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RICH AND STRANGE: THE YUPPIE HORROR FILM

BARRY KEITH GRANT

Most critics who are concerned with genre theory or interested in the range of formal film categories deny that the genres of horror and science fiction are particularly flexible and adaptable. For example, at the beginning of his *Hollywood Genres*, Thomas Schatz asserts that science fiction is rather *inflexible* because of the specifics, the topicality, of its conventional narrative conflicts (31). After thus dismissing science fiction, Schatz never returns to it—and horror isn't even listed in the index. Similarly, Andrew Tudor, a sociologically oriented film theorist, claims that horror is a particularly "limited" film category because "its conventions are unidimensional and straightforward" (208). Such an assessment relies in large part on how one defines the genre—the problem of definition always being a thorny one in genre theory and criticism.

I shall discuss a group of recent American films that presents a distinct variation of the horror film. This group includes, among others, *After Hours* (1985), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *Something Wild* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Bad Influence* (1991), *Pacific Heights* (1990), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), *Poison Ivy* (1992), *Single White Female* (1992), and *The Temp* (1993).

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Some of these films, to be sure, reveal affinities to other genres: both *Something Wild* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*, for example, possess elements of screwball comedy (a classification that shares with horror the irruption of the irrational into the workaday world). Yet, to a significant extent, all these films retain much of the style and syntax of the horror genre—while substituting a new set of semantic elements, or what Rick Altman calls "building blocks" (30). And although it may be argued that some of these movies exhibit only minimal relation to the horror film, together they form a distinct generic cycle that, instead of expressing the repression and contradictions of bourgeois society generally, as many critics agree is central to the ideology of the genre,¹ specifically addresses the anxieties of an affluent culture in an era of prolonged recession.

The fears and anxieties of the yuppie subculture, which has been estimated to include anywhere from 4 to 20 million people (Savells 234), encourage the transformation of "evil" in these movies from the classic horror film's otherworldly supernatural to the material and economic pressures of this world that are too much with us. This change strikes me as marking a generic shift as profound as that of the evolving antinomies of the contemporary western—the very example that Schatz invokes as a comparison in order to dismiss science fiction.

Defining Yuppie Horror

The term "yuppie" was coined in 1983 (Adler et al. 14; Hammond 496) to de-

scribe an emergent and seemingly distinct class of young urban professionals, transcending categories of both race and gender, that embraced values of conspicuous consumption and technology as unambiguously positive. Yuppiedom thus combined the “me-generation” philosophy of the Carter era with Reaganomics, becoming a convenient icon of the era’s zeitgeist.

More precisely, according to Marissa Piesman and Marilee Hartley’s *The Yuppie Handbook*, the term

would include a person of either gender who meets the following criteria: (1) resides in or near one of the major cities; (2) claims to be between the ages of 25 and 45; and (3) lives on aspirations of glory, prestige, recognition, fame, social status, power, money or any and all combinations of the above (12).

These values coalesced into a lifestyle, a veritable *weltanschauung*, that embraced what one observer has called a “religion of Transcendental Acquisitions” (Adler et al. 19). This is nicely expressed in *Bad Influence* when the yuppie Michael, asked whether he needs his elaborate new video system, says, “That’s not the point.” With his hair slicked back and braces on his trousers, Michael Douglas’s Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street* (1987) became the perfect icon of the high-powered businessman—and the patron saint for yuppies, for whom “greed is good” because “money means choices” (Savells 235).

The term caught hold of the popular imagination, generating much media hype and spawning a gaggle of other demographic acronyms. In short order, there were, among others, DINKS (Double Income No Kids), WOOFs (Well Off Older Folks), and SWELLS (Single Women Earning Lots and Lots) (Kastner A4). The trend is nicely satirized in the instant group identified in the Jane Austen-like comedy of manners *Metropolitan* (1990):

the indelicate and cumbersome UHBs, or Urban Haute Bourgeoisie, a term that by the end of the film shows signs of catching on despite its apparent awkwardness.

