

the Biography Channel on TV, which faithfully subscribes to a full-life documentary formula. *Erin Brockovich* (2000) ingeniously responded to expository demands without slowing its pace: a pre-credit scene places Brockovich in a job interview in which she spills out her life story to a prospective employer.

10. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, p. 145.
11. Anderson, 'Biographical Film', p. 336.
12. Recent biopics are more chauvinistic than ever: 78 per cent of single-person biopics in our sample were US citizens, compared to Custen's figures of 42 per cent in the 1970s, 46 per cent in the 1960s and 66 per cent in the studio era.
13. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, p. 134.
14. Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
15. Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 117.
16. Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski, *Man on the Moon: The Shooting Script* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1999), p. vii.
17. Custen, *Bio/Pics*, pp. 154–5.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
19. Confirming Stone's status as a commercially viable auteur, Warners has released a ten-movie 'Oliver Stone Collection' on DVD. This set includes a 52-minute documentary grandly entitled *Oliver Stone's America* and a four-hour 'director's cut' of *Nixon*.
20. Although this opening scene seemed a ludicrous invention to many, Howard Hunt did in fact, according to a screenplay note, rent this 16mm training film and screen it to the burglars on the night of the break-in attempt. See Eric Hamburg (ed.), *Nixon: An Oliver Stone Film* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 84.
21. Dave Kuehls, 'Pre-viewed', *Runner's World* (February 1997), pp. 48–56; Merrell Noden, 'A Mad Dash: Two Films about Prefontaine Go Neck and Neck', *Entertainment Weekly*, 7 February 1997, pp. 21–2.
22. Kuehl's, 'Pre-viewed', p. 56.
23. The overseas marketing for *Remember the Titans* completely elided the biopic angle as the studio was concerned with overcoming 'the usual barriers surrounding American sports or black-themed pictures' by highlighting the 'inspirational leader element'. See Don Groves, 'It's a Whole New Ballgame', *Variety*, 1 January 2001, p. 17.
24. For example, print ads for *Before Night Falls* presented at least three marketing approaches: the critically acclaimed art film, the critically acclaimed art film about a gay man and a historical-political drama about Cuba. The first two approaches featured a barrage of quotes from critics surrounding a central image of Javier Bardem. In the gay press, Bardem was pictured sunbathing next to another man. After Bardem's Academy Award nomination, smaller ads dropped the raves, headlined the nomination and presented a ragged image of Bardem next to copy referencing the 1980 Cuban exodus.
25. Patrick Goldstein, 'A Couple of Real Fighters', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June 2001, Calendar.
26. See Altman, *Film/Genre*, pp. 38–43.
27. Pascal, quoted in Goldstein, 'A Couple of Real Fighters'.

8

From Paranoia to Postmodernism? The Horror Movie in Late Modern Society

Andrew Tudor

Even the most eager advocates of the claim that we live in 'postmodern' times would have to concede that the currency of the term itself has become somewhat devalued over the past couple of decades. What may have seemed a reasonably concise expression in, say, Lyotard's early use of it¹ has been spread ever more thinly across a wider and wider range of social and cultural circumstances. This is as true in film studies as elsewhere, where it has become almost *de rigueur* to invoke postmodernity in seeking to characterise the state of the cinema at the turn of the century. Quite what the term suggests about contemporary film (or, indeed, about contemporary society) is far from agreed, and I shall try to clarify some of its range of meanings later in this discussion. For the moment, however, I want to look at the term 'postmodern' as it is invoked in application to contemporary horror movies.

It is not clear quite when critical discussion began to talk of late-century horror as somehow 'postmodern'. Certainly by 1986 Tania Modleski felt able to make a case linking current developments in the horror movie and postmodern theory.² In 1989, almost as an afterthought to my study *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, I suggested that certain aspects of modern horror related to at least some of the social and cultural changes that had been characterised as postmodern.³ A year later, Noël Carroll made a similar although rather more subtle point, arguing that 'the contemporary horror genre is the exoteric expression of the same feelings that are expressed in the esoteric discussions of the intelligentsia with respect to postmodernism'.⁴ Neither Carroll nor I was overly enthusiastic about using the term itself, about so-called 'postmodern theory', or about the desire to diagnose our times as a social condition of postmodernity, but the parallels were too obvious to resist and the cultural resonance too rich to ignore. Since then there has been a proliferation in use of the expression 'postmodern horror' as an apparently unproblematic descriptive term and rather fewer attempts to examine the proposition that there is indeed something about the modern horror movie which merits the designation. A good instance of the latter, and one to which I shall return, is Pinedo's 1997 volume.⁵ But for the most part, recent horror movies have been dubbed 'postmodern' with little or no discussion of what that involves or implies.

