

Recreational Terror and the Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film

The universe of the contemporary horror film is an uncertain one in which good and evil, normality and abnormality, reality and illusion become virtually indistinguishable. This, together with the presentation of violence as a constituent feature of everyday life, the inefficacy of human action, and the refusal of narrative closure produces an unstable, paranoid universe in which familiar categories collapse. The iconography of the body figures as the site of this collapse. *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* unfolds in this postmodern universe. The film, which details the sanguinary activities of a psychotic serial killer, was ready for release early in 1986 but remained on the distributor's shelf until 1989, when Errol Morris, director of *The Thin Blue Line* brought *Henry* to the Telluride Film Festival (*Village Voice* 1990, 59). Among the obstacles the film faced was the unwillingness of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to give it an *R* rating. The reason? Its "disturbing moral tone" (McDonough 1990, 59). Fearful because an *X* rating means death at the box office for nonpornographic films, distributors lost interest. Even the director John McNaughton expressed concern over whether the film would find an audience. As he told *Variety*, "[*Henry*] may be too arty for the blood crowd and too bloody for the art crowd" (quoted in Stein 1990, 59). McNaughton's concern and the MPAA's judgment rested on the film's tendency to play with and against the conventions of the contemporary horror

genre. What makes it an innovative and daring film also makes it difficult to classify. This holds true as well for the postmodern horror film, of which *Henry* is emblematic.

The boundaries of any genre are slippery, but those of the postmodern horror film are particularly treacherous to negotiate since one of the defining features of postmodernism is the aggressive blurring of boundaries. How do we distinguish horror from other film genres and the postmodern horror film from other horror films? In this chapter I will argue that the contemporary horror genre, i.e., those horror films produced since about 1968, can be characterized as postmodern. I will formulate a working definition of the postmodern horror genre based on generalizations drawn from the study of films which cultural consensus defines as horror films, though not necessarily as postmodern ones.¹ In the course of delineating the postmodern features of the contemporary horror genre, I will differentiate it from its prior classical incarnation.

THE QUESTION OF POSTMODERNISM

In *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*, Andrew Tudor (1989) charts the development of the Anglo-American horror genre. The primary distinction he draws is between the pre-sixties (1931–1960) and the post-sixties (1960–1984) genre, terms that roughly correspond to my use of “classical” and “postmodern.”² Tudor parenthetically aligns the post-1960s genre with postmodernism and the “legitimation crisis” of postindustrial society by which he means the failure of traditional structures of authority (1989, 222). Although Tudor does not involve himself in discussions of postmodernism per se, he does point out that the legitimation crisis of late capitalism may be the salient social context in which to ground the contradictions of the post-sixties horror genre. But before we can address the postmodern elements of the contemporary horror film, we must tackle the thorny issue of defining postmodernism.

Social theorists represent it as a widespread and elusive phenomenon, as yet unclearly defined, its amorphous bound-

aries are hard to pin down. Andreas Huyssen portrays it as both a historical condition and a style, "part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility" (repr. 1990, 234). Todd Gitlin associates postmodernism with the erosion of universal categories, the collapse of faith in the inevitability of progress, and the breakdown of moral clarities (1989, 353). Jean-François Lyotard characterizes the postmodern as entailing a profound loss of faith in master narratives (claims to universal Truth) and disenchantment with the teleology of progress (1984, xxiv). Craig Owens identifies it with "a crisis of [Western] cultural authority" (1983, 57).

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 a fiction. Although the political valence of postmodernism is subject to debate, there is much to be said for the progressive potential of this paradigm shift.