Commercial cinema, with its antennae sharply attuned to popular taste, mobilized the tested appeal and contemporary popularity of the horror film to address this new cultural force—and has continued the cycle into the decade of the ’90s.

Yuppie horror is a subgenre that employs—but modifies—the codes and conventions of the classic horror film. “A good horror film,” notes Bruce Kawin, “takes you down into the depths and shows you something about the landscape; it might be compared to Charon, and the horror experience to a visit to the land of the dead” (“Children of the Light” 237). In *After Hours*, Paul’s taxi ride to the different, bohemian world of Soho in lower Manhattan is shot in fast motion—a joke about New York cab drivers, to be sure, but also a suggestion of crossing over into another place, like Jonathan Harker’s coach ride through the Borgo Pass in Murnau’s classic *Nosferatu* (1922). Other instances of the use of this narrative convention include Michael’s descent into the underground bar in *Bad Influence*, site of alternative sexual practices (the passwords include “gay white male” and “fun-loving couple”), and the movement in *Desperately Seeking Susan* from the rational materialism of Fort Lee, New Jersey, to the dark and magical world of Manhattan, as if New York were across the river Styx rather than the more mundane (but perhaps equally dead) Hudson.

In an economy characterized by increasing economic polarization and spreading poverty, these scenes of crossing into the nether world of urban decay “exude the Manichaean, middle-class paranoia . . . that once you leave bourgeois life, you’re immediately prey to crime, madness, squalor, poverty” (Powers 51). Hence in *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) wannabe

Gekko Sherman McCoy, a self-described “master of the universe” with a “\$6 million apartment,” quickly plummets from his usual haunts into the dark underpass of a highway ramp in the Fort Apache wilderness of the South Bronx. So, too, in *Pacific Heights*, the reddish bulbs of a “Loan” sign flash behind Patty Parker as if in warning to abandon all hope ye who enter here.

This fear informs the premise of the descent by middle-class characters into the hell of the inner city, as in *Trespass* and *Judgment Night* (both 1993)—the latter employing the metaphor of the mobile home to signify a lack of bourgeois stability, an idea used earlier in the supernatural horror film *Race with the Devil* (1975). Like the return of the oppressed, this nightmarish world threatens always to erupt, as in *Grand Canyon* (1992) when the yuppie entrepreneur (Steve Martin) is hospitalized after a mugger takes his Rolex. To use the terms of another of these movies, one must always be on guard against the temp who aspires to become permanent.

Within this dark underworld of bankruptcy and property divestiture, several of the films offer upscale variations on the horror film’s old dark house, what Robin Wood calls the terrible house (90) and Carol J. Clover the terrible place (30), making them into gothic, horrifying “workspaces” or “living spaces.” Indeed, the eponymous upscale high-rise in *Sliver* (1993) is explicitly referred to several times by some of its inhabitants as a “haunted house.” The New York apartment building in which the two women live in *Single White Female* is visually reminiscent of the spooky Dakota in *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968)—a deliberately resonant reference, as Roman Polanski’s film may be seen as an early instance of yuppie horror in which Satan’s manifestation functions as the unrepressed return of Guy’s real desire to further his career over commitment to raising a family.² In *Un-*

lawful Entry (1992), the installation of the warning system and the periodic spotlight from the police car put the white family in the position of South Central L.A. blacks, making their home seem more like a prison, a horrifying representation of the couple’s anxiety about whether they can afford their house. Michael’s place in *Bad Influence* becomes frightening mostly after Alex has stripped it clean of all the yuppie toys—an ironic inversion of the conventionally cluttered Gothic mansion.

