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Returning the Look: *Eyes of a Stranger*

Robin Wood

Like Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy, Robin Wood in this essay (which originally appeared as "Beauty Bests the Beast" and is reprinted with permission from American Film [Sept. 1983], © 1983, The American Film Institute) takes up two related questions: the manipulation of the "look" in modern horror and the ideological import of the representation of violence against women. Writing after the stream of so-called slice-and-dice movies had saturated the market in the wake of Halloween (1978) and Friday the 13th (1980), Wood discusses this cycle as a phenomenon that in its emphasis on the sadistic terrorization of women and the seemingly endless butchery of promiscuous teenagers speaks to certain "needs" of our capitalist, consumer culture. Wood parts company from the standard critique of these films by insisting that we pay attention to "different uses of the same generic material," so we can differentiate between the "reactionary" and the potentially "subversive" examples of the cycle.

"Returning the Look" shares the same basic method and set of critical assumptions with Wood's often-reprinted essay, "Return of the Repressed" (Film Comment [July-Aug. 1978]), which in expanded form appears in a 1979 anthology he co-edited, American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film. Among his many books are Hitchcock's Films and Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan. Wood teaches film studies at York University, Toronto, and is a member of the editorial collective of CineAction!

Confronted over the past few years with the proliferation of escalatingly violent and gruesome low-budget horror movies centered on psychopathic killers, one may take away the impression of one undifferentiated stream of massacre, mutilation, and terrorization, a single interminable chronicle of bloodletting called something like *When a Stranger Calls After Night School on Halloween or Friday the Thirteenth, Don't Answer the Phone and Don't Go into the House Because He Knows You're Alone and Is Dressed to Kill*. In fact, the films are distinguishable both

in function and in quality, and however one may shrink from systematic exposure to them, however one may deplore the social phenomena and ideological mutations they reflect, their popularity (especially—indeed, almost exclusively—with youth audiences) suggests that even if they were uniformly execrable they should not be ignored; an attempt both to understand the phenomena and discriminate among the films seems valid and timely.

The films can be seen to fall into two partially distinguishable categories, answering to two partially distinguishable cultural “needs”: the “violence-against-women” movie (of which Brian De Palma’s *Dressed to Kill* is the most controversial—as well as the most ambitiously “classy”—example) and what has been succinctly dubbed the “teenie-kill pic” (of which the purest—if that is the word—examples are the three *Friday the 13th* movies). The distinction is never clear-cut. The two cycles have common sources in Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (which in turn have a common source in *Psycho*); the survivor in the teenie-kill movies—endurer of the ultimate ordeals, terrors, and agonies—is invariably female; the victims in the violence-against-women films are predominantly young. But the motivation for the slaughter, on both the dramatic and ideological levels, is somewhat different: in general, the teenagers are punished for promiscuity and the women are punished for being women.

Both cycles represent a sinister and disturbing inversion of the significance of the traditional horror film: there the monster was in general a “creature from the id,” not merely a product of repression but a protest against it, whereas in the current cycles the monster, while still “produced by” repression, has become essentially a superego figure, avenging itself on liberated female sexuality or the sexual freedom of the young. What has not changed (making the social implications even more sinister) is the genre’s basic commercial premise: that the customers continue to pay, as they always did, to enjoy the eruptions and depredations of the monster. But where the traditional horror film invited—however ambiguously—an identification with the “return of the repressed,” the contemporary horror film invites an identification (either sadistic or masochistic or both simultaneously) with punishment.

On the whole, the teenie-kill pic seems the more consistently popular of the two recent cycles, and one can interpret this as a logical consequence of a “permissive” (as opposed to liberated) society. The chief, indeed almost the *only*, characteristic of the film’s teenagers (who are obviously meant to be attractive to the youth audience as identification figures) is a mindless hedonism made explicit by a character in Steve Miner’s *Friday the 13th Part 3*, who remarks (without contradiction) that the only things

worth living for are screwing and smoking dope. The films both endorse this and relentlessly punish it; they never suggest that other options might be available. (After all, what might it not lead to if young people began to *think*?) What is most stressed, but nowhere *explicitly* condemned, is promiscuity—the behavior that consumer capitalism in its present phase simultaneously “permits” and morally disapproves of.

The satisfaction that youth audiences get from these films is presumably twofold: they identify with the promiscuity as well as the grisly and excessive punishment for it. The original *Friday the 13th*, directed by Sean S. Cunningham, dramatizes this very clearly: most of the murders are closely associated with the young people having sex (a principle that reaches ludicrous systematization in the sequels, where one can safely predict that any character who shows sexual interest in another will be dead within minutes); the psychopathic killer turns out to be a woman whose son (Jason) drowned because the camp counselors who should have been supervising him were engaged in intercourse. In the sequels Jason himself returns as a vaguely defined mutant monster, virtually indistinguishable from Michael of the *Halloween* films, introducing another indispensable component of the cycle, the monster’s unkillability: the sexual guilt that the characters are by definition incapable of analyzing, confronting, or understanding can never be exorcised.