Clearly, the term *postmodernism* acknowledges a shift from modernism, one not clearly defined and unable to stand as a separate term. But this cultural transformation was not ushered in by an apocalyptic ending or a clean break. It was and continues to be a matter of uneven development, where, to heed a warning issued by postmodernists, development cannot be conflated with progress. Insofar as we can conceptualize this cultural transformation as a break, it might be more fruitful to speak of it as a stress break, not the result of an originary traumatic event but the cumulative outcome of repetitive historical stresses including the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Cold War, Vietnam, the anti-war movement, and the various liberation movements associated with the sixties: civil rights, black power, feminism, and gay liberation. Indeed, the impetus to situate postmodernism as a sixties or post-sixties phenomenon lies in the celebrated (or scorned) association of that

period with cultural contradictions and resistance to authority that figure so prominently in discussions of the postmodern today.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF POSTMODERNISM TO POPULAR CULTURE

The contemporary horror genre is sometimes criticized in modernist terms for being aligned with the degraded form of pleasure-inducing mass culture. Critics relegate the contemporary genre to the ranks of ideologically conservative culture and excoriate or laud it for promoting the status quo through its reinforcement of such classical binary oppositions as normal/abnormal sexuality. Indeed, in *Dreadful Pleasures* (1985), James Twitchell portrays the horror film as a morality tale that demonstrates the dangers of sexuality outside the heteromonogamous nuclear family.

In contrast, the vexed relationship of the contemporary horror film to postmodernism is rarely articulated. When the contemporary genre is associated with postmodernism it is often to discredit one or both. For Kim Newman, "the postmodern horror film" refers to those eighties horror films characterized by camp. This comic turn signals for Newman a degeneration, a dying out of the genre's capacity to depict "the horrors and neuroses of the age," a function he claims is necessary to culture but one that has been displaced and dispersed across other genres that are themselves increasingly hybrid in form (1988, 211–15). He speaks as a disappointed horror fan for whom "postmodern horror films" fail to do what they are fitted to do. Tania Modleski, on the other hand, is no fan of the genre. In "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory," she classifies contemporary horror films as an expression of postmodernism and concludes that the former illustrate what is most perverse about the latter. This position bears closer inspection.

Although in principle postmodernism erodes all binary oppositions, Huyssen locates postmodernism's defining feature in its challenge to modernism's grounding distinction between high (artworld) culture and low (mass) culture. Post-

modernism blurs the boundaries between art and mass culture. Ironically, as both Huyssen (repr. 1990, 241) and Modleski (1986, 156) argue, many postmodernists unselfconsciously reproduce the high culture/low culture opposition in its modernist Frankfurt School form in their own work. They say, in effect, that mass culture produces pleasure, which inscribes the consumer into the dominant bourgeois ideology. In contrast, the decentered text produces *jouissance* and takes an adversarial stance against bourgeois society. Modleski aligns the contemporary horror film with the latter form but questions its value for feminism.

Modleski identifies the following as postmodern elements of the contemporary horror film: open-ended narratives, minimal plot and character development, and (relatedly) the difficulty of audience identification with undeveloped and unlikeable characters. Modleski argues that the decentered, disordered horror film, like the avant-garde, changes textual codes in order to disrupt narrative pleasure, and that as such it is a form of oppositional culture. (Huyssen notes that postmodernism appropriates and recycles many of modernism's aesthetic strategies, like the ones Modleski indicates.) Modleski aligns the horror film with postmodernism and both with the disruption of pleasure in order to question the political wisdom of renouncing pleasure for women, given the lengths to which women have historically been denied pleasure, and consequently to question the limits of postmodernism for feminism.

Modleski raises important questions. But her depiction of the contemporary horror film is flawed and therefore her conclusion is flawed. She fails to grasp the ways in which the contemporary horror film *is* pleasurable, not only for a male audience but also for a female audience. Although the horror film is not necessarily critical or radical, it does contain, as Huyssen suggests for postmodernism, "productive contradictions, perhaps even a critical and oppositional potential" (repr. 1990, 252).

But before embarking on this exploration, I want to address the apparent contradiction contained in the notion of a postmodern genre. The classical genres are defined as bounded by preestablished rules. Genre theory seeks to elucidate these rules and thus provide unity and coherence to a group of films.

