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The American Monster

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THE AMERICAN MONSTER

by

DARA GROSS

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Abstract

THE AMERICAN MONSTER

by

Dara Gross

Advisor: Professor Amy Herzog

Before the 1960s, American horror is primarily focused on gothic creatures, aliens, and mutated animals. A major change occurs in the 1960s when humans become the monster, reflecting the violence and social upheaval in the United States during that decade. As America continues to change in the coming decades, the human monster undergoes multiple transformations. First is the lone psychopath, popular during the 1960s and seen in films such as Psycho (1960) and Homicidal (1961). Next there is the family of psychopaths, popular during the 1970s, and seen in movies such as The Last House on the Left (1972) and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974). Starting in the late 1970s and continuing through the 1990s, America sees a new type of human monster: the stalker. The stalker can be seen in films like Halloween (1978) and Scream (1996). Most recently, the torturer emerges as the human monster of the 2000s, as seen in horror films such as the SAW series (2004-2010) and Hostel (2005). Each iteration of the human monster reflects the most prevalent fears of American society at the time.
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The American Monster

In 1960, American horror cinema introduces a new type of monster: the human monster. Earlier horror movies do not feature seemingly normal human beings committing atrocities. The traditional monsters are typically scientific experimentations, creatures from gothic literature, mutated animals, or aliens. The advent of the human monster launches an entirely new era of horror that lasts fifty years. During that period, the human monster undergoes multiple major transformations until its popularity finally fades. This paper examines the arrival of the human monster in American horror movies, its transformations, and how each of its manifestations reflect the culture and industry from which it emerged.

Throughout the history of horror cinema, the popular styles at any given time reflect what the culture fears most. In times of major societal turmoil, new types of horror movies arise and become particularly popular. This is because new horror cycles tend to be “capable of incorporating or assimilating general social anxieties into [their] iconography of fear and distress” (Carroll 207). The most popular horror films are the ones that are able to show a very clear connection between the onscreen havoc and the biggest social concerns (Baca 31).

In any horror film, the monster embodies the primary source of fear, although other characters, even the protagonists, also may be quite frightening. The plot of the typical horror movie is focused on two opposing forces: “Order (man, social groups, society, the system of values) and the Other (represented in the figure of the monster)” (Baca 13). The characters of Order frequently represent what any given culture at any given time would consider “normal” because these characters usually conform to the dominant social norms. The fundamental role of the horror movie monster is to threaten this normalcy. This, in particular, is what makes the
monster the primary source of fear (Baca 28). The monster “violates the taken-for-granted ‘natural’ order” because he is “an unnatural, deviant force” (Pinedo 21)

This conception of the horror movie monster, by itself, does not necessarily differentiate horror movies from science fiction films and thrillers. Some movies are classified as horror movies primarily due to the types of monsters portrayed. Films depicting classic monster types, such as vampires, werewolves, and zombies, are usually lumped into the horror genre for that reason alone. When other types of monsters are portrayed, however, the distinctions between horror, sci-fi, and thriller depend upon more subtle factors.

Horror movie monsters are typically more visibly gory than sci-fi and thriller monsters. Horror movie monsters often graphically murder victims on screen. This explicit, and sometimes over-the-top, visible carnage is frequently what distinguishes the horror genre from sci-fi and thriller. Brutal violence may occur in sci-fi and thriller movies, but it usually occurs completely or mostly off-screen, or is merely incorporated into the story verbally.

Furthermore, even when horror movie monsters kill their victims in a less graphically violent manner, such as by suffocation, or in a less visible manner, stylistic factors may be used to create the atmosphere of a horror movie. Lighting, cinematography, and music often play a crucial role in creating the particular look and feel of a horror movie. A monster may strangle someone in a sci-fi or thriller movie, but the stylistic aspects will be different.