This seeming oxymoron of the terrible luxury home is explicitly the subject of *Pacific Heights*. The plot concerns a couple’s efforts to gentrify an old Victorian house, a popular yuppie pastime (Ward 97). Initially, the yuppie couple, Patty Parker and Drake Goodman, conceive of their home as little more than a profitable investment, as a financial arrangement not unlike their cohabitational agreement. But the home soaks up renovation money like an insatiable sponge, a money pit—a scenario presented not with the blithe spirit of *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948) but with the ominous foreboding of *Amityville Horror* (1979), perhaps the first real estate horror film. (Stephen King perceptively described it as the generic “horror movie as economic nightmare” [138].) Drake and Patty inexorably fall from the beatific heights of potential profit to the lower depths of looming insolvency.

An essential visual difference between horror and science fiction films is one of vision. In science fiction, the outlook is characteristically bright and directed upward and out; in horror films, vision—that of the characters, the text, and the spectator—tends to be directed down and inward and to be darkened and obscured (Grant 185–87).

A similar visual design tends to inform yuppie horror films. In *Poison Ivy*, for example, both the mother and the deadly outsider contemplate sinking downward into the big sleep of reason, creating a



In the tradition of *The Bad Seed*, Peyton (Rebecca de Mornay), the nanny in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, presents an angelic facade that only handyman Solomon (Ernie Hudson) suspects may hide a heart of evil.

vertiginous gloom that pervades the entire film from the opening giddy bird's-eye shots of Drew Barrymore swinging out over a steep cliff. The sleek black car driven by Carter Hayes in *Pacific Heights* appears ominously over the crests of hilly San Francisco streets as if surfacing from the underworld. Carter, Peyton in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, and the deadly roommate Ellen in *Single White Female* are all associated with the basement and darkness. *Pacific Heights* uses a swirling 360-degree camera movement at crucial moments to comment on Patty and Drake's crumbling finances, both to visualize their sinking deeper and deeper into debt and to lend their descent into the maelstrom metaphysical weight, as if their very world view had been pulled out from under them, à la *Vertigo* (1958). Not coincidentally, this Hitchcock film is one among several referred to diegetically on the television in the smartly intertextual *Single White Female*.

Monstrous Others and Material Fears

An essential element of the horror film is the presence of a monster. In yuppie horror films, the villains are commonly coded as such. Alex's face in *Bad Influence* is frequently streaked by the noirish shadows of trendy Levelor blinds, and the killer's face in *Desperately Seeking Susan* is often bathed in a hellish red light. When Carter Hayes successfully installs himself in the apartment of the yuppie couple's home, he is said by their lawyer to have "taken possession"; in the climax, Carter is impaled, a fitting demise for a blood-sucking vampire, financially speaking. In the climaxes of *Fatal Attraction* and *Something Wild*, both Alex and Ray seem implausibly unstoppable, like their supernatural counterparts Jason, Michael Meyers, and Freddie Krueger. And in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, the tension established between the seeming girlish innocence of nanny Peyton (Rebecca de

Mornay) and her fiendish malevolence is firmly rooted in the tradition of such “pos-
sessed child” horror films as *The Exorcist*
(1973) and *The Omen* (1976), and, further
back, *The Bad Seed* (1956).

Furthermore, much like the traditional
monsters, the evil characters in yuppie
horror movies function as the Other, as an
external, disavowed projection of some-
thing repressed or denied within the indi-
vidual psyche or collective culture. These
films tend to depict the monstrous Other
as the protagonist’s *Doppelgänger*, or
double, a convention Wood calls “the
privileged form” of the horror film (79).
Roland Barthes writes that “the petit-
bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the
Other” and so makes him over into the
image of himself (151), a point that would
seem especially true for yuppies, who,
according to sociologist Jerry Savells,
“assume control of their lives and their
fate, without question” (235).

Pam Cook has suggested that Max Cady
in Scorsese’s remake of *Cape Fear* (1992)
offers a “distorted picture” of the Bowden
family’s “rage and pain, and of their de-
sire for revenge,” called forth from within
the family by the daughter, Danielle (15).
Cook argues that the film has to be under-
stood as Danielle’s subjective vision, what
Kawin would call her mindscreen (*Mind-
screen*), because it is marked by her voice-
over in the form of recollection.