In contrast, a postmodern work breaks down boundaries, transgresses genres, and is characterized by incoherence. A postmodern genre would seem to be an oxymoron. So what does it mean to talk about a postmodern genre, especially given that "genre" is a structural idea? First, the notion of transgression presupposes existing genres to be transgressed (Cohen 1988). The postmodern horror film transgresses the rules of the classically oriented horror genre, but in doing so it also retains some features of the classical genre such that it is possible to see and appreciate the transgression. Furthermore, the postmodern horror film draws upon other generic codes and structures, in particular, science fiction and the suspense thriller, to concoct hybrids like science-fiction horror, of which *Alien* (1979) is a notable example. Thirdly, since a genre is in part constituted by audience expectations, a degree of license is granted to the horror film as incoherence and violation enter the narrative and visual lexicon of the genre audience through repeated viewings. Indeed, the genre audience acquires a taste for the deconstructing tendency of the contemporary horror film, and a willingness not to resist it. Consequently, the genre audience greets a new horror film with the expectation of being surprised by a clever overturning of convention.

Although in practice there is overlap between the classical and postmodern forms of the genre, as there must be, analytically it is fruitful to draw this distinction in order to perceive the changes that have transpired between the emergence of the Hollywood horror film of the thirties and the films of the nineties. In doing so, it is important to bear in mind that the shift from classical to postmodern paradigms does not entail a clean, historically definable break. It is, rather, a process of uneven development in that each film both uses and departs from rules and that this process does not itself follow clear and definite rules.

CLASSICAL AND POSTMODERN PARADIGMS OF THE HORROR GENRE

The classical horror film is exemplified in films such as *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr.*

Hyde (1931). The creature feature films of the post-war period—including *The Thing* (1951), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and *The Blob* (1958)—share a similar narrative structure, which Tudor lays out. The film opens with the violent disruption of the normative order by a monster, which can take the form of a supernatural or alien invader, a mad scientist, or a deviant transformation from within. The narrative revolves around the monster's rampage and people's ineffectual attempts to resist it. In the end, male military or scientific experts successfully employ violence and/or knowledge to defeat the monster and restore the normative order (Tudor 1989, 81–105).³ The boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, human and alien is as firmly drawn as the imperative that good must conquer evil, thus producing a secure Manichean worldview in which the threats to the social order are largely external and (hu)man agency prevails, largely in the figure of the masterful male subject. As Robin Wood notes, the films of the thirties further distanced their monsters from everyday life by locating them in an exotic time or place (1986, 85).

In the fifties, the gothic monsters largely receded into the background,⁴ and what emerged was an amalgam of science-fiction and horror elements known as the creature feature. This hybrid combines science fiction's focus on the logically plausible (especially through technology) with horror's emphasis on fear, loathing, and violence. The fifties films generally locate the monster in a contemporary American city, sometimes a small town, thus drawing the danger closer to home, but they retain the exotic in the monster's prehistoric or outer space origins (Lucanio 1987, 36–37).

The postmodern horror film is exemplified by films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *The Thing* (1982), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1990). Again, drawing on Tudor's analysis we can summarize the narrative structure as follows. Such films usually open with the violent disruption of the normative order by a monster, which can take the form of a supernatural or alien invader, a deviant transformation from within, a psychotic,

or a combination of these forms. Like its classical predecessors, the postmodern horror film revolves around the monster's graphically violent rampage and ordinary people's ineffectual attempts to resist it with violence. In the end, the inefficacy of human action and the repudiation of narrative closure combine to produce various forms of the open ending: the monster triumphs (*Henry*); the monster is defeated but only temporarily (*Halloween*), or the outcome is uncertain (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *The Thing*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*). The boundary between living and dead, normal and abnormal, human and alien, good and evil, is blurred, sometimes indistinguishable. In contrast to the classical horror film, the postmodern film locates horror in the contemporary everyday world, where the efficacious male expert is supplanted by the ordinary victim who is subjected to high levels of explicit, sexualized violence, especially if female. Women play a more prominent role as both victims and heroes. The postmodern genre promotes a paranoid worldview in which inexplicable and increasingly internal threats to the social order prevail (Tudor 1989, 81–105).