The monster’s identity in American horror movies has clearly transformed “accordingly to social and cultural changes” (Baca 13). In American horror movies of the 1920s and 1930s, most monsters come straight from gothic literature. These classics remain popular until the 1950s, when aliens and mutated creatures become the more common monsters.
In the 1960s, America sees the genre’s single most drastic change in the horror movie monster. The human monster appears and becomes the predominant force of evil. Movies start depicting seemingly ordinary humans as the main villain. This human monster “dominate[s] the 1960s” and then continues to play a major role in American horror cinema until approximately 2012 (Derry 164). Although the human monster transforms multiple times during this period, it remains immensely popular for the majority of that fifty-year span.

During the same period, other types of horror monsters emerge and gain enormous, albeit more fleeting, popularity. Aliens, demons, ghosts, vampires, zombies, and even viruses all have their turn as horror movie darlings at various times. However, from Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960) to The Collector in *The Collection* (2012), there is no doubt that the human monster has longer lasting popularity and experiences more metamorphoses than any other monster.

More importantly, each manifestation of the human monster mirrors a significant change in American culture. From the lone psychopath of the 1960s, to the family of crazed killers of the 1970s, to the stalker of the 1980s and 90s, to the torturer of the 2000s, the human monster embodies the worst fears in American society at the time. Each of these changes is enabled or bolstered by new developments in the film industry, technology and ratings systems.

**1. The Traditional Monsters**

Traditional horror movie monsters before the 1960s have certain consistent attributes that differentiate them from the human monsters introduced in the 1960s. Though there are major differences among the horror films of the 1920s-30s and those of the 1950s, their monsters share a number of important characteristics.

The traditional horror movie monster does not look “like a human being; there is always something that sets the monster apart: an odd manner of dress, facial disfigurement, or animal
appearance” (Derry 163). These monsters almost always are clearly differentiated from protagonists by their appearance and frequently by their actions. In this way, these films show a clear distinction between “normal and abnormal” and “human and alien” (Pinedo 19). Finally, the traditional monsters are always defeated at the end of the film. As Isabel Pinedo explains, “In the end, male military or scientific experts successfully employ violence and/or knowledge to defeat the monster and restore the normative order” (19).

These key attributes of traditional horror movie monsters begin changing in the 1960s. This section examines the popular pre-1960s monsters so they may be contrasted with the human monster who first appears in 1960.

*The Legendary Monsters*

Before the 1920s, horror movies are not popular in America. They are considered un-American and too offensive for prevailing tastes. As Steve Haberman explains, “horror for the sake of entertainment was frowned upon by this public and often attacked from the pulpit as well” (100).

The only popular horror story in the early twentieth century is the tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. First made into a movie in 1908, it is then remade many times. It becomes popular because the story is far less offensive to the American public due to its “well-defined separation of good and evil and its parable-like consequences of succumbing to sin” (Haberman 100-102).

By the 1920s, horror movies are becoming more popular in America. In 1921, one of the best-known German Expressionist films, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), comes to the States and is met with both praise and controversy (Haberman 42-43). Despite the controversy, this film provides significant inspiration to American filmmakers of the 1920s (*The Horror Film* 50).

Even though *Caligari* generates greater popularity for horror films, they are not yet perceived and labeled as horror films. Though these films tackle macabre themes, they are
marketed as “colorful, offbeat melodramas” instead of horror movies (Kinnard 1). At this time, the American film industry is in good condition and getting stronger. There is an increase in film length, salaries, and production budgets, which gives the horror genre the opportunity to grow and expand (Cook 169).

Aesthetically, American movies of this era exhibit influence from the spooky and mysterious German Expressionist movement by including shots consumed by shadows, dramatic makeup, and intricate set designs. For example, The Bells (1926) and London After Midnight (1927) show influence from Caligari because they “depict Boris Karloff and Lon Chaney, respectively, wearing close copies of Dr. Caligari’s costume” (The Horror Film 50).

The Phantom of the Opera (1925) is the best example of a 1920s horror movie. The film is much longer than any of the early filmed versions of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and its production budget is obviously higher. Moreover, it tackles themes of hauntings, magic, and the criminally insane without being considered a horror film (Kinnard 1). It also shows the aesthetic influence of the German Expressionist movement. Many scenes take place in the dark, such as the Phantom’s deep underground lair where shots are often consumed by shadows. This foreboding gloom is quite reminiscent of the ominous darkness of the German films. Also, the heavy black lines under the Phantom’s eyes are similar to Cesare’s make up in Caligari, and the Phantom’s frequent appearance as only a shadow evokes the mysterious title character in the classic 1922 German film, Nosferatu.

