rationalize those elements into something that is positive for his female victim. He imagines his female target will receive empowerment from the experience he is forcing on her, which will, in turn, benefit her (despite the terror that he forces this unwilling participant to endure). Vernon wants to be killed by his Survivor Girl, the female sole-survivor who will take on a masculine role and violently murder him so that he can return to life in an un-killable supernatural form. The Survivor Girl must be a virgin, and she must take up a phallic weapon of power to kill her pursuer, preferably his own weapon (in Vernon's case, a sickle). Although the film uses different terminology, this concept of a "Final Girl" is directly lifted from the research of another female horror academic, Carol J. Clover, and her influential book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (260).

Where pieces of Clover's Final Girl are present within the film, they are counterbalanced by shifts away from the trope. For most of the film, Gentry is unaware that she is Vernon's Survivor Girl because he has led her to believe that he has long-settled on a teenage girl. Unlike the trope as described by Clover, the audience's experience throughout the film does not shift between Vernon as killer to Gentry as survivor; for the majority of the movie's run time, Gentry is always present and active, even when the camera is focused on Vernon. They share the screen and the audience's

attention. Gentry is always speaking with Vernon and trying to understand him, both for the purposes of her work and as a way to come to terms with her fascination. It is only during the majority of the slasher scope scenes that Gentry is not present; this pattern holds true until the end of the film when she is the focus of Vernon's murderous intent.

Other instances of this trope inversion appear in naming conventions and the male gaze. Like many Final Girls, Gentry possesses a unisex name (other examples include Laurie from *Halloween* and Sidney from *Scream*). While typically the supernatural mass murderer sports a more masculine name (Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, etc.), Leslie's name matches Taylor's in its usage as a unisex name, although it leans more towards feminine usage within the United States. As with his name, Leslie's gaze is not inherently masculine either. He does not "peep" on young women undressing; he watches and stalks without the element of the fetishistic scopophilia or sadistic voyeurism that is outlined by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (837-839). When Leslie looks, it is in targeting a means to an end, rather than taking any real pleasure from these acts when he is without his mask. This act as only a means to an end highlights the problematic nature of the Final Girl; her position as the surviving hero is dampened by the acknowledgement that she is merely a tool, in this scenario, for a male villain to achieve his goals, whether she is the target of rage (such as in the case with Michael Myers' against his sister Laurie Strode in the first *Halloween* film) or the method through which the killer achieves his infamy (such as with Vernon). Vernon's pleasure is derived from the pageantry and scene setting of creating his legend and from the opportunity to teach Gentry the motives and reasoning behind supernatural murder sprees to ensure her survival. His gaze is cold and calculated, making one reevaluate at

once the male gaze within slasher films. Images of disrobing teenagers and stranded young women being “peeped” on from afar alludes to the overt sexual desires of the male killers (Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs*). Although films that focus on human killers may reinforce this notion, the most popular and long-standing franchises featuring supernatural slashers do not. The gaze of the slasher does not typically give pleasure to the character himself, although it likely is meant to bring pleasure to members of the audience. Driven by a curse, Michael Myers weeps silently beneath his mask when he is driven to kill his young niece. With neither speech nor facial expressions, Jason Voorhees is a blank slate whose franchise began not with his voyeurism and punishment of sexual activity but with the gaze of his mother. Leatherface (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*) finds child-like glee when he plays dress-up but less so when he is killing. It takes a slasher like Freddy Krueger (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*), who does not don a mask, who is the most obviously sexual, but he does not need to gaze. His presence invades the dreams and mind of his victims rather than watching from afar; he does not hide. In allowing Vernon to be seen by the audience with and without his mask, the film shows the audience a clear distinction between two types of slasher films: those with masked and unmasked killers. For the masked killers, any sadistic pleasure experienced by the audience has less to do with the killer’s gender and more to do with the anonymity of the masked and silent gaze. The unmasked slashers, much more akin to those of the serial killer subgenre in how they behave rather than how they *look*, announce their pleasure to the audience (Freddy Krueger and Pinhead from *Hellraiser*) rather than the audience seeing that pleasure through their eyes; the audience is given no point-of-view shots from these types of killers. Vernon becomes a mixture of both types of slasher,



masked and unmasked; while he kills, the audience does not see through his eyes but, when he is unmasked, the audience learns of his pleasure in the staging of his murderous operation. In fact, the more voyeuristic shots within the film come from the documentary crew's camera. Although the camera operator is male, Gentry is the one directing the shots. Her professional and personal fascination with Vernon drives the more anonymous and silent gaze of the camera, and its focus is on a handsome young man rather than a vulnerable young woman.