In this chapter I want to explore the implications of that tendency by pursuing two

related lines of argument. First, I shall examine late twentieth-century horror movies with a view to establishing their distinctive characteristics. In this I shall build upon the account of horror movie history laid out in *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, seeking to extend that analysis from 1985 to the century's end. Note, however, that I have not attempted to replicate the kind of detailed statistical analysis found in the original study. The increasing tendency to distribute horror direct to video limits the representativeness of such figures when based solely on theatrical distribution. Instead, I have been more concerned to see if the horror discourse that I called 'paranoid horror' in the original study has mutated into some more distinctively 'postmodern' form or if, as Pinedo suggests, my 'paranoid horror' simply equates to what she calls 'postmodern horror'.⁶ Having examined the recent history of the horror movie, my second line of argument then goes on to ask what, if anything, is to be gained by describing contemporary horror as 'post-modern' and how that relates – if at all – to the larger social context of the so-called postmodern world.

The horror film since 1985

What, then, has happened to the horror movie since 1985? If one were to advance a naive description, that is to say one without the benefit of detailed historical comparison, several features would be immediately apparent. Perhaps most obvious would be the growing dependence of the genre on clearly defined cycles in which one sequel follows hot on the heels of another. The *Friday the 13th* franchise – the term seems appropriate in a consumerist culture – which had already reached its alleged 'final chapter' with the fourth film in 1984, was revived in 1985 in *Friday the 13th Part V: A New Beginning* and ran through three more sequels before reaching an apparent apotheosis in 1993 with *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday*. Needless to say, there is now a *Jason X* (2001), in which he is revived in the future. The enormous success of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) meant that it was speedily followed in 1985 by Part 2 and then generated another four sequels, five if you include the elegantly reflexive *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994). Scattered among the rest, and now choosing examples almost at random, we find three sequels to *Alien* (1979); *House* (1986) and *House II: The Second Story* (1987); *Psycho III* (1986) and an almost shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho* (1998); a couple of *Fright Nights*; three each in the *Hellraiser* and *Child's Play* cycles; a couple of *Candyman*s; no less than *Halloween 8* (2001); and a string of one-off sequels and remakes. And, in addition, there are those films that follow both directly and indirectly in the wake of the hugely influential *Scream* (1996), of which more later.

In a historical perspective, of course, one might wonder whether any of this is really new? There is a sense in which I think that it might be. While it is true that the horror movie has always worked with clearly marked cycles (consider, most obviously, the Frankenstein, Dracula, werewolf and mummy cycles which have recurred throughout the genre's history), the recent reliance on rapid sequences of sequels which, in their marketing, are offered as precisely that, does appear to be a genuinely distinctive feature of 1980s and 1990s horror. It is as if the concept of a 'sequel' – or, if you like, the process of 'sequelling' – has itself become a major convention of the genre, a phenom-

enon fully understood and, more important, expected and embraced by a generically competent horror audience. As a character observes in *Scream*, 'these days you've got to have a sequel' – the quality of which phenomenon, appropriately enough, then turns up as a topic for classroom discussion early in *Scream 2* (1997).

A second aspect of contemporary horror which would be as immediately apparent to the naive viewer as to the sophisticate is the prominence of comedy. Around thirty or so of the films I viewed for consideration here would merit the description 'comedy-horror', while a substantially larger group regularly introduce comic elements into what are otherwise 'serious' narratives. Again, historically this is not new. There has always been a thread of comedy running through the genre, especially at the low-budget end, but the ubiquity of comic elements in recent horror is striking, as is the character of the comedy itself. Two features of that stand out. One is the linking of comedy to 'splatter'. In 1980s films such as *Re-Animator* (1985), *Brain Damage* (1987) and *Evil Dead II* (1987), much of the comic fun to be had derives from the excess of gory detail. The other aspect, in this case more a development characteristic of the 1990s than the 1980s, is the tendency to reflexively generate humour by openly appealing to a knowing audience's familiarity with the genre conventions. There are some quite subtle variations on this – the delightful *Tremors* (1989), for example, has half an eye on 1950s horror – but the real *locus classicus* is *Scream*, succeeded by its own two sequels as well as by the likes of *The Faculty* (1998), *Scary Movie* (2000) and *Cherry Falls* (2000). It is such films as these that have so often attracted the designation 'postmodern', if only superficially, because of their studied self-consciousness and their use of pastiche.