In the 1930s, horror movies become even more popular as the studio system begins to dominate the American film industry. During this time, the studios manage to become “the vast industrial empires of popular mythology” (Cook 236). Among these studios is Universal, a “second-rank” studio, “which owned no theaters and [was] dependent upon the majors for first-
run exhibition outlets” (Bordwell and Thompson 343; Cook 239). Universal manages to turn things around after its release of *Dracula* in 1931, which is extraordinarily and surprisingly successful (Kinnard 1, *The Horror Film* 57).

*Dracula*’s impact is so significant that it launches the first American horror cycle, in which filmmakers continually adapt gothic literature to the big screen (Phillips 32-33, 55). After *Dracula*, Universal Studios rushes “more ‘monster movies’ into production,” establishing this initial cycle (Maddrey 12; Bordwell and Thompson 343). Films in this cycle not only borrowed much of their visual aspects from Gothic literature, but also “drew heavily on silent films of the horrific and fantastic as a basis for their visual design” (Maddrey 5; Kinnard 1-2).

*Dracula* was quickly followed by *Frankenstein* (1931). Both are excellent examples of 1930s horror movies and reflect the popular aesthetics of the time. In fact, James Whale, the director of *Frankenstein*, showed considerable influence from *Caligari* in the way he used “exaggerated visuals” (Kinnard 1-2). Moreover, *Frankenstein* is the first movie to actually be called a horror movie (Kinnard 1; Phillips 21). Both of these films are wildly successful hits, kicking off the first wave of American horror movies, and helping to make Universal a major studio (Kinnard 1; Bordwell and Thompson 343).

**Mr. Hyde**

In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1912), Dr. Jekyll is testing his theory that he can use drugs to separate the good and evil inherent in each person. He mixes some chemicals together, drinks the concoction, and transforms into an evil man named Mr. Hyde. Hyde then drinks the potion and turns back into Jekyll. The doctor seems satisfied with his work initially, but months later, after taking the drugs several times, he loses control of his transformations. As Hyde, he eventually attacks his fiancé and kills the man who tries to stop him. A policeman attempts to capture Hyde,
but Hyde transforms back into Jekyll before he can be caught. After running out of his special concoction, Jekyll realizes that his next transformation will be his last and he will be stuck as Hyde forever. After transforming, Hyde drinks poison and is found dead on his laboratory floor.

Hyde’s defining characteristic is his horrible, inhuman appearance. Jekyll, the good doctor, is an attractive young man with light-colored hair and nice clothing. Hyde, on the other hand, has contorted features, dark, greasy hair, thick, bushy eyebrows, and large, dark shadows under his eyes. Also, some of his teeth are missing and he appears much older than Jekyll. Hyde is so grotesque that he does not look human. He is hunched over at all times, and his mannerisms are angry and violent, making him appear more like a beast than a man. This visual contrast between Jekyll and Hyde clearly establishes the idea that good is attractive and bad is ugly, a theme that remains prominent in American horror cinema until 1960.

An important aspect of *Jekyll and Hyde* is that it is possible for the viewer to sympathize with the monster notwithstanding his horrible appearance and actions. This is because Jekyll and Hyde are the same person. Thus, the viewer is made to feel bad for Jekyll when Hyde takes over, despite the fact that Jekyll did this to himself. Many American horror films before the 1950s evoke some minimal degree of sympathy for the monster.