Key elements of the transition from classical to postmodern paradigms are played out in *Targets* (1968), a self-reflexive film that juxtaposes the gothic monster of the classical paradigm with the psychotic monster of the postmodern paradigm. *Targets* is about a clean-cut, normal-seeming, suburban young man, Bobby Thompson, who inexplicably kills his wife and mother, then snipes at freeway motorists from a water tower. (Thompson's character is based on Charles Whitman who went on a murder spree in Austin, Texas in 1966.) A parallel plot features Boris Karloff as an aging horror film star who decides to retire because he has become anachronistic. People are no longer terrified by his films. Why should they be, when the headlines of everyday life are more horrific? The two narrative lines intersect when Thompson snipes from behind the screen of a drive-in theater at an audience watching *The Terror*, a 1963 gothic horror film featuring Boris Karloff. The juxtaposition of these two figures dramatizes how the psychotic killer's inexplicable violent rampage has supplanted the traditional monster of castles and closed endings.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POSTMODERN HORROR GENRE

Despite the enormous breadth of films falling under the rubric of horror, there are identifiable elements that define horror in general, classical horror, and postmodern horror. I locate five characteristics that *operate together* to constitute the postmodern horror film:

1. Horror constitutes a violent disruption of the everyday world.
2. Horror transgresses and violates boundaries.
3. Horror throws into question the validity of rationality.
4. Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure.
5. Horror produces a bounded experience of fear.

The first four traits refer to the workings of the film text; the fifth refers largely to the dynamic between the film and the audience. The first three apply to both classical and postmodern paradigms but operate differently in each. The fourth trait is particular to the postmodern paradigm. The fifth applies to horror in general, though I will discuss how it applies specifically to postmodern horror. Each characteristic operates in the *context* of the others; none is constitutive of the genre in and of itself. But together they form an interlocking web that constitutes the genre. This is a working definition, not an exhaustive list of qualifying criteria, and as such, this provisional definition is subject to the ongoing historical changes of the genre. The postmodern genre operates on the principles of disruption, transgression, undecidability and uncertainty.

HORROR CONSTITUTES A VIOLENT DISRUPTION
OF THE EVERYDAY WORLD

Contrary to popular criticism, violence in the horror film is not gratuitous but is rather a constituent element of the genre. The horror narrative is propelled by violence, manifested in both the monster's violence and the attempts to destroy the monster. Horror is produced by the violation of what are tellingly called natural laws—by the disruption of

our presuppositions about the integrity and predictable character of objects, places, animals, and people. Violence disrupts the world of everyday life; it explodes our assumptions about normality. The impermeability of death is violated when corpses come back to life (*Dracula* [1931], *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]). The integrity of self is breached when the body undergoes a radical transformation (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [1931], *The Fly* [1986]).

The horror film throws into question our assumptions about reality and unreality. Like Harold Garfinkel's disruption experiments, it treats "an important state of affairs as something that it 'obviously,' 'naturally,' and 'really,' is not" (1967, 50). It disorients the viewer's taken-for-granted reality. Horror violates our assumption that we live in a predictable, routinized world by demonstrating that we live in a minefield, by demanding a reason to trust in the taken-for-granted realm of "ordered normality."

In the classical paradigm, the violent disruption is often located in or originates from a remote, exotic location. In contrast, the postmodern paradigm treats violence as a constituent element of everyday life. As Gregory Waller puts it, "the entire [contemporary horror] genre is an unsystematic, unresolved exploration of violence in virtually all its forms and guises" (1987, 7). The disruption takes the form of physical violence against the body: (typically nonsexual) invasion of body cavities or of body surfaces to create cavities, the release of body fluids through stabbing and slashing, the tearing of body parts from each other, the wrenching transformation of bodies. Gore—the explicit depiction of dismemberment, evisceration, putrefaction, and myriad other forms of boundary violations with copious amounts of blood—takes center stage.