The violence-against-women movies have generally been explained as a hysterical response to 1960s and 1970s feminism: the male spectator enjoys a sadistic revenge on women who refuse to slot neatly and obligingly into his patriarchally predetermined view of “the way things should naturally be.” This interpretation is convincing so long as one sees it as accounting for the intensity, repetitiveness, and ritualistic insistence of these films, and not for the basic phenomenon itself. From *Caligari* to *Psycho* and beyond, women have always been the main focus of threat and assault in the horror film.

There are a number of variously plausible explanations for this. As women are regarded as weak and helpless, it is simply more frightening if the monster attacks *them*; the male spectator can presumably identify with the hero who finally kills the monster, the film thereby indulging his vanity as protector of the helpless female. That he may also, on another level, identify with the monster in no way contradicts this idea; it merely suggests its inadequacy as a *total* explanation. Second, as men in patriarchal society have set women up on (compensatory) pedestals and, thereby, constructed them as oppressive and restrictive figures, they have developed a strong desire to knock them down again.

As in every genre, the archetypal male-constructed opposition of wife-

whore is operative. In the traditional horror film the women who got killed were usually whore-figures, punished for "bringing out the beast" in men; the heroine who was terrorized and perhaps abducted (but eventually rescued) was the present or future wife.

The ideological tensions involved here are still central to our culture. The films obliquely express what Alfred Hitchcock's films, for example, consistently dramatized: the anxiety of the heterosexual male confronted by the possibility of an autonomous female sexuality he cannot control and organize. But the key point is that in the traditional horror film, the threatened heroine was invariably associated with the values of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family (actual or potential): the eruption of the Frankenstein monster during the preparations for his creator's wedding in the 1931 James Whale movie was the locus classicus. What the monster really threatened was the repressive, ideologically constructed bourgeois "normality." Today, on the other hand, the women who are terrorized and slaughtered tend to be those who *resist* definition within the virgin-wife-mother framework. As with the teenie-kill movies, the implications of the violence-against-women films are extremely disturbing.

The dominant project of these overlapping, interlocking cycles is, then, depressingly reactionary, to say the least. However, as both can be shown to have their sources in contemporary ideological tension, confusion, and contradiction, both also carry within them the potential for subverting that project. There is, for example, no inherent reason why a filmmaker of some intelligence and awareness should not make a teenie-kill movie that, while following the general patterns of the genre, analyzes sexual guilt and opposes it: it would chiefly require characters who are not totally mindless, for whom both filmmaker and spectator could feel some respect. The recent *Hell Night*, directed by Tom De Simone, in which sorority pledges brave a haunted house, shows vestiges of such an ambition—it at least produces an active and resourceful heroine (Linda Blair) capable of doing more than screaming and falling over—but in general the apparently total complicity of the youth audience in these fantasies of their own destruction has licensed a corresponding mindlessness in the filmmakers.

Feminists (of both sexes) have, on the other hand, been quite vociferous on the subject of violence against women, and this can be credited with provoking various degrees of disturbance in recent specimens of the genre, ranging from vague uneasiness to an intelligent rethinking of the conventions. In *Dressed to Kill* the violence to women is consistently countered by a critique of male dominance and an exposure of male sexual insecurities; it is among the most complete expressions of De Palma's obsessive concern with castration, literal or symbolic. Armand Mastroianni's *He*

Knows You're Alone, in which a maniac stalks brides-to-be, is finally very confused, but makes a highly sophisticated attempt (through a very conscious, intermittently reflexive play with narrative) to analyze violence against women in terms of male possessiveness and the fear of female autonomy. It is certainly worth discriminating between it and Joseph Ellison's *Don't Go in the House*, which may be taken as representing the cycle at its most debased: the latter is a film in which the most disgusting violence (a pyromaniac flays his victims alive with a blowtorch) is significantly juxtaposed with some unusually strident dialogue about "faggots" in a way that can be seen as indicating, however inadvertently, some of the sexual tensions that motivate the cycle as a whole.

Ken Wiederhorn's *Eyes of a Stranger* strikes me as the most coherent attempt to rework the conventions of the violence-against-women cycle so far. Although the film doesn't escape contamination (the generic patterns are to some degree intractable), it does come closest to embodying a systematic critique of the dominant project. Disgracefully mishandled and thrown away by its distributors, it seems to have come and gone virtually unnoticed on both sides of the Atlantic (apart from some predictable abuse from journalist-critics incapable of distinguishing between different uses of the same generic material). The film follows the basic rules of the cycle faithfully, so the necessary synopsis can be brief. A psychopath is terrorizing women (obscene phone call, followed by rape and murder); a television news reporter (Lauren Tewes) comes—correctly—to suspect a man in the apartment opposite her own; she endangers her own life by searching his apartment for evidence while he is out; he discovers who is harassing him and, in the climactic scene, invades her apartment in return, assaulting her younger sister (Jennifer Jason Leigh), who is blind, mute, and deaf from the shock of being raped and beaten when she was a child. I shall restrict analysis to three aspects, representing the major components of the subgenre.