Another key element of *Jekyll and Hyde* is the optimistic viewpoint it presents. The end of the film expresses the idea that evil can be defeated. By killing himself, Hyde is punished for his evil deeds, and Jekyll is simultaneously punished for his risky experimentation. This theme of evil being defeated also remains prominent until the 1960s. Thus, *Jekyll and Hyde* serves as an excellent example of “the classical paradigm,” which “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” (Pinedo 22).
Jekyll and Hyde also reflects an acute fear of scientific development. Jekyll is a well-intentioned scientist testing a theory, but his experiment has disastrous consequences, resulting in one assault and two deaths including his own. In the end, Jekyll dies in his lab, a none-too-subtle final message that scientific experimentation can be devastating. Moderately popular during the 1920s and 1930s, this theme becomes a primary focus of horror movies in the 1950s.

Although horror films are not yet popular when Jekyll and Hyde is released, it does open the door. In the coming years, many filmmakers begin using gothic literature as the inspiration for their films. If nothing else, Jekyll and Hyde gave them a place to start.

The Phantom

In The Phantom of the Opera (1925), new owners assume control of the Paris Opera House. They hear stories of strange occurrences and a ghost haunting the theater. This Phantom becomes infatuated with a young opera singer, Christine, and kidnaps her to his underground lair below the opera house. There, she removes his mask and discovers that he is a severely deformed man. Repulsed by his appearance and demeanor, Christine rejects the Phantom. This drives him to commit even more evil deeds than before. Eventually, Christine’s paramour saves her from the Phantom’s lair, and in the end the Phantom is chased down and killed by an angry mob.

Both the Phantom and Hyde represent the idea that evil is ugly. Like Hyde, the Phantom’s wicked deeds are matched by the grotesqueness of his face. His teeth are uneven, his skin is wrinkled and leathery, his eyes are underscored by dark circles, his nose is partially missing, and his skull is deformed. Just like Hyde, the Phantom’s hideous appearance makes him the monster of the movie and marks him as evil.

Although comparable in appearance, the Phantom evokes more sympathy than Hyde. The Phantom is a tormented individual who was scorned by the world because of his deformities. It is
relatively easy to sympathize with him for this reason. As the Phantom’s twisted character is revealed, however, it becomes increasingly more difficult to feel compassion for him. In this way, the Phantom is more similar to the monsters of the 1960s than any other traditional monster, but his grotesque appearance identifies him as a conventional pre-1960s monster.

In addition to their beastly facades, the Phantom and Hyde share a common fate: they are both killed in the end. Thus, both *Phantom* and *Jekyll and Hyde* express the same optimistic view about the futility of evil. The Phantom’s death, however, is much more dramatic than Hyde’s. Hyde commits suicide, but the Phantom is tracked down and eventually eradicated by an angry mob. The core message in both films is the same: evil can be defeated. Yet again “good triumphs over evil [and] the social order is restored” (Pinedo 22). However, *Phantom* also expresses the additional message that common people can work together to vanquish an evil monster. The image of a vengeful, angry mob destroying a monster recurs often in pre-1960s horror films.

As previously discussed, American horror films of this era are heavily influenced by the aesthetics of the German Expressionist movement. *Phantom*, however, reveals the major thematic difference between American and German horror films. Rather than truly embracing the horror depicted in German films, American filmmakers give their supposedly supernatural monsters simple and natural explanations (Phillips 19). Because there is still some resistance to horror films in the United States, Hollywood fears that either “audiences would not accept such nonsense or that gothic horror might prove too morbid for conventional tastes” (*The Horror Film* 52). Thus, a trend emerges to have a monster that initially appears to be a mystical entity turn out to be just a hideous human.

The Phantom is an example of this American departure from the German style because he is initially presented as an otherworldly spirit. The previous owner of the Paris Opera House,
among others, truly believes that the Phantom is a ghost. As the narrative unfolds, however, the Phantom is revealed to be a deformed human with the deceptive talents of a skilled magician. Thus, there is a factual explanation for what initially presented as a supernatural phenomenon.

**Dracula**

*Dracula* (1931) starts with Renfield traveling to Transylvania to meet Count Dracula, despite having been warned that Dracula is dangerous. After a night in the Count’s castle, Renfield becomes his slave, and the two travel to London. There, Dracula claims a young woman, Lucy, as his victim and attempts to turn her friend, Mina, into a vampire, but he is stopped and in the end killed by Professor Van Hellsing.