Cook’s reading may be applied equally to
several other of these films, among them
Pacific Heights, *Bad Influence*, and *Poi-
son Ivy*. In the latter, for example, the bad
girl who seduces the father is clearly the
incarnation of the rebellious daughter who
considers herself to be unfeminine and
unloved and, as in *Cape Fear*, the film’s
narrative is framed by the daughter’s
voice-over remembrances.

In Michael Cimino’s remake of *The Des-
perate Hours* (1991), the fleeing criminal
Michael Bosworth, threatening the up-

scale family he has taken hostage in their
home, suggests that he represents a “re-
proach” to what he refers to as the “men-
dacity” of the family patriarch, who is
having an extramarital affair, as if Bos-
worth were the return of the man’s re-
pressed self—the father confronted by Big
Daddy, as it were—a relation wholly ab-
sent from the original drama.

Similarly, in *Something Wild*, Charlie be-
gins as what Lulu calls a “closet rebel,”
but the “something wild” within him is
brought out by his passion for Lulu/
Audrey and his struggle against Ray Sin-
clair. During the climax, Charlie and Ray
seem to embrace even as they fight, like
twin Stanley Kowalskis in their T-shirts.
Lulu says to Charlie in the end, “What are
you going to do now that you’ve seen how
the other half lives . . . the other half of
you?” A similar reading is invited by
Desperately Seeking Susan, in which the
bland Roberta learns to be more assured
sexually, like the extroverted Susan she
encounters, significantly, through the per-
sonal want ads.

In *Single White Female*, in a way the
inverse of *Poison Ivy*, Ellen is the plain
Other of Allie, the unattractive woman
whose career would proceed unimpeded
by sexual entanglements. The shots of the
two women in mirrors, posed in positions
reminiscent of the famous mirror shot in
Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), makes their
psychological interdependence clear.

In *Pacific Heights*, Drake Goodman
grows increasingly violent in response to
the “bad influence” of Carter Hayes. At
first glibly willing to commit white-collar
crime by, as he says, “fudging the num-
bers a bit,” Drake later viciously beats
Carter and is about to strike him a mur-
derous blow with a tire iron when he is
finally restrained by Patty’s screaming
plea. But like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s
Goodman before him, Drake has glimpsed
the underlying moral ambiguity of human
nature.

In *Bad Influence*, Alex is the incarnation of what Michael calls the “voice that tells you what to do some time,” a therapeutic materialization of Michael’s much-needed assertiveness training. Like Bruno Antony to Guy Haines in Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* (1951), Alex is Michael’s unrestrained id, the embodiment of Michelob’s yuppie admonition that “you can have it all.” As Alex shows Michael how to be more competitive and assertive, Michael’s hair, like his personality, becomes increasingly Gekko-like. In the end, before going over the edge himself, Michael shoots Alex, who falls heavily from a pier, the water closing over him as he sinks back into the murky depths from which he had emerged, the creature from the black lagoon of Michael’s mind now vanquished.

Even *Fatal Attraction*, which has almost uniformly been condemned for its scapegoating of the professional female, may be read in this way. It is possible to view the narrative as Dan Gallagher’s horrifying mindscreen or psychodrama, wherein the result of his affair with Alex Forrest is, on one level, the return of his repressed dissatisfaction with his marriage.³ Dan feels trapped by domesticity, his discontent imaged forth in the family’s cramped apartment. He is clearly disappointed about the evening’s prospects when he returns from walking the dog to find their daughter sleeping in his bed with his wife, Beth. So he fantasizes a relationship with no distracting responsibilities in the form of Alex. But then, like a networking party turned nightmare, to assuage his guilt, Dan projects the blame onto her—at one point he calls her “sick”—making her a monstrous Other because she does not recognize what he calls “the rules” for such affairs. Alex will not be “reasonable,” will not be treated like the sides of beef that hang outside her apartment building. She refuses to allow the removal of her voice, an ideological operation of the text that feminist critics such as Kaja Silverman and Mary Ann Doane have argued happens so often in Hollywood

film. Alex telephones Dan insistently and leaves an audio cassette in his car that questions his masculinity—both instances of an assertive female voice that seems beyond his masculine control. Indeed, it is not Alex but Dan who is silenced, as her adamant refusal to have an abortion leaves him, as he admits, “no say.”