If one takes Clover's definition of a slasher from "Her Body, Himself" and examine it in comparison to *Behind the Mask*, a film made more than ten years after its publication, one could see a distinct launching point for the relationship between Vernon and Gentry. "[Slasher] films present us in startlingly direct terms with a world in which male and female are at desperate odds but in which, at the same time, masculinity and femininity are more states of mind than body" (Clover, "Her Body, Himself" 68). Vernon and Gentry are not desperately at odds. They are neither lovers nor specifically friends; when Vernon turns against Gentry, her cameramen and fellow researchers are more emotional and upset about Vernon's perceived betrayal. They attempt to reason with Vernon, trying to appeal to his better nature, to the person beneath the mask, with whom they had shared laughs and barbeque in the nights prior. Although Vernon does seem to pause in his assault for a brief moment, he nonetheless kills Gentry's male companions, who stay behind to give her a chance to escape. While Clover contends that the "Final Girl is boyish . . . Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine," she admits that the words *masculine* and *feminine* cannot "do justice to the sense of her character as a whole" (*Men, Women, and Chainsaws* 86, 106). The dynamic between

Vernon and Gentry supports this categorization with allowances for the limitations of wordage with which to speak about issues of identity and gender.

Naming conventions aside, the characters' genders within *Behind the Mask* are a product of and a response to the horror genre and the public perception of it. Vernon wants a female sole-survivor because the trope of the Final Girl exists, not because he feels a sadistic urge to kill women but because he defines himself as a slasher as though it were a profession. Gentry's femaleness, while factoring into Vernon's decision to kill her, is a part of who she is, and there is never a scene in which she shirks her femininity in order to kill and, therefore, never fulfilling the Final Girl trope to its entirety (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* 102, 106). Gentry does not fit into the mold of "a physical female and a characterological androgyne: like her name, not masculine but either/or, or, both, ambiguous" (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* 106). Rather than stabbing Vernon with his phallic weapon (as happens to Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger, and Michael Myers in various incarnations and sequels), Gentry crushes Vernon's head within an apple press before setting him on fire. If one were to take this scenario to the pinnacle of potential metaphors, the presence of apples only seeks to heighten Gentry's womanhood. As the apple is a symbol of fertility and original sin within Christian dogma, Gentry, a virgin, reclaims it in order to slay the force that seeks to destroy her. The pressing and squeezing of Vernon's head, face hidden by his mask, can be equated with birthing pains as Gentry unwittingly "gives birth" to Vernon, who survives being set on fire and rises from the grave with new supernatural powers. Even with these unforeseen negative consequences, Gentry never "acquits herself 'like a man'" (Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* 102).

Whereas Gentry's presence within the film presents a far more progressive portrait of the Final Girl than in Clover's arguments, Tony Williams notes that the Final Girl typically is not victorious (167-168). Although she may survive the day, whether the Final Girl is mentally or physically capable of carrying on her life after the horror she has witnessed is up for debate. Alice from the original *Friday the 13th* barely makes it ten minutes into *Friday the 13th Part II* (1981) before being brutally killed. Nancy Thompson from *Nightmare on Elm Street*, one of the most pro-defense Final Girls, sacrifices herself to Freddy Krueger in order to save others in the third film, *Dream Warriors* (1987). Laurie Strode, possibly the longest surviving Final Girl, eventually meets death at the hands of her brother, Michael Myers, in *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), the eighth installment in the franchise, released over two decades after the first film's release. In pursuit of her goal of finishing her thesis, Gentry loses her friends, linking her to Heather in *The Blair Witch Project*, and unknowingly makes it possible for Vernon to become the kind of killer that he wants to be, much as Alice does in *Friday the 13th*.

Like Clover, Williams connects slasher films to a larger tradition of horror, arguing that most slashers owe some success in their filming techniques to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). The character who would, by today's horror conventions, be considered the Final Girl is Marion Crane, and Norman Bates kills her halfway through the film. Lila, Marion's sister, steps in to fill the role of main female character, but Sam Loomis, Marion's boyfriend, ultimately confronts Bates to subdue him. This heroic male character is then revived in *Halloween's* Dr. Sam Loomis, the psychiatrist who monitors Michael Myers during his many years of institutionalization after the murder of his sister. Dr. Loomis fires the final shot of the first film to kill Myers and save Laurie Strode;

however, when Myers does not die and pursues Strode further in the sequel, Loomis sacrifices himself to save Strode and to kill Myers by igniting oxygen tanks in a room where he and his former patient have a confrontation (Williams 169-170).