Apart from sequelling and comedy, an account of late-century horror would have little else to add that had not been already apparent by the 1980s. A continuation of the trend towards the youth market, seen in the constant use of American high school and college environments as a setting and source of typical characters. A further extension of highly skilled, gory special effects, with a concomitant emphasis on the spectacle of splatter and on 'body-horror'. The familiar return of classical horror stories in the form of big-budget films from 'respectable' directors, such as Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) or Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994). Proof, if proof were needed, that it is still possible for the occasional low-budget horror film such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) to make the jump from the genre ghetto into more general commercial success, in this case made interesting because of the role played by the World Wide Web in selling the project direct to the public. And, sadly, precious few films with the power to disturb found in, say, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), or *Shivers* (1975); perhaps only *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), *Man Bites Dog* (1992), or, in a rather different mode, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* (1991), even aspires to that kind of assault on horror movie sensibilities.

None of these features – apart from the role of the Internet in selling *The Blair Witch Project* – is significantly new. To appreciate what might be genuinely innovative or unusual, it is necessary to frame the historical context a little more systematically. To do so I shall return to the central ideas of *Monsters and Mad Scientists* and look again at my characterisation of modern (i.e. post-1960s) 'paranoid' horror as being qualitatively

different to the 'secure' horror discourse that preceded it.' This contrast can usefully be introduced in the schematic form of a table summarising the main contrasting components of the two discourses:

Secure Horror

successful human intervention
effective expertise
authorities as legitimate
sustainable order
'external' threats
centre-periphery organisation
defined boundaries
closed narratives

Paranoid Horror

failed human intervention
ineffective expertise
authorities as unreliable
escalating disorder
'internal' threats
victim groups organisation
diffuse boundaries
open narratives

Table 8.1 The Discourses of Secure and Paranoid Horror

Essentially my claim is that the dominant discourse of film horror prior to the 1960s presupposed an ultimately secure world in which the monstrous threat was finally defeated and order restored. Established authorities were broadly reliable, the boundaries between known and unknown were clearly marked, and protagonists were able to intervene with some realistic hope of success. In marked contrast, horror movie discourse from the 1970s onwards presumes a world in which the monstrous threat is increasingly beyond control and order is therefore unlikely to be restored at narrative end. Experts can no longer provide credible protection, the threat from the unknown pervades the everyday world, and there always remains potential for escalating disorder. Individually the difference is perhaps best seen in the contrast between a classic 'mad scientist' narrative such as *Frankenstein* (1931) and a terrorising psychotic narrative such as *Halloween* (1978). In the former, the narrative's central threat is a consequence of human volition, is 'external' to the human body and mind, is clearly distinguished from 'normality', and is finally defeated. Human expertise is effective; authorities are broadly legitimate. In the latter, the threat is unexplained, it is 'internal' in the sense that it emerges from the psyche and is located in an ordinary everyday world, and the boundary between 'normality' and 'abnormality' is not clearly marked. The monster survives, and 'experts' are unable to deal with it. At every turn, the world of *Halloween* and its many successors is thoroughly unreliable and insecure.

Key to the development of such psycho-movies as the most prominent feature of post-1960s horror is the distinction between internal and external threats. Even where no explanation is offered for their behaviour, the rampaging psychotics who follow in the wake of, first, *Psycho* (1960) and *Peeping Tom* (1960), then *Halloween*, are constituted as monstrous threats by virtue of some characteristic presumed to be internal to their being. This was a major change of emphasis in as much as most horror movie threats prior to the emergence of the psycho-killer were externally derived: they came from space, for example, or supernature, or were created by virtue of scientific interference

in the proper order of things. Internality also finds expression in the growing use of contemporary and prosaic everyday settings such as small towns, suburbs, ordinary houses, family groups, and the like. This renders the characteristic threats of paranoid horror 'internal' in the sense of belonging within our familiar physical and social world, not distanced from us as they are in the Gothic *elsewhen* of an imaginary Transylvania or among the exotic equipment of a fanciful laboratory. 'Internal', then, suggests internality in both a mental and a social sense. In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, furthermore, it also developed an associated physical dimension with the further growth of 'body-horror', its ferocious and graphic destruction of victims' bodies a very direct and visceral expression of the turn to internality.