*Dracula* is an exception to the theme that evil must be palpably ugly, although the Count’s appearance and behavior are odd and surreal. Dracula wears a long, black cape with a high collar over an overly formal vest and bowtie. His face alternates between hypnotizing stare and threatening scowl, and he has peculiar hand motions. His eerie appearance and creepy mannerisms make him seem as though he is from another world. This bizarre otherworldliness, as opposed to blatant ugliness, is what identifies Dracula as the monster of the movie.

*Dracula* also marks the end of the American trend toward natural explanations of the supernatural. The Count is an immortal vampire, and no simple account of his existence is provided. His struggle with immortality, however, is what makes him somewhat sympathetic. When Dracula says, “To die—to really be dead—that must be glorious,” it makes viewers feel sorry for him, but this sympathy is not sustainable. Dracula is not a tormented scientist who accidentally attacks his fiancé, nor is he a deformed man who has been traumatized by the world. The Count is an extremely powerful and evil creature.
Dracula does, however, continue into the sound era the theme of optimism established during the silent era. The vampire monster is vanquished in the end just like the deformed human monsters, Hyde and the Phantom. Killing Dracula prevents Mina from becoming a vampire, and the problem is resolved. Dracula will not be able to turn anyone else into an evil monster. As Van Hellsing says: “There is nothing more to fear, Miss Mina. Dracula is dead forever.”

Dracula also continues the horror movie tradition of reflecting society’s worst fears. The Count embodies a new fear in American culture, a fear of Europeans. As discussed earlier, Dracula’s appearance and mannerisms, as well as his accent, are strange and foreign (Phillips 23). The Count’s home is a surreal, misty, crumbling castle, unlike anything in America. After Renfield visits Dracula, he becomes forever changed because he is corrupted by the Count’s bizarre ways. Moreover, the very concept of Dracula did not originate in America, giving the monster and the film itself the overall sense of being foreign (Phillips 31).

This racism is grounded in a fear of Europe itself. At the start of the 1930s, there is an increasing tension “between democratic, fascist, and communist governments in Europe.” This leaves many Americans feeling that the first World War had resolved nothing and that a second would soon follow. Moreover, there are many European immigrants who came to America before World War I, and although immigration had slowed during the war, Americans of this era feel threatened by the Europeans who were already there (Phillips 15).

Dr. Frankenstein’s Creation

In Frankenstein (1931), Dr. Frankenstein sets out to test his theory of reanimation by piecing together body parts from corpses to create a new living creature. He manages to bring his creation to life, only to lose control of it and suffer the consequences. The monstrous creature
wanders about wreaking havoc until an angry mob is able to kill it. In the end, Dr. Frankenstein and his fiancé are forever scarred by this experience.

Unsurprisingly, the *Frankenstein* monster shares physical traits with Hyde and the Phantom. They all have a grotesque appearance. Dr. Frankenstein’s creation has an oddly shaped, flat-topped head with a sizeable scar on his forehead, deep shadows under his eyes, and a big bolt protruding from both sides of this neck. He is also abnormally large and strong. These corporal attributes make him particularly scary and more threatening than Hyde or the Phantom.

Psychically, Frankenstein’s creation seems more like an abused child than an intentionally evil being and, therefore, generates a moderate amount of sympathy from film viewers. He is immature in the sense that he simply does not understand the potential dangerous consequences of his actions. This is perfectly illustrated in one particularly important scene. As the monster wanders through the countryside, he befriends a young girl named Maria. The two of them play with flowers by the river. They toss them into the water and watch them float. Thinking that Maria also will float, the monster throws her into the river. When he realizes that she is not floating, he runs away looking terrified and upset, just as a child would.

In addition, and to an even greater degree than the Phantom, the monster in *Frankenstein* is not responsible for his ghastly deeds. He has no control over his life—no ability to grow and learn. From the moment of his creation as a terrifying beast, he is treated like an evil monster and, therefore, comes to act like one. The viewer may feel even more sympathetic to him when they realize that the terrible events of the film are not truly his fault.