Although Strode disappears from the franchise, save for brief mentions, for twenty years, Loomis returns when Myers does, an archetype that Leslie Vernon dubs an “Ahab.” Referring to the obsessive whale-hunting sea captain of Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, an Ahab is a force for good, whereas the masked killer is a force for evil, locked in a dance of life and death with neither being able to win. Vernon’s Ahab is Doc Halloran, his former psychiatrist, who dresses and speaks similarly to Donald Pleasence’s portrayal of Dr. Loomis. Much as Dr. Loomis is a reference to *Psycho*, Doc Halloran is a reference to both *Halloween* and *The Shining* (the character Dick Hallorann, who possesses the gift of the Shining and tries to warn the Torrences of the dangers of the Overlook Hotel). While nodding to the audience who might recognize the similarities between Dr. Loomis and Doc Halloran, the pre-establishment of this trope of a wizened older man who comes to the defense of a younger, more vulnerable person allows Vernon to explain to Gentry why his “work” as a supernatural killer is important. There has to be a balance between good and evil; Vernon has to exist for Doc Halloran to counteract that with goodness. Unlike Laurie Strode, Gentry’s survival is not because of Doc Halloran; it is because of Vernon. He explains to her the tropes and tricks he will use. This is part of his plan; he never wants to kill her as he needs her to survive. This predicament makes Gentry a bit of a conundrum as a Final Girl. As she is predetermined to live and is in minimal danger, can she be considered a Final Girl? While Williams might note that the more progressive distinction of Final Girl may not apply due to the main decision-making

being done by a male character, Gentry chooses her own weapon when Vernon antagonizes her into attacking him, fully aware of what he wants her to do, and refuses to allow him to have his perfect plan.

This scene, in many ways, is in direct conversation with the audience; unlike many post-9/11 horror films, the characters of *Behind the Mask* are all likeable, including Vernon. The audience feels conflict in choosing a side and realizes a level of manipulation on the part of the filmmakers. While this anonymous hand of the author/filmmaker is always present, it is thus made all too present. The audience wants Gentry to survive but does not want Vernon to die, and the viewers are given just such an ending that manages to be both poignant and satisfying. Vernon rises from an autopsy table after being defeated (seen from a found footage/security camera point-of-view shot), the question of where he will go and whom he will kill remains unanswered. If he follows Jason's example, he will kill Gentry if a sequel is made; if he follows Michael Myers' or Freddy Krueger's pattern, he will wait for some sequels before finally offing her. However, Gentry may prove to be more like other post-*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* heroines like Sidney from *Scream* or Julie James from *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and its sequel, who both have, thus far, survived their franchises for better or worse. Williams argues that "Although eighties heroines may appear more masculinized than their predecessors, the conservative ideological dimensions of this gender change needs thorough investigation before we may safely regard it as progressive" (170). The heroines of the 1990s and early 2000s, like Buffy, Sidney, Julie, and Taylor, embrace femininity in the face of terror without relying on any wilting flower trope, although men may temporarily step in to aid them; their choices are the ones that

ultimately matter. The best possible outcome for Gentry would be one similar to that of Nancy Thompson, who meets death in a third film only to be resurrected in Wes Craven's 1994 foray into meta-narratives, *New Nightmare*. In the film, Heather Langenkamp, who played Thompson in the original *Nightmare*, plays herself and must take on the role of Nancy "one last time" in order to defeat Freddy Krueger for good (until *Freddy vs. Jason* that is). In doing so, Thompson, through Langenkamp, is triumphant, even though she and her son have been through a hellish trauma. With a *Behind the Mask* sequel supposedly in the works, only time will tell what will become of Gentry.