Parallel to this growing emphasis we find a change in the tacit social structure of the typical horror movie world. In secure horror, where constituted authorities (e.g. scientists, military, the police, etc.) are generally seen as legitimate, those authorities are central to narrative resolution and essential if the larger population of potential victims are to be saved. The tacit social model is one of centre and periphery, authority and dependence. In paranoid horror, where constituted authorities are no longer seen as legitimate and are no longer effective in combating the monstrous threat, the social structure of the horror movie is reduced to an assembly of potential victims. Resistance, if it can be mounted at all, is based upon loose alliances between those victims, rather than on authoritative expertise or the variously coercive arms of the state. The old centre-periphery model of social life, which largely characterised secure horror, gives way to a victim-oriented world in which embattled individuals and groups struggle for survival.

Does this characterisation of paranoid horror still hold as an adequate description of the dominant horror movie discourse of the late twentieth century? Broadly I believe that it does. Most of its major features are still in place, even if their frequency varies and their narrative articulation has altered. It may be, for example, that the balance between open and closed narratives has shifted slightly back towards the former since the 1980s, or that the psycho-killer is no longer quite as prominent a figure, but seen against the background of secure horror, recent horror movies remain 'paranoid' through and through. This does not mean, of course, that there are not some broadly traditional films to be found in this as in any other period. *Haunted* (1995), as befits a film from a director as long established as Lewis Gilbert, has many attributes of the classic ghost story, while, as always, films directed at the mainstream market, such as *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *What Lies Beneath* (2000), routinely compromise on the more excessive demands of the paranoid discourse. But the general 'shape' of the world presumed by late modern horror remains that mapped out in the secure/paranoid model.

Within that broad pattern, however, it is still possible that the character of the paranoid discourse has been modified significantly by the seemingly new elements in 1990s horror: most notably, generically self-conscious comedy and the accelerating incidence of sequelling. The significance of these two features is that they interact to add a further level of reflexivity to the relation between audience and film, inviting the moviegoer to participate in the construction of the horror experience via modes of response which are increasingly self-aware. That gives rise to a number of obvious but important questions.

Does such self-awareness undermine the 'seriousness' of the paranoid vision of the world? Do these characteristics of modern horror distance spectators from the emotional intensity of the experience? Does the affectionate mockery implicit in their pastiche of generic conventions also apply to the underlying assumptions which make the discourse meaningful? Or, is the effectivity of the basic discourse untouched by these essentially superficial changes? For if the paranoid assumptions of modern horror work for their audiences because they resonate metaphorically with features of everyday social experience – and that claim is central to my analysis – then humorous or not, self-conscious or not, the basic structures of meaning implicit in the genre remain constant. Let us examine some of these issues a little more closely in relation to what has arguably been the most successful 'reflexive' horror movie of the 1990s: *Scream*.

Scream

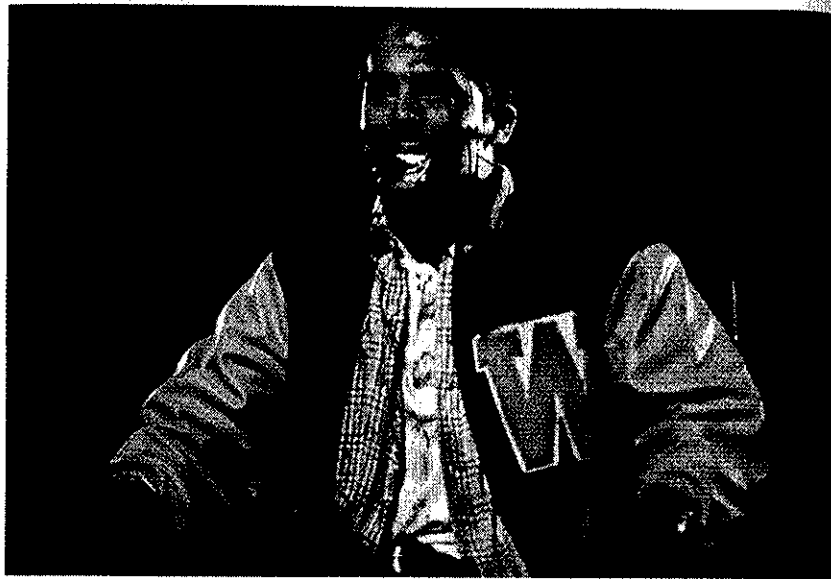
Scream did not introduce self-consciousness about genre conventions into horror – some degree of awareness has always been a key element in the genre audience's response in as much as generic competence is routinely textually played upon and audiences have usually been willing to rise to that bait. What *Scream* has done is find a highly commercial (and therefore influential) form for expression of the kind of knowing reflexivity that its director, Wes Craven, achieved with rather less commercial success in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*. In that film, the conceit was that both actors and director from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (the first and best of the cycle, and the only one directed by Craven) find themselves under threat from the original film's monster, Freddy Krueger, who has, as it were, escaped the confines of cinema into the 'real' world of the *New Nightmare*. The slipperiness of the boundary between reality and dreamworld which drives the *Elm Street* narratives is thus turned back on itself, and the shift of levels generates a kind of meta-film in which the actors (and Craven) play meta-versions of themselves. This relativising of the film's reality frame raises complex issues of involvement and verisimilitude, and in consequence the film was perhaps too knowing for its own commercial good. *Scream*, in some contrast, keeps its reflexivity and self-consciousness firmly within the confines of the diagesis, its characters explicitly articulating genre conventions (in both dialogue and action) in such a way as to ensure that their self-consciousness remains a verisimilitudinous component of the narrative and does not therefore question the 'reality' of the film's world. As Randy (*Scream*'s horror movie expert) observes in the course of explaining horror conventions: 'You get too complicated, you lose your target audience.' Just so with *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, but not with *Scream*.