Many commentators on yuppiedom have noted that yuppies are always threatened by the looming spectre of “burnout” because they are “workaholic[s] whose main identity and sense of self-worth is often supplied by [professional] success” (Ward 106). Burnout is thus a fearful possibility that, like the portrait of Dorian Gray, haunts the yuppie’s prized public image. It is no coincidence that Michael in *Bad Influence*, Drake Goodman in *Pacific Heights*, and Allie in *Single White Female* all show clear evidence of work-related stress. As an article in *Newsweek* put it, “You can, after all, stay on the fast track only so long, even in a \$125 pair of running shoes” (Adler et al 24). The important distinction is that the visage of Dorian Gray in yuppie horror films is handsome rather than grotesque. Here the craggy ugliness of a Rondo Hatton is replaced by the smooth charm of a Rob Lowe, for the ethical horrors of cupidity supersede the physical revulsion of the classic horror film. The fact that so many of these characters are at once ethically monstrous and physically attractive befits an age in which, as someone observes in *The Temp*, “They still stab you in the back as much as in the ’80s, only now they smile when they do it.”

Indeed, it is exactly this view that animates the worldly narrative of *Ghost* (1990), a film that, while marginal as horror, is nevertheless strongly informed by yuppie angst, and Brett Easton Ellis’s remarkable 1991 novel *American Psycho*, a book that perhaps stands in relation to yuppie horror as *Psycho* (1960)—to which its title obviously refers—does to the modern horror film genre.

If yuppie consciousness and values fetishize appearances—"Surface surface surface was all anyone found meaning in" (Ellis 375), observes Patrick Bateman, Ellis's handsome Wall Street mass murderer—then yuppie horror films show how frightening such surfaces can really be. "I have a knife with a serrated blade in the pocket of my Valentino jacket," Bateman matter-of-factly observes at one point, like that sage observer in *The Temp*. It is perhaps no accident that Ellis's narrator often describes his perceptions in terms of movie techniques such as pans (5), dissolves (8), and slow motion (114). Narrated with the same kind of dark humor as pervades *Psycho*, it is as if Norman has grown up and moved from a remote place off the main highway to life in the fast lane in the big city. Master Bates has become BateMAN, but, ironically, the onanism only suggested in the Hitchcock film is chillingly literal in the novel.

Because of the valorization of conspicuous wealth in the yuppie world view (and one of the great jokes of Ellis's style in *American Psycho*), the monsters in yuppie horror films tend to threaten materiality more than mortality. For yuppies, in the words of the portrait in *Newsweek*, "The perfection of their possessions enables them to rise above the messy turmoil of their emotional lives" (Adler et al. 19). Thus, yuppie horror films exploit the subculture's aspiration for material comfort, and the material success the characters so covet becomes frighteningly vulnerable and fragile, like the close-up of the splintering scale model of Patty and Drake's home in *Pacific Heights*.

The vindictive Cady sums it up well in *Cape Fear* when he says, "That house, that car, that wife and kid, they mean nothing to you now." The Puritan-like material emblems of election come to seem suddenly damned, the appurtenances of an expensive lifestyle often turned deadly, like Claire's greenhouse in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, which

becomes an elaborate weapon hailing lethal shards on her best friend, Marlene. The husband in *Unlawful Entry*, fetching a golf club to ward off a possible intruder in their home, jokes to his wife that if it turns out to be dangerous, he'll come back for his driver. This yuppie joke is realized in *Something Wild* when Audrey uses one of Charlie's clubs to whack the attacking Ray, and in *Bad Influence*, in which one of Michael's clubs (he owns a set although he doesn't play) serves as the murder weapon for Alex. *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* devotes much of its time to chronicling objects that become "unruly." In an upscale yuppie home fitted with, as Elayne Rapping notes, tasteful "houseware 'touches' out of L. L. Bean and Bloomingdale's" (65), Peyton is like a yuppie gremlin, relocating icons of status (such as a gold cigarette lighter) and thus encouraging a "misreading" of their subcultural signification.