As with his predecessors, Dr. Frankenstein’s creation is killed in the end, thus extending the virtually universal theme that evil can and will be defeated. Like the Phantom, the monster in *Frankenstein* is pursued by a group of angry people and is vanquished through the power of the
mob. Thus, the monster’s death expresses the same message as the Phantom’s: if all of the good people band together, an evil monster will not stand a chance of survival.

The Frankenstein monster also represents one of the same fears as Hyde: a fear of scientific development. Both monsters are created in laboratory experiments by doctors who do not take into account the potential consequences of their actions. Drs. Frankenstein and Jekyll both lose control of their creations and must face the calamitous outcomes of their experiments. The lesson is that some scientific theories, especially those exploring the nature of human existence and morality, are better left untested.

This fear of scientific development creates a fascinating ambiguity about the identity of the horror movie monster. Frankenstein leads the viewer to question who the real monster is: Dr. Frankenstein or his creation. Dr. Frankenstein is so obsessed that he is willing to eschew morality in the pursuit of proving his theory. He goes so far as to engage in criminal behavior by digging up freshly buried corpses and stealing brains to use in his experiment. When he initially believes he succeeds in creating new life and exclaims, “now I know what it feels like to be God,” the viewer is left thinking that the doctor may be the real monster. After all, the doctor was more responsible than his creation for the tragic consequences of his experiment. Perhaps this is why, in the public vernacular, the doctor and the monster share the same name.

This blurred line between protagonist and monster became a continuing theme in horror cinema, and the distinction would become even less clear in the 1960s. For example, in George Romaro’s famous Night of the Living Dead (1968), a group of people is trapped in a farmhouse as they attempt to survive the zombie apocalypse. Though initially the zombies are presented as the monsters, the movie viewer soon finds that the people inside the farmhouse present far more
of a threat to each other than the creatures lurking outside. Furthermore, in the end, it is the purported rescuers who kill the protagonist, not the zombies.

_Frankenstein_’s legacy is the same as _Dracula_’s. Many more gothic monster movies would follow in their footsteps, including _The Mummy_ (1932), the _Invisible Man_ (1933), and yet another version of _Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde_ (1931) (Phillips 13). It is difficult to imagine these legendary monsters ever truly dying. They ultimately represent anxieties that are fundamental to human nature (Phillips 4-5). However, this type of monster does move out of the limelight by the end of the 1930s. As American culture undergoes many changes in the next two decades, newer, more relevant monsters replace the old gothic ones (Phillips 5, 33).

_The Sci-Fi Monsters_

After the first major horror cycle ends, a different, weaker cycle begins in the 1940s (Kinnard 2; Maddrey 23). Many consider that to be “a dismal decade for the genre” because the films were not as well done as those of the 1930s ( _OWI Meets Monsters_ 47). This cycle includes “grade ‘B’ pictures that were much more quickly paced and more modern in style than—but noticeably inferior to—the studio’s 1930’s classics” (Kinnard 2). Rick Worland notes that this decline in quality “points to the historical backdrop of World War II” ( _OWI Meets Monsters_ 47). In 1945, as the war ends, this horror cycle phases out and Film Noir temporarily replaces horror. At that time, “the horror genre, for the most part, fell into another quiet phase” (Kinnard 2; Maddrey 29).

In the 1950s, the American horror genre changes significantly and storms back in popularity. In this new cycle, “gothic monsters receded into the background and what emerged was an amalgam of science fiction and horror, known as the creature feature” (Pinedo 19). The monsters are no longer shadowy figures that lurk in mysterious places, but creatures from outer space or mutants transformed by radiation. These changes reflect shifts in cultural fears. The
monsters of this decade do not represent a fear of Europe, but “have been interpreted as
metaphors for the nuclear bomb or as fear of potential communist invasion” (Baca 14).