Unlike *New Nightmare*, *Scream* declines to blur the line between film and film-makers (although the briefly appearing janitor, named as Fred and wearing a Freddy Krueger striped top, is surely Craven himself). Its self-consciousness is contained: an occasion for humour and joyous audience involvement, but not a mechanism for questioning the workings of the horror movie as such. Indeed, *Scream*'s distinctive quality lies in its skilful balancing of knowing humour with well-crafted, tension-filled sequences. Consider, for example, the film's famous opening in which Casey, the generically archetypal, alone-at-home, androgynously named teenage girl played by Drew Barrymore, is terrorised by

telephone and finally murdered by the masked killer. This sequence never sacrifices the tension to the gags or to the genre references. Instead the insertion of allusions to horror films actually adds to the mounting sense of pursuit. 'Do you like scary movies?' asks the telephone voice early in the scene, its slightly strange tonal quality belying the apparently jocular character of the question and of the interchanges thus far. By the time the now angry voice insists that 'You should never say "Who's there?". Don't you watch scary movies? It's a death wish,' the genre references are actively contributing to the rising tension. We watch scary movies and we know exactly what this means. And the series of questions that follow – 'name the killer in *Halloween*' ... 'name the killer in *Friday the 13th*' ... 'what door am I at?' – pushes that yet further even where (as I witnessed more than once on the film's first release) audiences are shouting out the correct answer when a panicking Casey wrongly names Jason in response to the second question.

Similarly with the long party sequence which climaxes the film, as the killer terrorises one victim after another. This meticulously constructed 40 minutes of rising anxiety moves effortlessly between the Casey/Billy relationship, tension-building, humorous asides, the jokey Deputy Dewey/Gile Weathers subplot, and increasingly graphic violence, without allowing any of the elements to undermine progress towards the grand climax. So, for example, in the set-piece scene in which Tatum is trapped in the garage – with its carefully cued echoes of *Halloween* which is even then playing on the VCR in the house – tension, humour and violence combine. Having ensured that we are aware of the mechanised garage door by having her accidentally raise and lower it as she enters from the house (and thus having also ensured that as a cinematically competent audience we now expect it to play a significant part in what follows), Tatum is then treated in the classic genre fashion of those who blithely enter cellars, attics, garages and the like. After the business with the garage door, she walks out of shot, leaving us uneasily contemplating the open door to the main house. We see the reverse shot of her heading towards the fridge, then the reverse from within the fridge as she takes the beer bottles. Then a close shot of the house door as, predictably, it slowly (and creakily) closes, followed by a rising low chord on the music track as the camera rapidly closes in behind her. Tension builds, there is a sudden noise, and a precipitate series of cuts to garden tools falling over, to Tatum jumping with fright and to the cat fleeing through the cat flap. Tension is released and our expectations are fulfilled in the familiar manner of the 'suspense-shock cycle', in which growing tension is punctured by a shock (or, indeed, by humour, or by both) and then rebuilt.⁸ Throughout this manipulation we, as genre film-goers, know exactly what is happening; we are both willing victims of the technique and simultaneously self-aware parties to its construction.