The postmodern paradigm is characterized by the forceful importance of what Philip Brophy⁵ calls the act of *showing* the spectacle of the ruined body. In contrast, the classical paradigm focuses on the more circumspect act of *telling* (1986, 8). This difference in the approach to violence is one of the primary distinctions between the classical and postmodern paradigms. The latter's fascination with the spectacle of the mutilated body, the creative death, necessitates its high level

of explicit violence and privileging of the act of showing. The dismembered body, the body in bits and pieces, occupies center stage in the postmodern paradigm. Pete Boss, following Brophy, claims that the primacy of *body horror* is central to the contemporary horror genre, which he too characterizes as postmodern. Characteristically, everything else, including narrative and character development, is subordinated to "the demands of presenting the viewer with the uncompromised or privileged detail of human carnage" presented in an emotionally detached manner so that what fascinates is not primarily the suffering of the victim but her or his bodily ruination (Boss 1986, 15-16).

Body horror can be accomplished with only a part of the body standing in for the mutilated whole. Such a scene appears in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, a film in which a burn-scarred supernatural killer stalks teenagers in their dreams and the lethal violence he inflicts there is actually inscribed on their bodies. Glen, against the advice of his perspicaciously discerning girlfriend Nancy, falls asleep in his bed. As he does, the killer's arms reach up from inside the bed and yank him into it in a sucking motion. He vanishes. After a pause, a geyser of blood shoots up from the bed to the ceiling. In defiance of gravity, blood flows in waves along the ceiling, out to the walls. Although the mutilated body per se is withheld from view the frame is focused on the eruption of blood whose copiousness far exceeds the contents of the missing body. In the postmodern genre, violence can burst upon us at any time, even when we least expect it, even when the sun is shining, even in the safety of our own beds, ravaging the life we take for granted, staging the spectacle of the ruined body. The postmodern genre is intent on imaging the fragility of the body by transgressing its boundaries and revealing it inside out.

HORROR TRANSGRESSES AND VIOLATES BOUNDARIES

Although violence is a salient feature of the genre, it must be situated in the context of monstrosity, culturally defined as an unnatural force. As Stephen Neale remarks,



FIGURE 1.1. Postmodern horror disrupts our presuppositions about the integrity and predictable character of things by showing bodily transgressions. From *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), courtesy of Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

what defines the specificity of [the horror] genre is not the violence as such, but its conjunction with images and definitions of the monstrous. What defines its specificity with respect to the instances of order and disorder is their articulation across terms provided by categories and definitions of "the human" and "the natural." (1980, 21)

Horror violates the taken-for-granted "natural" order. It blurs boundaries and mixes categories that are usually regarded as discrete to create what Mary Douglas (1966) calls "[im]purity and danger." The anomaly manifests itself as the monster: a force that is unnatural, deviant, and possibly malformed. The monster violates the boundaries of the body in a two-fold manner: through the use of violence against other bodies as discussed above and through the disruptive qualities of its own body. The monster's body is marked by the disruption of categories; it embodies contradiction. The pallor of the vampire, the weirdly oxymoronic "living dead" signifies death, yet the sated vampire's veins surge with the blood of its victim. The monster disrupts the social order by dissolving the basis of its signifying system, its network of differences: me/not me, animate/inanimate, human/nonhuman, life/death. The monster's body dissolves binary differences.

Horror indiscreetly mixes categories to create monsters. According to Noel Carroll (1990; 43, 46) monsters can take the form of either fusion or fission figures. A fusion figure combines contradictory elements in an unambiguous identity. Examples include composite figures of life and death (the creature in *Frankenstein* [1931]; the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]), self and other (the scientist-fly in *The Fly* [1958], the demonically possessed girl in *The Exorcist* [1973]). In contrast, a fission figure combines contradictory elements in two identities connected over time by the same body. Examples include the temporally sequential combination of human and werewolf (*I Was a Teenage Werewolf* [1957], *The Howling* [1981]), human and alien (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956], *The Thing* [1982]).