This resurrection of American horror cinema is partly facilitated by an upheaval in the
film industry. The federal government had filed an anti-trust lawsuit against major Hollywood
Studios, resulting in “a consent decree that effectively ended the old studio system” (Maddrey
30). This leads many films to blur “the lines between studio and independent productions” due to
the fact that “major studios drastically reduced production and principally focused on
distribution” (Sexton 69). The horror genre benefits from these developments, because the
collapse of the studio system granted freedom to independent filmmakers (Maddrey 6, 30). In
fact, low-budget horror movies of this era are able to succeed precisely because of “the
curtailment of production by major studios” (Heffernan 57).

Horror movies of the 1950s also benefit from an important demographic change. At this
time “both exhibitors and distributors actively courted youth audience, by mid-decade the most
loyal box-office patrons” (Heffernan 57). American International Pictures (AIP) begins
producing films that are “aimed directly at teenage audiences” (Jancovich 4). Specifically, “AIP-
type drive-in movies had sought young viewers on dates” (Nowell 122). These films are low-
budget, fast to make, and considered the “successors of the B-film studios of the 1930s and
1940s” (Cook 419). This type of film is “so successful that other exploitation producers copied
it” (Cook 420).

Aesthetically, these films look fairly cheap to the modern eye, but they are enhanced by
numerous developments in film technology and the field of special effects (Cook 416, Heffernan
57). Many movies showcase new “technology such as widescreen, stereo sound, and color”
(Heffernan 57). Special effects improvements allow filmmakers to show spaceships and horrible,
inhuman monsters. In direct contrast to these fantastical vehicles and monsters, the story settings become more realistic. The films begin taking place in the modern world rather than the crumbling castles of older horror movies. As Pinedo notes:

> the films of the 1930s distanced their monsters from everyday life by locating them in an exotic time or place … by contrast, the films of the 1950s generally located the monster in a contemporary American city, sometimes small town, thus drawing danger closer to home. (Pinedo 19)

The new special effects and updated settings make the 1950s films stunning and exciting. *The Thing* (1951), *Them!* (1954), and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) are perfect examples of horror films of the 1950s. *The Thing* “started a phenomenally popular cycle … that dominated the genre for the next ten years” (Cook 417). All three movies take advantage of the updates in special effects and take place in the new, modern type of setting.

**The Thing**

In *The Thing From Another World* (1951), a flying saucer is discovered at the North Pole with a frozen alien inside. A group of scientists and air force officers brings the alien to an artic research base. The alien thaws and begins terrorizing the people at the base. The scientists soon discover that the creature seeks to duplicate itself and eventually conquer the world, and the air force team makes a plan to take down the monster, eventually ending in success.

The Thing actually looks a bit like Dr. Frankenstein’s creation. They are both large creatures with protruding foreheads. The Thing also has enormous hands with claws and spikes on its knuckles. As with the vast majority of monsters that preceded it, the Thing is ugly and does not look human.
On the other hand, the Thing is far less sympathetic than the previous gothic monsters. Mr. Hyde, the Phantom, Dracula, and Dr. Frankenstein’s creature all generate a modest degree of sympathy because they are able to feel emotion and act on those feelings. In direct contrast, the Thing is unfeeling and unsentimental. It acts purely on instinct or logic. Not only is its appearance inhuman, but its conduct is also completely inhuman.

Though *The Thing* broke the trend of portraying a somewhat sympathetic monster, it did not break the trend of providing an optimistic outlook about evil. In the end, the air force officers work together effectively to take out the alien menace. At the end of the film, there is a warning that another alien invasion may occur with comparable evil consequences. It is clear, however, that if another threat does arise, it can be defeated through group effort and cooperation.

Another important aspect of the Thing is its origin. The Thing is not a creature from Europe, but rather a monster from the stars. This is reflective of a current cultural phenomenon. Two incidents in America lead to the massive amount of hype surrounding space invaders. In June 1947, a man “reported spotting a group of crescent-shaped objects flying in formation and at great speed near Mount Rainier, Washington.” By the next year, there was a report about a flying saucer crash landing in New Mexico. These two cases helped launch the space invaders phenomenon of the 1950s in American cinema (Phillips 35).