Perhaps, then, the quintessential moment of fright in the yuppie horror film is the image in *After Hours*—emphasized by Scorsese in slow motion—of aspiring yuppie Paul's lone \$20 bill flying out of the cab window. In yuppie horror films, it would seem that to be broke is more frightening than being undead or mutilated. So Charlie desperately clutches at his wallet in *Something Wild*, although he allows himself to be handcuffed to the bed by Lulu, whom he has just met, with barely a protest. Because yuppies are already "possessed," these films suggest, they are more frightened by the sight of acid eating into the smooth finish of Dan's Volvo in *Fatal Attraction* than by, say, Uncle Ira no longer quite being Uncle Ira in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

Ideology of Yuppie Horror

While this yuppie cycle tends to rely primarily on the visual and narrative conventions of the classic horror film, on occasion their very discursive structure is



Is Peter (Timothy Hutton) suffering from paranoid delusions, or is *The Temp* (Lara Flynn Boyle) truly evil?

also similar, employing what Tzvetan Todorov has called “the Fantastic,” which critics have found to inform traditional horror films (Gunning). According to Todorov, the fantastic is characterized by a “hesitation” that eludes either a realist explanation (the “uncanny”) or a supernatural one (the “marvellous”).

Such hesitation is found in those yuppie horror films that can be read as mind-screens, as already discussed, but perhaps the most interesting in this regard is *The Temp*. Narrated from the viewpoint of the male protagonist, the film begins with his finishing a therapy session, and we soon learn that he has suffered from paranoid delusions in the past. Since we never see the secretary actually do anything ominous until the end, we can’t be sure whether the narrator’s interpretation of events is correct or if the woman is merely a terrific secretary and the protagonist is experiencing a series of unhappy coincidences. This intriguing ambiguity is clearly resolved in the climax, where the

patriarchal power of the narrator/male boss is forcefully reinstated with the defeat of the infernal secretary who has refused to stay in her allotted place in the corporate hierarchy. But until the film reaches for such predictable generic and ideological closure, it insistently questions patriarchal assumptions.

Fredric Jameson’s observation that *Something Wild* is about patriarchy (291) applies to many of these movies, which on another level, as my reading of *Fatal Attraction* suggests, are about masculinity in crisis. This is hardly surprising, given that yuppie horror films necessarily question (by expressing an unease about) capitalist ideology. Indeed, to the very substantial extent to which yuppie horror films are about masculine panic, they are simply the most overt articulation of a theme that dominates contemporary Hollywood cinema, most obviously in the recent trend toward hyperbolic SF action movies, with their excessive display of masculine “hardbodies.”

This is not to suggest, however, that all yuppie horror endorses the ideological status quo. For if we were to examine this subgenre according to Wood's "basic formula for the horror film" (78)—the way the texts define normality, the monster, and the relation between these two terms—we would find they range from the reactionary to the progressive, as with any genre. In *Pacific Heights*, for example, all's well that ends well: Patty reconciles with Drake, sells the house for a tidy profit, and defeats Carter Hayes while adding further to her income, tax-free yet. The film thus endorses yuppie capitalist values and neutralizes any potential threat in the fact that Patty, as Carter says, has "crossed the line" of acceptable behavior. *Pacific Heights* is no Hitchcockian text.

By contrast, the ending of *Fatal Attraction* may be seen as more subversive. It is Beth who kills Alex, after which she and Dan embrace, reunited because she has submitted to the patriarchal imaginary; only then can marriage be "happy." The final shot is thus heavy with Sirkian irony, worthy of the famous ending of *Magnificent Obsession* (1953): the camera pans to the fireplace mantle, the hearth of the family home, showing a photograph of the married couple—a still image—and a pair of bronzed baby shoes. Both objects undercut the notion that anything has changed in Dan and Beth's marriage; rather, the objects connote immobility and stasis and are a comment on their embrace of traditional values.