Having captured us in this way, the process now begins again. Tatum returns to the closed house door only to find that it is locked. Suddenly the lights go out and the music once more begins to build. She sets the garage door to rising, but before she can escape, it stops and starts to close. Tatum turns, and the reverse shot reveals the masked killer, hand on the door switch. The 'dialogue' that follows is constructed almost entirely from movie references. 'Is that you, Randy?' she asks. The masked figure slowly shakes its head. 'What movie is this from?' as she walks towards him, 'I spit on your garage?' He



Scream (1996): knowing humour, crafted tension, reflexive horror

blocks her exit. 'Oh, you wanna play psycho-killer.' The camera angle is down into her face as she stands below him. 'Can I be the helpless victim?' The mask nods, and the camera again reverses to the downward-angled close-up. 'OK, let's see,' and, in an affected, high-pitched voice, 'No, please don't kill me Mr Ghostface; I wanna be in the sequel.' He still prevents her leaving, and losing patience she tries to push past: 'Cut, Caspar,' she says, 'that's a wrap.' They struggle, he produces the knife and very deliberately slashes her arm.

I have described this scene at such length because its evident self-consciousness and the comedy contained in the dialogue do nothing to undermine the growing tension and our expectation of nastiness to come. We may well be amused by the references to *I Spit on your Grave* (1978), to psycho-movies, to sequelling, and even to *Caspar* (1995), but we also remain fully involved in the scene's dramatic dynamics. Unlike Tatum, we know that 'ghostface' is for real, and the simultaneous deferral and suggestion of imminent violence achieved in the self-conscious movie references actually stretches out the tension. When the violence does come (after a pitched battle, Tatum is killed when, jammed in the cat flap as the garage door rises, she is crushed against the door's frame), it serves as both temporary tension release and a further turn of the overall screw.

This balance between self-consciousness, humour, tension and horror is maintained right through the rest of *Scream*'s climactic sequence, with the genre allusions multiplying as rapidly as the gore. However, it should be said that not all recently successful horror movies manage this balance as well as *Scream*. *Scary Movie*, for instance, resorts to slapstick, and is mostly a none too subtle replicative parody of *Scream* with some good jokes, but little or no tension. Similarly with *Cherry Falls*, the comedy largely displaces

the horror. This is perhaps unsurprising given a story-line in which a rampaging killer (who, inverse to slasher conventions, is attacking only virgins) precipitates a mass deflowering among the population of college kids. The typical character of this humour is more than apparent in the pun of the film's title or in the admittedly rather splendidly tasteless line: 'we are talking hymen holocaust here'. Nor are these lesser copies of *Scream* exceptions. When the record is examined, few films actually aspire to *Scream*'s carefully judged balance between self-consciousness and tension, let alone achieve it. In fact, the modern horror movie has hardly been overwhelmed or even dominated by such reflexivity and pastiche, and there still remains an enthusiastic audience for relatively straightforward 'stalk-and-slash' such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) – written by Kevin Williamson, who also wrote *Scream* – which is well crafted and remains largely non-reflexive. While *Scream* has indeed played a key role in turning modern horror in a more reflexive direction, it would be a mistake to characterise the whole genre in terms of this 'postmodern' shift.

Postmodernism and contemporary horror

Where, then, does this leave the common claim that we live in a period characterised by 'postmodern horror'? There are, I think, three broad ways in which this claim can be understood and assessed, and I shall examine them in ascending order of generality. At its least ambitious, the diagnosis of recent horror as distinctively postmodern is simply a claim about stylistic attributes of texts: particular styles or techniques may conveniently be labelled 'postmodern'. At the second, broader level of generality, the designation encompasses these stylistic features, but in addition sees them as symptomatic of a larger pattern of cultural and moral change – postmodernism as a world view, a doctrine, an ideology, perhaps even a philosophy. At the third level, the argument is as much about postmodernity as postmodernism. Yes, it claims, there are aesthetic attributes properly to be considered as postmodern; yes, there is an emergent pattern of postmodern cultural and moral change; however, all this must be seen as part of the historical social transition from modernity to postmodernity. To this extent postmodernity is indeed 'post'; markedly different to what has gone before.

At each of these three rungs on the ladder of generality, successive claims are more difficult to sustain in the sense that the weight of evidence required to make them plausible becomes ever more demanding. On the first and lowest level, the case is easy enough to make. Films such as *Scream*, its sequels, successors and imitators, are considered postmodern by virtue of their overt resort to a number of distinctive textual features. The use of pastiche and humour is seen as inviting the audience to be complicit and self-aware, to participate in what Paul Wells describes as 'knowing deconstructions of the subgenre'.⁹ For Wells and similarly disposed commentators, the postmodern horror movie is concerned above all openly to articulate the rules of the game and play them out as exactly that: a game. In so doing, or so it is claimed by some, they lose their potential for subversion or critique, and are able to 'speak only limitedly about the culture that produces them'.¹⁰ Wells regrets this alleged diminution of the horror movie's power and sees it as a logical outcome of the 'McDonaldisation of horror', but others are more posi-

