

In Excess: Notes on the Special Issue on Horror and the Global

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It is hard to imagine a film genre that has wider reach across the cultures of the globe than horror. Fear at the possibility of suffering a violent death, terror at the sight of supernatural entities like ghosts and demons, and revulsion at making physical contact with diseased or decaying bodies are primordial emotions which human beings have felt the need to confront since the beginning of recorded history. The ubiquity of sacrifice in the stories concerning the origins of a people or the foundation of a polity attests to the vital function of horror in constituting the identity of a community and securing it against the forces that threaten to bring chaos and destruction. Fear and terror are indispensable elements in rites of initiation in pre-modern societies, in which the initiate is compelled to undergo a terrifying ordeal as a condition for gaining full membership in the tribe as an adult. It is by going through a symbolic process of death and rebirth that one reaches adulthood and gains the secret knowledge of the tribe's founding myths and sacred teachings.¹ According to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, it is crucial that the transmission of this knowledge take place in a manner that is both terrifying and injurious to the initiate, otherwise he will not take to heart the secrets that are being revealed to him. For the horror and cruelty of archaic rites arises from "that instinct which guessed that the most powerful aid to memory was pain."²

Experiences of horror and pain are thus indispensable to the rituals that shape the young into full members of the community with adult responsibilities and adult privileges. The ordeal undergone by the initiate connects his life to the destiny of the ancestral hero, in which the terrors involved in the rites of initiation recreate the monstrous forces

vanquished by the hero in his journey to the underworld. By taking part in the rites of initiation, the young person comes to participate in the exemplary life of the hero, who returns from his journey bearing life-giving blessings to the tribe. Horror cinema, in exposing the viewer to images that terrify him or her, would appear to fulfill a similar function in evoking the primal forces capable of destroying the community in order to defuse and control them. The parallel between horror cinema and archaic rites of initiation have encouraged the view that horror is an inherently conservative genre: it shores up the spectator's attachment to the social status quo by showing the negative consequences of the loss of moral and sexual restraint. For radical film scholar and critic Robin Wood, the horror films made during the classical period of Hollywood cinema have the aim of justifying the patterns of repression that sustain bourgeois society. The monster represents a threat to "normality," which is typically embodied by "the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them," and the triumph over the monster serves as the heroic deed that reaffirms the beliefs and values of the "normal" world.³

But horror by nature traffics in excess, gravitating toward themes that are not easily contained within existing forms or fully neutralized by them. What one generation finds terrifying, the next is likely to regard as trite, formulaic, or ridiculous. The genre of horror loses its hold on viewers if it is not able to shock and frighten them, just as rituals of initiation deteriorate into dull and mechanistic exercises if the initiates no longer find credible the fears they seek to arouse. Horror movies have thus resorted to increasingly graphic scenes of violence and gore in order to retain their popularity with audiences. A more profound shift in the genre has been the introduction of a plot twist which reveals that the sources of horror are far more pervasive than initially supposed, or that the real threat to the protagonists is not the grotesque and violent monster but rather their fellow human beings. In *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), for example, the greatest threat to the life of its African American protagonist turns out to be not the flesh-eating ghouls laying siege to the house in which he has taken refuge, but the posse wandering

through the countryside destroying the zombies—the armed men fail to take care to verify whether he is a human or one of the undead. Similarly, in *Alien* (1979), the true villain of the film is not the grotesque and vicious creature that nearly wipes out the crew of a space freighter, but rather is revealed to be the corporation that arranges for the crew unwittingly to take the monster on board, so that the creature could be vivisected for military research. Such films have led critics to make the case for horror as a launching point for radical sociopolitical critique. Indeed, one of the major shifts in horror cinema since the 1960s has been the identification of “normality” as the “monstrous” itself, which, as Wood points out, arises from the readiness of a society to “enjoy and surreptitiously condone the working out of its own destruction.”⁴