The fusion and fission figures of postmodern horror assume overtly sexual proportions. The woman who bears

The Brood (1979) produces an external womb, a birth sac that hangs from her abdomen. The male protagonist of *Videodrome* (1983) develops a vaginal slit in his abdomen which is forcibly penetrated with a videotape. This figure combines not only male and female but organic and inorganic matter, giving new meaning to the term wetware. In *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (1971), the good doctor's infamous transformation involves a sex change.⁶

The monster signifies what Julia Kristeva calls the "abject," that which does not "respect borders, positions, rules"—"the place where meaning collapses" (1982, 4, 2).⁷ Danger is born of this confusion because it violates cultural categories. This is why the destruction of the monster is imperative; it is only when the monster is truly dead and subject to decay that it ceases to threaten the social order. Disintegration promises to reduce the monster to an undifferentiated mass, one that no longer embodies difference and contradiction, for "where there is no differentiation, there is no defilement" (Douglas 1966, 160).

Although classical and postmodern paradigms of the genre share most of the foregoing characteristics, they differ in two important respects: the nature of their moral universe and the resolution of conflict. The classical paradigm draws relatively clear boundaries between the contending camps of good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle almost invariably entails the destruction of the monster. Although boundary violations are at issue in classical horror, repairs can be effected. Good triumphs over evil; the social order is restored. In contrast, the postmodern paradigm blurs the boundary between good and evil, normal and abnormal, and the outcome of the struggle is at best ambiguous. Danger to the social order is endemic.

Nothing is what it seems to be in postmodern horror. Take, for instance, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, a film about a nightmare in which the protagonist, Nancy, dreams she wakes up only to find herself propelled into yet another terrifying dreamscape right up to the conclusion of the film. In this postmodern scene, the referent or "reality" is gone, and she is caught within a closed system from which there is no

exit. It is thus that the postmodern horror genre operates on the principle of undecidability.

This principle is extended from the narrative level to the cinematographic level. The postmodern horror film repeatedly blurs the boundary between subjective and objective representation by violating the conventional cinematic (lighting, focus, color, music) codes that distinguish them. This is one reason that the dream-coded-as-reality occupies a privileged position within the postmodern horror genre. Another is its close association with the unconscious and the irrational.

HORROR THROWS INTO QUESTION THE VALIDITY OF RATIONALITY

Horror exposes the limits of rationality and compels us to confront the irrational. The realm of rationality represents the ordered, intelligible universe that can be controlled and predicted. In contrast, the irrational represents the disordered, ineffable, chaotic, and unpredictable universe which constitutes the underside of life. In horror, irrational forces disrupt the social order. The trajectory of the classical narrative is to deploy science and force (often together as when science is put into the service of the military) to restore the rational, normative order, whereas the postmodern narrative is generally unable to overcome the irrational, chaotic forces of disruption. Because of this narrative structure, the classical paradigm's critique of science is necessarily limited. It takes the form, as in *Frankenstein*, of the hubris-inspired overreacher who aspires to be like God. Or the form of military science gone awry as in *Them!* (1954) in which exposure to radiation causes ants to mutate into giants. The postmodern paradigm's critique of science and rational discourse runs much deeper, as I will show. But first, I want to consider how horror in general questions the validity of rationality.

Horror films assert that not everything can or should be dealt with in rational terms. As the parapsychologist warns the rational skeptic in *The Haunting* (1963), "the supernatural is something that isn't supposed to happen, but it does

happen . . . if it happens to you, you're liable to have that shut door in your mind ripped right off its hinges." Indeed, mental doors are ripped off their hinges in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, a film in which teenagers who dream about Fred Krueger can be killed by him in their dreams. Nancy pops caffeine pills and coffee by the potful because she is "into survival." Ultimately, she survives because she rejects the rational belief that dreams are not real and instead puts her faith in an irrational premise that collapses dream and reality. Her boyfriend Glen, however, lulls himself into a false sense of security. After all, he is home in bed, his parents are downstairs, and he is surrounded by stereo and television. His complacency, despite Nancy's repeated warnings, allows him to fall asleep, with fatal consequences.

Characters who insist upon rational explanations in the face of evidence that does not lend itself to rationality are destined to become victims of the monster. In *The Thing* (1951), the rational skeptic is Dr. Carrington, a scientist who seeks to communicate with the alien, a plant-based life form, who as a creature capable of space travel represents for him a member of an intelligent species. He is injured when he tries to reason with the creature. The rational skeptic, usually male, is punished or killed for his epistemological recalcitrance. Since science constitutes itself as a masculine enterprise, it is not surprising that the doomed rational skeptic tends to be male. The ones who survive necessarily suspend their rational presuppositions and trust their gut instincts.