tively disposed to this kind of 'postmodern' cinema. Just as postmodernism in architecture – arguably the main context from which the term entered common parlance – was aesthetically celebrated for pastiche and self-consciousness, for freeing design from the (alleged) strictures of modernism, so, too, the postmodern horror movie can be positively valued for its aesthetic reflexivity. Use of the term in this sense, then, is not inappropriate, perhaps even useful, in as much as it draws our attention to specific artistic features of (some) recent horror movies. However, given the additional social and cultural baggage that the ascription 'postmodern' routinely now carries, its invitation to presume more general claims may mean that its analytic disadvantages outweigh its advantages.

In any case, it is now rare for analysts of the postmodern, in film or elsewhere, to limit application of the term simply to the descriptive and aesthetic. They tend rapidly to escalate to the second level of generality, where to speak of postmodern horror is also to invoke a whole series of assumptions about the distinctive nature of the cultural and moral context in which such horror thrives. Fragmentation, the rejection of traditional forms as inappropriate to contemporary life, the denial of orthodox narrative conventions, the decline of fixed identity, the rise of relativism and 'nihilism' are all ideas now commonly associated with postmodern forms. The characteristic cultures of the late twentieth century are said to embody these features, with horror no exception. A well-known difficulty with such views, however, is not that they do not speak to some of the evident characteristics of the age, for they clearly do, but that they have done so throughout the twentieth century. So, for example, the transition in literature and art from nineteenth-century realism to twentieth-century modernism has often been described in just these terms: fragmentation, narrative innovation, relativism, variable identity, and the rest. What then of specifically *postmodern* horror? Is it no more than the delayed application of modernist precepts in the hitherto largely traditional world of popular culture? And if so, does it merit the distinctive qualities attributed to it by those determined to see postmodernism in culture as a reflection of profound changes?

Pinedo provides a stimulating example of an analysis pitched at this second level of generality. The postmodern horror movie, she suggests, 'transgresses the rules of the classically oriented horror genre', increasingly deals in 'hybrids' with other genres and constructs an audience for whom overturning conventions itself becomes a new convention.¹¹ She further proposes five key characteristics of this postmodern genre: unremitting violence in everyday life; blurred boundaries and endemic danger; rationality questioned and authority undermined; rejection of narrative closure; extreme violence which 'attests to the need to express rage and terror in the midst of postmodern social upheaval'.¹² Yet for all the care with which she addresses these features, it is significant that Pinedo has difficulty in precisely demarcating what is actually postmodern about contemporary horror. As she says herself, four of the five main features with which she is concerned are characteristics of horror more generally, but have been treated with greater intensity or elaboration in postmodern horror. None of them is qualitatively new. Indeed, among Pinedo's criteria it seems to me that only open trans-

gression of genre rules, possibly hybridity (although I am not convinced that there is any more hybridity in the late twentieth-century genre than there was in, say, the 1950s or the 1970s) and an audience both aware of and expecting the overturning of genre conventions genuinely distinguish late-century horror from earlier forms of the paranoid discourse. Essentially, that is, an extension of reflexivity on the part of both the genre audience and the texts themselves. But is that enough to locate contemporary horror as part and parcel of a larger postmodern culture? Or is there, as Neale persuasively suggests, a tendency to overstate the significance of allusion, pastiche, hybridity, 'sequelitis' and the like in New Hollywood's genres?¹³

One way of dealing with such questions, of course, is to shift levels yet again and mount a case about the radical character of late twentieth-century social change. This kind of account suggests that a state of postmodernity exists in late modern society and that postmodern horror is no more (or less) than a popular cultural articulation of that state. Pinedo formulates a version of this argument when she sums up the 'postmodern world' in the following terms:

For my purposes, the postmodern world is an unstable one in which traditional (dichotomous) categories break down, boundaries blur, institutions fall into question, Enlightenment narratives collapse, the inevitability of progress crumbles, and the master status of the universal (*read* male, white, monied, heterosexual) subject deteriorates. Consensus in the possibility of mastery is lost, universalizing grand theory is discredited, and the stable, unified, coherent self acquires the status of fiction.¹⁴

Whether that state of affairs should properly be called 'postmodern' is, of course, a matter for some debate, and many have argued that the social changes of the late twentieth century represent recognisable extensions of earlier social patterns – 'late modernity', if you will – rather than radical dislocations. For those holding this view, such as Anthony Giddens, what we are witnessing is a process of 'modernity coming to understand itself' through a growing capacity for individual and institutional reflexivity.¹⁵ The potential for reflexive awareness, for doubting the credibility of experts and the knowledge systems upon which they rely, for relativising subjectivity and the self, for experiencing a generalised anxiety, are all implicit in modernity itself. There is no need to postulate an epochal transition to make sense of these features of modern life, and to do so is to misunderstand the character of late modern society and its culture.