The identification of normality with the monstrous might however strike us less as critical and emancipatory than as nihilistic and despairing. In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll observes that the genre offers a “repertory of symbolism for those times in which cultural order has collapsed or is perceived to be in a state of dissolution.”⁵ The topic of this special issue of *Situations* speaks to the volatile and intriguing convergence between horror cinema as the genre most fascinated by the breakdown of social order and the possibilities for the expansion and universalization of that breakdown by means of the global market. It is not a surprise that the spread of contagion serves as a central element in the plots of some of the most memorable and celebrated horror films of recent years, such as *Ringu* (1998), *28 Days Later* (2002), *REC* (2008), *Pontypool* (2009), and *It Follows* (2014). The video that summons a deadly ghost who slays those who view it, a virus created in a laboratory that gets out into Britain and brings about the destruction of society, demonic possession that becomes carried by a biological agent, even the use of ordinary endearments in English which triggers a violent mental breakdown and a sexual act that causes a relentless demon to hunt one’s lover instead of oneself—these storylines highlight the fragility and vulnerability of an interconnected world, in which death and chaos spread with alarming speed across a society bereft of any effective means to contain and limit the damage.

The idea of a borderless world, defined by the mobility of peoples

to move freely from their countries of origin to distant corners of the globe, has replaced the Marxist image of the classless society as the utopia in the period of global capitalism. But such frequent contact also brings to the fore conflicts in worldviews, as well as the possibility, both feared and welcomed, of a fundamental change in social values themselves. Just as peoples may travel across vast distances for the sake of their aspirations and hopes, what are the nightmares they nevertheless carry with them, and what are the nightmares that they will encounter in their new homes? How does a local legend or a parochial fear acquire a transnational dimension, traveling to new destinations to terrify unfamiliar populations? What kind of insights do culturally and geographically remote objects of fantasy offer on the social, political, and economic processes set in motion by the global market when they reveal their seamy or dangerous underside? The articles in this issue on horror and the global confront an array of questions that explore the genre in relation to an Asia that has been reshaped by the forces of modernity.

In “Discovering Fear through the Camera,” Joanna Madloch examines the use of the folk legend that photography can capture the image of ghosts in the Thai film, *Shutter* (2004). Madloch shows how the exploration of this motif in the context of contemporary Thailand, where modern individualism is still embroiled in a clash with traditional morality and patriarchal values, results in turning points in the narrative that Western viewers would find surprising and unexpected. These cultural differences are further highlighted when Madloch compares *Shutter* with its Hollywood remake, which, in consciously adopting a Western feminist perspective, robs the original of both subtlety and suspense. “Resisting Globalization: Australian Horror at *The Perimeter of Perception*” is a reflection on a recent work of horror cinema by film scholar Ian Dixon, who served as the director and script editor of the film. In discussing a film about the captivity of a child within an invisible sphere, Dixon frames contemporary horror in Australia in relation to the atrocities and injustices of the past (the oppression of the aboriginal people by the settlers from the British isles) and the exclusions of the present (the government’s strict policies against refugees and migrants). He adds a third element to his allegorical framing of contemporary horror

in the specter of transhuman technologies that seek to extend control over the totality of life, which gives rise to the view that present forms of human life might be obsolete and turns the tables on the inhabitants of the First World as the beneficiaries of the history of colonization. Donald Anderson's "The Colonial Politics of Gazing in Joe D'Amato's Black Emanuelle/Laura Gemser Films" examines the unsettling nexus between soft-core pornography and horror in the motif of the "snuff film" (which are said to depict the actual deaths of the performers). Anderson makes the case for the eruption of horror in an erotic film involving colonial fantasies as a powerful critique of Western colonization. Finally, "The Death of Horror: On Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Cure*," Peter Y. Paik considers the possible dissolution of the genre of horror through the analysis of a film in which hypnosis serves as the vehicle for a series of murders. The hypnotized murderers are distinguished above all by the lack of horror for the killings they commit, foreshadowing the twist in recent horror films in which becoming a monster is no longer regarded as a fate worse than being the victim of a monster.

What a society fears reveals perhaps more about that society than what it desires, or claims to desire. As modernity remains uneven in its influence and the extent to which modern outlooks are taken as natural by peoples across the globe, horror can serve as a vital instrument to probe the tensions that run beneath an increasingly interconnected world as well as cast into relief the often sharp differences in worldview that characterize cultures undergoing transformation. The contributors to this issue seek to bring into the light the fears that advance the understanding of the world produced by globalization.

Notes

¹Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipus, Philosopher*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 41.

²Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 43.

³Robin Wood, "American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s," *Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 71. Quoted in Rick Worland, *The Horror Film: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 21.

⁴Ibid., 80.

⁵Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 214.