Similar is the ending of *After Hours*, when Paul returns from his descent to the nether world and arrives at the entrance to his midtown office. No longer what poet Andrew Marvell would call the iron gates of strife, they open of their own accord and, transformed by the golden light of dawn, seem to beckon Paul into the comfy heaven of his low-level executive job.

In their articulation of lurking dread, even the most conservative of these films are

more interesting than bland yuppie movies like *Rain Man* (1988), wherein the yuppie is humanized and learns that there are more important things in life than imported sports cars, or *Grand Canyon*, in which the economic gap is dwarfed by the geographical one.⁴ Jameson is right to call *Something Wild* and other such movies modern gothic tales (289–90), although he incorrectly, I think, chooses to emphasize their reliance on nostalgia. For these movies are emphatically about *now*.

Certainly the fact that mainstream cinema has turned more to horror and the thriller than to, say, comedy and the musical (as it did in the past), to address fears about America's affluent but now struggling economy—as well as the very nature of contemporary relationships—tells us how very deeply these anxieties are rooted. Indeed, these films tend to locate these larger cultural concerns at a more basic, personal level, within the dynamic of intimate personal relationships—the perfect adaptation of the horror genre to the troubled narcissism of the post-me generation. In yuppie horror films, monsters do not roam the countryside, killing indiscriminately; instead, we find ourselves sleeping with the enemy, often literally.

One can discern a decided evolution within the cycle. In the early yuppie horror films, the nightmarish situations were as often as not the result of recklessness rather than fiendishness. But as the recession deepened, the monsters tended to become increasingly malevolent: the Big Chill has become a wind from hell. (One might view the recent cycle of films based on old TV series—*The Addams Family* [1992], *The Beverly Hillbillies* [1993], *The Flintstones* [1994], and *Car 54, Where Are You?* [1994]—as the flip side of yuppie anxiety. Truly based on nostalgic appeal, they recall both the historical "better time" of the affluent 1960s, when the shows were first broadcast, and the ahistorical once-upon-a-time fantasy world of TV-land.)

Certainly, as I've already suggested, there are examples of earlier horror films, like *Rosemary's Baby* and *Race with the Devil*, that anticipated the yuppie cycle. *The Exorcist* is similar to Polanski's film in that it suggests that the demonic possession of the daughter is the result of the mother's putting her career before family. But of the several examples one might cite as precursors of the modern horror cycle, only *Strangers on a Train*, in typical Hitchcock fashion, steadfastly refuses to locate or "explain" the monstrous as supernatural. And although there are earlier films that we might identify as examples of Stephen King's notion of economic horror, the yuppie horror cycle truly begins to appear around the time of the publication in 1985 of an article entitled "Second Thoughts on Having It All" in *New York* magazine, described by one observer as an "epochal event" (Will 78).

Whether the yuppie protagonists are contained within their space in the movies of besiegement (*Fatal Attraction*, *Pacific Heights*, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*) or removed from it in the "road movies" (*Something Wild*, *After Hours*), they share a frightening sense of alienation from a comfortable, privileged routine. Films that combine elements of both subclassifications (*Trespass*, *Judgment Night*) emphatically demonstrate that you can't take it with you, even if you have yuppie buying power.

Significantly, yuppie horror films exhibit minimal interest in gore and splatter effects. They avoid the kind of body horror characteristic of, say, George Romero or David Cronenberg, even though, as one writer puts it, "The body is the yuppie's most prized possession" (Adler et al. 14). In these movies, it is less life than "lifestyle" that is threatened. *Disclosure* (1994) is filled with trendy dialogue about the dilemmas of contemporary sexual politics, and it suggests throughout a wish to avoid rather than a fear of the body that culminates, in the climactic scene in which Michael Douglas is

pursued by a virtual reality Demi Moore, in its rejection altogether.