The conversations in *Behind the Mask* reflect academic and fan discourse as well as fan and genre expectations. Critical detachment is not entirely possible when one cares about one's subject matter. In confronting this dilemma of academic/professional integrity and the pleasure one finds as a fan, *Behind the Mask* breaks down the dichotomy between fan discourse and academic discourse, allowing them to merge. In that the film also blends humor with references and trope acknowledgement within its own genre, it takes the changes in horror brought during the 1990s and questions them with loving reverence. It reflects the "new playfulness" that early on pitted postmodernism against modernist aesthetics (Best and Kellner 11). Vernon makes his decisions because the conventions exist within the horror genre; he does not act with independent thought once his demeanor shifts to that of the slasher killer. His actions, whether the viewer is horrified or is laughing with him, invites reflection on the tropes he feels compelled to follow and those that both he and Gentry invert. Rather than treating horror as completely irreverent or devoid of value, *Behind the Mask* engages with its audience, with academics, and with its characters to develop a metanarrative that is both critical and

fruitful for study, avoiding the pitfalls of the purely parodying horror comedies that arose in the early 2000s. The film asks its audience and scholars to be critical of what they are consuming, just as one should question a meal served by Hannibal Lector: Just because it tastes delicious does not mean that the dish is necessarily good for the consumer (or for the consumed). One can enjoy horror and recognize that there are still problematic elements that need to be addressed and that these films can be improved upon without the reliance on tropes that do nothing but stagnate the entire genre. Taylor Gentry represents that idea perfectly, although it is important to remember the lingering bit of doubt about the success of her efforts at confrontation. By the film's end, she is left worn down but victorious, and Vernon receives what he had always wanted--to rise again. The moral of this supernatural slasher tale is that engagement with media never dies, and, in true sequel fodder fashion, the work of the Final Girl is yet to be done.

## CONCLUSION

The future of horror is looking brighter for having taken a page from Craven's screenplay by simply moving forward, by not giving up on the genre. The more overt, self-referential meta-horror has given way to socio-meta, making what had been those non-diegetic forms of meta vital to narrative. Horror, though it has reflected social ills and unease, has not always dealt with issues of race and gender directly with representation being the focus. Films such as *The Babadook* (2014), *The Witch* (2015), *Hereditary* (2018), and *Candyman* (2020) are leading the way for victim-centric horror, focusing on the anguish of protagonists not for titillation but to provoke thought on social issues, such as gender, race, and class. Jordan Peele's direct sequel of *Candyman* (1992) reframes the narrative away from a white protagonist onto a person of color while retaining the discussion of gentrification, the importance of personal history, and race—all vital to the original's narrative.

While slasher films are less prevalent in the market than they were in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they continue to earn studios money even if critics remain ever dismissive. *Happy Death Day* (2017) was a surprise delight, depicting the growth of an unlikeable protagonist (one that the audience would not mind see die several times over the course of the *Groundhog Day*-esque film) into a wonderfully likeable "Final Girl" in a brightly colored PG-13 slasher romp.

Online platforms, like Youtube, gave content creators the opportunity to explore horror further with smaller film studios able to distribute their contributions to the genre to a wide audience. Though their metanarratives remain relegated mostly to references,



these studios are able to show their love for the horror that has come before without letting it overshadow their efforts. Crypt TV is one Youtube channel keeping horror traditions alive for an international audience through their various series based around different creature creations. One of Crypt TV's recent releases, *Shelley* (2018), is a return to the classic slasher format while still offering something new—a teenage girl ghost, possessing preternatural strength and a love of lacrosse sticks, who seeks vengeance on those who murdered her. Like *Behind the Mask: The Rise of Leslie Vernon* (2006), *Shelley* provides the opportunity to subvert expectations about how gender is treated within horror movies.

In addition to providing audiences for filmmakers, horror scholars outside of academia share their thoughts on horror films from the big budget to the obscure. Youtube critics Diamanda Hagan and Ryan Hollinger offer their own unique perspectives on the genre through well-produced videos on horror films that strike their interest. With heavy make-up and with the persona of a third world dictator, Hagan's interest lies with lesser-known and low budget productions. Hagan utilizes the comedic value from covering films with bad CGI and/or terrible writing, but she also highlights some diamonds in the rough and shows genuine love for the genre even as she jokes. Hollinger's critique leans toward the more academic style of writing, typically showcasing theatrically released films. Hollinger discusses historical context, intertextuality, and offers thoughtful critique while remaining entertaining for the non-initiated. Hagan and Hollinger, though they vary in style and presentation, show that horror critique outside of scholarship does not need to be the unnecessarily cruel or nitpicky CinemaSins format that only seeks to point out flaws with no solutions. With

more users delving into content creation, the inclusivity of the conversation around horror will only continue to grow, and one hopes that it will only improve the quality of discussions surrounding a genre that could always a few more champions.

Horror films are just as diverse in subject, tone, and technical acumen as ever, and the genre's story is not finished yet. Filmmakers will continue to process their fears through the lens of the genre, and, while the horror genre may have its down moments, fans simply must keep the courage to see one more movie, one more time, every time.

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