The psychopath, the "look." Much has been made of the strikingly insistent use (in both teenie-kill and violence-against-women movies) of the first-person camera to signify the approach of the killer, perceived by many critics as an invitation to sadistic indulgence on the part of the spectator. There is a simple alternative explanation for the device: the need to preserve the secret of the killer's identity for a final "surprise." The second motivation might be seen merely as supplying a plausible alibi for the first: the sense of indeterminate, unidentified, possibly supernatural or superhuman menace feeds the spectator's fantasy of power, facilitating a direct spectator-camera identification by keeping the intermediary character, while signified to be present, as vaguely defined as possible. In *Eyes of*

a Stranger the psychopath's identity is revealed quite early in the film: a rather ordinary-looking, confused, ungainly, unattractive man who strongly evokes memories of Raymond Burr in *Rear Window*. The point-of-view shots of strippers, naked women, and so on (surprisingly infrequent for the genre) are always attached to an *identified* figure: so that if the male spectator identifies with the point of view, he is consistently shown precisely whose it is. Hence, although the film is posited on the terrorization of women (and, during its first half, certainly gets too much mileage out of that for its own good), this is never presented with simple relish, and the sadism can never be simply enjoyed. It is difficult to imagine audiences *cheering* the murders—a not uncommon phenomenon within this cycle—deprived as they are of all possible perverse “glamour.”

The other male characters. The two “attractive” young men—potential hero figures, though one is murdered very early in the film—are both associated with the killer on their first appearances (a device also employed, though less strikingly, in *He Knows You're Alone*). The first frightens the first victim by appearing in her doorway wearing a grotesque mask that resembles the killer's face under its concealing stocking (meanwhile, the killer is already hiding in her apartment); the second (Tewes's lover, the film's *apparent* male lead) leaps on her violently in bed in a parody of sexual assault. Male aggression is thus generalized, presented as a phenomenon of our culture; the lover, significantly, is trying throughout the film to circumscribe Tewes within his values and his apartment. Consistently, the men in the film are either unhelpful or uncomprehending, or they are active impediments. The police refuse to investigate the first victim's reports of harassment in time to save her because Tewes's (fully justified) warning newscast has provoked an epidemic of obscene calls that turn out to be “jokes,” like the lover's pretended assault. The lover refuses to accept Tewes's evidence (circumstantial but persuasive, and strongly supported by that “intuition” that men like to see as the prerogative of the female so that they can condescend to it) until it is too late, because of his commitment, as a lawyer, to one of the dominant institutions of patriarchy. Tewes's attempts to express her concern on television are met by her fellow newscaster with bland indifference; the film is very shrewd in pinpointing the tendency of television to cancel out and reassure, Tewes's warning to women being immediately followed by the determinedly comic antics of the (male) weather reporter.

The women. The film is consistently woman-centered. Our identification figures are exclusively female, and the temptation to produce a male hero who springs to the rescue at the last moment is resolutely resisted, the women handling everything themselves. Tewes and Jennifer Jason Leigh are both presented (in their different ways, and within the limita-

tions of the generic conventions) as strong, resourceful, and intelligent. Here, too, comparison with *Rear Window* is interesting. In Hitchcock's film, Grace Kelly invades the murderer's apartment to demonstrate her courage to a man; Tewes's motivation, in the corresponding scene of *Eyes of a Stranger*, is a genuine and committed social concern. It is true that this is shown to have roots in personal psychology (her feeling for her younger sister and a largely irrational guilt about what happened to her), but the film strongly suggests that this has become generalized into a concern about the victimization of women in contemporary society. Crucial to the film is its reversal of the patterns of male domination: the turning point is the moment when Tewes phones the killer to persuade him to turn himself in, but also to let him know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of an anonymous phone call.

The conclusion of the film is particularly satisfying by virtue of its play on the "look," and the way in which it "answers" the beginning. The opening images show a man photographing marine life along the Florida coastline who suddenly finds himself photographing a woman's body: the "look," innocent enough on the personal level, is symbolically established as male, the "looked-at" as female (and passive). The psychosomatically blind sister's recovery of her sight during the murderer's assault — dramatically predictable and, if you like, "corny" (I find it, like many "obvious" moments in the cinema, very moving) — takes on corresponding symbolic significance in relation to this, and to the film's play on "looking" throughout (from its title onward).

Leigh's regaining of her sight, and her voice, can be read in terms of pop psychology (the reliving of a traumatic experience); the film also makes clear that she sees at the moment when she finally realizes that she has to fight for her life. The regaining of sight represents the renunciation of the passivity into which she had withdrawn: immediately, the power of the look is transferred to the power of the gun with which she shoots the murderer, the reappropriation of the phallus. In accordance with current convention, he is not really dead, and Tewes, returning just in time, has to shoot him again; unlike Michael and Jason, however, he is by no means signified as indestructible. The contemporary horror film has, typically, two possible endings (frequently combined): the "heroine"-survivor alive but apparently reduced to insanity; the suggestion that the monster is still alive. (Like so much else in these twin cycles, the endings were initiated by *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and *Halloween*, respectively). *Eyes of a Stranger* ends with the murderer, definitively dead, slumped ignominiously in the bathtub, his eyes closed, his glasses still perched incongruously on his nose: an unflattering reflection for any male who relished the sadistic assaults.