In horror films, unlike the fairy tale, the monster is usually irrational and impervious to the request to sit down and reason together.⁸ The monster's violence runs its own inexorable course. Although the monster is not susceptible to reason or propitiation, it is susceptible to violence. Characters who survive must come to terms not only with the irrationality of the situation but also with their own ability to be as single-mindedly destructive as the monster. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, Nancy learns that during her childhood, Fred Krueger, a child murderer who was freed on a technicality, was burned to death in a boiler room—the dark and dank site of his crimes and of the teenagers' nightmares—by a vigi-

lante party of outraged parents, including her own. Krueger's body bears the mark of that violence. His teeth are charred; his skin is raw, burned, and seems to ooze a viscous substance. He is avenging himself by slaughtering the teenage children of those parents. Nancy learns that Krueger is the legacy of parental violence, and that she too is capable of wielding violence to defend herself.

In horror, the narrative is propelled by violence, not only by the monster's violence but by the protagonist's. To be efficacious, the protagonist must objectify the monster and subject it to a controlling gaze; that is, she must treat it the way it treats her. Paradoxically, characters who survive in horror films eschew critical tenets of rationality (for instance, that the attacker cannot be dead already), while at the same time they utilize instrumental rationality to objectify the monster and facilitate their own exercise of violence. Postmodern horror compels its heroes, many of whom are women, to both exercise instrumental rationality and to rely on intuition; it requires them to be both violent and to trust their gut instincts. As such, postmodern horror defies the Cartesian construction of reason that reduces it to instrumental rationality and pits it against emotion and intuition. According to the Cartesian construction of reason, rationality is masculine, associated with mastery, and requires the domestication of irrationality, which is feminine and associated with the body and disorder (Di Stefano 1990, 68). This limited conception of reason disparages the feminine. Postmodern horror combines, in the (often female) figure of the hero, instrumental rationality and intuition.

Cops and psychiatrists (descendants of the soldiers and scientists of classical horror) are largely absent from or ineffectual in the postmodern genre, despite the latter's insistence on the use of force. When experts are called in, they are not likely to be effective. For instance, in *The Entity* (1982) a woman is tormented by a phantom rapist. When psychiatry proves to be of no avail, she turns to parapsychology, which though more appropriate, is equally unable to extricate her. In the end, the inefficacy of science leaves the horror of her predicament unabated.

The nihilistic universe of postmodern horror cannot rely on the efficacy of science or authority figures. In *Halloween*, Michael Myers escapes from an insane asylum to return to his hometown where he will reenact the murder of his sister. The psychiatrist, who after fifteen years of observation can only pronounce that Michael is “simply and purely EVIL,” teams up with the local police to track him down. To emphasize the futility of the law, we are shown Michael driving directly past the psychiatrist (who has his back to the street and is waiting for the police officer) without any hint of apprehension on Michael’s part, nor any recognition on the part of the law.

The postmodern horror film throws into question two of the basic principles underpinning Western society: temporal order and causal logic. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, there is a glaring discrepancy between the explicit focus on time—the radio announces it, the characters set deadlines by the clock, and the alarm clock goes off at previously discussed times—and the implied duration of the narrative events taking place in those time frames. It is midnight when Glen is killed—the death scene itself lasts about three minutes—and 12:09 by the time police and ambulance are on the scene. (The six-minute speed with which police and ambulance respond to a distress call in a middle-class suburban neighborhood may be plausible, but especially in the context of ensuing events, it does strain credibility.) Between 12:10 and 12:20, Nancy sets up two elaborate booby traps—including piercing a hole in a light bulb and filling it with gun powder, installing a bolt lock on a door, rigging up a hammer to fall when the door is opened, setting a trip wire—and still has time to have a heartfelt talk with her mother. Time is unhinged, and this adds to the dreamlike texture of the film. One scene in particular resonates with nightmare imagery: Nancy flees from Krueger and runs up the stairs. The steps collapse like marshmallows beneath her feet, as she struggles laboriously to run but can only move in slow motion.