Faced with this escalation to the grander reaches of social theory, there is a temptation to think that in the end it may all reduce to a question of semantics. My 'paranoid horror' is much the same as Pinedo's (and others') 'postmodern horror', and perhaps it matters little which term is used. In as much as we agree on the central features of horror in the latter part of the twentieth century, and they correspond to features of recent culture that are afforded the label, then 'postmodern' is as good a term as any. Where such pragmatism falls down, however, is that specific theoretical and historical assumptions are now irreducibly incorporated into the usage. To employ the term 'postmodern' is to make claims about both the causes and consequences of the cinema (or cultural trait)

thus described. There is no doubt that the modern horror movie, like all popular culture, tells us something about the society in which we live. That it is a society in which we have become more aware of risks; a society in which we are less convinced by the systems of expertise that surround us and the institutions that seek to regulate our lives; a society in which our concept of the self is unreliable; and a society in which anxiety and fear have become ubiquitous. But to attribute this to postmodernism or postmodernity is to evade a crucial truth: that the social, cultural and environmental crises of the late modern era are manifestly products of modernity itself and of those capitalist forms of economic and social organisation in which it found consummate expression. We are not yet postmodern, nor shall we be until we have overcome the awesome consequences of that history.

Notes

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).
2. Tania Modleski, 'The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory', in Tania Modleski (ed.), *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 155–66.
3. Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
4. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 210.
5. Isabel Cristina Pinedo, *Recreational Terror: Women and the Pleasures of Horror Film Viewing* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
7. Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, pp. 102–4, 211–14; Andrew Tudor 'Unruly Bodies, Unquiet Minds', *Body & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1995), pp. 34–7.
8. Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists*, pp. 108–11.
9. Paul Wells, *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (London: Wallflower, 2000), p. 97.
10. *Ibid.* See also Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: A Critical Guide to Contemporary Horror Films* (London: Bloomsbury, 1988), pp. 211–15.
11. Pinedo, *Recreational Terror*, p. 14.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 17–50.
13. Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 245–51.
14. Pinedo, *Recreational Terror*, p. 11.
15. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 48. See also Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); and Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

9

The Impossibility of Romance: Hollywood Comedy, 1978–1999

William Paul

The rise of Animal Comedy

Hollywood comedy in the last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a radical reorientation, in part in response to newer freedoms granted by the rating system, in part because of changes in the culture at large. Following the enormous popular success of National Lampoon's *Animal House* (1978) there arose a series of comedies defined by their raunchiness and an apparent desire to push beyond acceptable bounds of good taste.¹ While the films had enough in common to constitute a distinct comic genre, their power at the box office established them as the dominant comic form for American audiences in the early to mid-1980s. For the previous sixty years or so, romantic comedy was the comedy in Hollywood. While it did not become as dead as the Western in the 1980s, it certainly went into decline.² The new style that precipitated the decline I have dubbed 'Animal Comedy' in honour of its primary progenitors, *Animal House* (1978) and *Porkey's* (1981). Animals are never very far from these films, at least metaphorically, occasionally literally, and, often enough, presented in strikingly similar ways.

The insistent emphasis on animality points to physicality as a key attribute of these films. As a consequence, physical comedy generally receives pride of place over verbal. Physical comedy of a fairly broad sort is hardly a new thing in American movies, but in the sound period at least it had generally been either limited to moments within a romantic comedy plotline or, if spread throughout the film, relegated to the lower-class realm of B-movies and shorts featuring the likes of the Bowery Boys and the Three Stooges. Animal Comedy represented a return to slapstick on a fairly grand and insistent scale. Its origins lie, I would argue, in the 1960s.

In the mid-1960s, a couple of films starring The Beatles and directed by Richard Lester appeared and instantly prompted comparisons to the Marx Brothers. While invocations of the Marx Brothers comedies were apt, the Beatles films actually appeared under the guises of different genres. *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) presented itself as a kind of documentary, one however given to flights of fancy, while *Help!* (1965) parodied the spy genre suddenly made popular by the James Bond films. In neither case could the films be regarded as romantic comedy, but in order to escape