The greater concern with lifestyle in yuppie horror films is perhaps nowhere more clear than in such movies as *The Firm* and *The Fugitive* (both 1993): the former is an upscale variation on such demonic cult horror films as Val Lewton's *The Seventh Victim* (1943); the latter little more than the hoary mechanics of the chase, situated within a yuppie context. Graphic body horror, by contrast, has become increasingly characteristic of the more mainstream horror film and of cyberpunk science fiction—the novels of William Gibson, or movies in which the body literally becomes a thing, as in *Robocop* (1987), *The Terminator* (1984), and such less distinguished clones as *Universal Soldier* (1992).

For similar reasons, fear of racial difference is not particularly important in yuppie horror movies. As in yuppie ideology, race is subsumed by economic difference. Hence, *Judgment Night* is careful to include a black among the group of four suburban men who carelessly venture, in a state-of-the-art mobile home, into the monstrous violence of inner-city Detroit. By contrast, race, an issue in such earlier horror films as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), has returned more recently in such mainstream horror movies as *The People under the Stairs* (1991), *Candyman* (1992), and *Candyman II* (1995). But whether the monstrous Other in yuppie horror films is seemingly aristocratic (as in *Bad Influence*) or strictly blue collar (as in *Poison Ivy*), the fear exploited may be understood as the nightmarish result of the yuppie's typical narcissistic self-absorption.

Conclusion

If, as some would argue, yuppies are nothing more than a "media mirage" (Hammond 496), an imaginative creation of the



Denis Leary (right) and his gang of suburbanites present a real life-threatening menace when they drive into inner-city Detroit in *Judgment Night*.

culture industry, they nevertheless have had a powerful effect on advertising and marketing. Moreover, since yuppies come from the “baby-boomer” generation that constituted the teenagers to whom horror films were directed in the 1950s and ’60s, they share an already established bond with the genre. Thus, it is not surprising that Hollywood would seek to incorporate into its rhetoric these viewers who, in the words of one advertising executive, are themselves “like a Hollywood movie, not real life” (Kastner A4).

Curiously, Rick Altman does not include horror in his examples of durable genres that have established a particularly coherent syntax (37–38), although the genre has been around since almost the beginning of cinema and, of course, before that in literature and folklore. Surely, the yuppie horror film is a particularly vivid contemporary instance of a genre’s semantic modification within its existing syntax to accommodate a newly defined potential audience. Horror, it would seem, is a more flexible genre than such critics as

Schatz, Tudor, and Altman have claimed. Rather, I would agree with Stephen King’s assertion in *Danse Macabre* that the horror genre is “extremely limber, extremely adaptable, extremely useful” (138). In fact, the yuppie horror film would seem a vivid demonstration of Altman’s thesis that the “relationship between the semantic and syntactic constitutes the very site of negotiation between Hollywood and its audience” (35). And if this cycle of the horror film demonstrates the protean adaptability of genre, it also reveals the inevitable anxiety generated by the biggest monster of all, late capitalism. To paraphrase William Carlos Williams, yuppie horror films depict the pure products of America gone crazy. And, to quote the last line of Ellis’s *American Psycho*, “This is not an exit” (399).

Notes

¹ See, for example, Wood, chapters 5 and 6; Clover; and several of the essays in Grant, *Planks of Reason*.

² The importance to yuppie horror of Ira Levin's fiction, including *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Stepford Wives*, and *Sliver*, is significant and certainly a subject for further research.

³ It is worth noting that the action in Adrian Lyne's next film, *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), is revealed explicitly at the end to have occurred entirely in the mind of the protagonist at the moment of his death. The only other similar reading of the film of which I am aware is Morris's.

⁴ In the context of romantic comedy, Steve Neale argues that the end of *Something Wild* "manoeuvres its couple . . . into an 'old-fashioned,' 'traditional' and ideologically conventional position" (297).

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