Causal logic also collapses in the postmodern horror film; thus, there is no explanation for the murders, cannibalism, dismemberment, and violence that take place in *The Texas*

Chain Saw Massacre. Despite the documentary claims in the prologue, the film not only fails to provide an explanation of events, but even language collapses in the final thirty minutes of the film. The lengthy sequence in which Sally is pursued, captured, tortured, and escapes is dominated by the sound of the chain saw; her relentless screams, groans, and pleas; the killers' taunts, bickering, laughter, and mutterings; and an ominous soundtrack. The few lines of dialogue serve not to anchor us in the rational but to demonstrate how demented the killers are.⁹

The postmodern horror film constructs a nihilistic universe in which the threat of violence is unremitting. *Night of the Living Dead* opens with Barbra and Johnny on a mundane trip to a rural cemetery to lay flowers on the grave of a dead, but still guilt-exacting, father. This prosaic event takes a horrific turn when Barbra is attacked by a zombie.¹⁰ Her brother fights to save her but is quickly overcome. Distraught, she flees to the relative safety of a farmhouse where she encounters Ben (and later other refugees) and retreats into silence. Between the time that Barbra is attacked and the time that she encounters Ben—a seven minute sequence—there is no dialogue, only screams, thunder, and background music. The collapse of speech occurs not only here but also in the zombies' utter silence, and in the inability of the human characters to communicate with each other, from the quarrelsome relationship between Barbra and Johnny to the unhappily married Coopers who bicker contemptuously throughout the crisis, from Barbra's semicatatonic state through most of the film to the running feud between Ben and Harry Cooper for leadership.

The small group is besieged by an unrelenting and ever-growing mob of zombies who brutally kill and cannibalize the living. The newly dead corpses then proceed to metamorphose into zombies and join in the onslaught. Thus, toward the end of the film, the dead daughter savagely kills and consumes the mother who tended her wounds.

The human survivors use first a radio, then a television to try to make sense of their predicament, to learn what the authorities know, and to formulate a plan of action. The news-

caster describes the crisis as an "epidemic of mass murder" engulfing part of the country "with no apparent pattern or reason." The "flesh-eating ghouls" are characterized as both "ordinary-looking people" and "misshapen monsters" from whom "no one is safe." Law enforcement officials seem completely bewildered.

In postmodern horror, causal logic collapses even when the narrative entertains a logical explanation for the chaos. Thus, a newscaster speculates that a Venus probe that carried high-level radiation back to Earth may be responsible for the dead rising from their graves. What locates this "scientific" account in the realm of horror rather than science fiction is the insignificant role rational discourse plays in the film and the film's sustained focus on the mutilation of the body. Indeed, the film's attention to body horror earned it the charge of being "an unrelieved orgy of sadism" by *Variety* (quoted in McCarty 1990, 103).

The running rational argument in *Night of the Living Dead* concerns whether to fortify the main body of the house, which provides multiple escape (or invasion) sites, or to take cover in the barricaded cellar. Ben, the hero, advocates—and convinces most of the others of—the wisdom of the first, whereas Harry, the unlikeable character who vies with him for leadership, advocates the second. In the end Ben, whose perspective the film supports, is proven wrong; he survives by taking refuge in the cellar after the others have been killed.

The futility of rational discourse is demonstrated in the final sequence when the sheriff's shambling posse converges on the zombie-beseiged farmhouse. The newsman at the scene comments, "everything appears to be under control," the forces of law and order are on hand to destroy the "marauding ghouls." It is at this point that the (white) posse kills the night's sole (black) survivor, Ben, mistaking him for a zombie. The implication is that this mistake was not an isolated incident and that chaos now reigns in a more familiar form. In fact, shortly before they come to the farmhouse, Sheriff McClellan tells the newsman that they killed three zombies "trying to claw their way into an abandoned shed. They must have thought somebody was in there. There wasn't though."