*The Thing* shares two additional key elements with *Frankenstein*. First, *The Thing* makes the viewer question whether the real monster is the alien creature or the evil doctor working at the research base. Second, this evil doctor represents a fear of scientific experimentation. In *The Thing*, Dr. Carrington is a heartless killjoy who hides important information from the air force in order to advance his experiments. When it comes to the alien, Carrington believes that “only science can conquer him.” When it comes to saving lives, he states that “knowledge is more
important than life.” He later attempts to thwart the air force efforts to kill the alien and ultimately betrays the military by claiming to be the alien’s friend. This betrayal results in his death. The Thing and Carrington share equal status as horrible monsters.

Carrington may have been portrayed as a monster because of the controversial scientific issues that preoccupy America in the 1950s. Most notably, there is much disagreement as to whether the atomic bomb is good or bad. Some consider it “the greatest scientific invention of the century“ (Phillips 42). Others find the atomic bomb to be very frightening and the bombings in Japan to be an example of science having gone too far (Phillips 42-44). Another example of what many consider detrimental scientific development is the Nazi medical experimentation during the Holocaust (Philips 43). Because of the controversy surrounding these topics, the fear of science stays strong in American horror cinema of this era.

The Thing starts a new trend for horror movie monsters. Throughout the 1950s, monsters are completely instinctive or coldly logical. Following the Thing are many of these unfeeling creatures in the form of “giant insects, carnivorous vegetables, and bug-eyed aliens.” These new monsters are not even remotely sympathetic. As Noel Carroll puts it: “it is hard to imagine extending a succoring hand to a tarantula the size of a tractor” (208).

**The Mutated Ants**

In *Them!* (1954), radiation from nuclear testing has created giant, man-eating ants. An FBI agent, Robert Graham, teams up with scientists to destroy the ants’ colony. Once the colony is destroyed, they soon realize that some ants have escaped and started a new colony in the sewers of Los Angeles. The team travels to Los Angeles and puts an end to the giant ant menace.

From the perspective of film technique, *Them!* employs special effects to pioneer an entirely new trend in horror movie monsters. Previously, monsters had been played by human
actors using makeup, costumes and props. In *Them!*, the monsters are not played by human actors and are no longer even remotely human in any way. They are literally gigantic ants that look horrific. They have giant fuzzy antennae and legs, as well as enormous pincers. They are the most appalling monsters thus far. The Mutated Ants do continue the age-old trend of evil being ugly, but they do so without any resemblance to human form or behavior.

The Mutated Ants do continue an important trend introduced by the Thing: they are wholly unsympathetic monsters. The ants are not shown as having any emotion. They are simply giant, conquering forces of evil. They are not even remotely sympathetic because they appear to act purely on instinct and thus are prototypes of the 1950s horror movie monster.

*Them!* also continues the trend of being optimistic about evil. In the end, the military is able to kill all of the Mutated Ants. The film ends in a similar way to *The Thing*. It is hinted that the giant ants may appear elsewhere or return in the future, but it is made clear that the military would be able to handle any other giant ant problem that may occur.

*Them!* also continues the horror movie convention of reflecting a societies’ worst fears. The Mutated Ants represent a fear of war. In the beginning of the film, there are many eerie shots of the destruction wrought by these monsters. These shots show the remnants of homes that look like they were bombed. After discovering that giant ants are responsible for the wreckage, one scientist comments that “ants are the only creatures on Earth other than man … who make war. They campaign. They are chronic aggressors.”

This fear of war is likely attributable to the Cold War and the Korean War, sources of great anxiety for Americans at the time. After the “Soviet Union had exploded its own atomic bomb,” America and the Soviet Union are “soon pushing to develop more powerful weapons such as the hydrogen bomb” (Phillips 40). As the arms race with the Soviet Union escalates, the
fear of mass destruction becomes more palpable (Phillips 42). Simultaneously, U.S. troops are fighting in Korea. Even though the Korean War was relatively short, it was “America’s fourth bloodiest war” with “more than 50,000” American deaths. The anxiety and devastation caused by these two wars generate great fear about the potential for a World War III (Phillips 41).

The Mutated Ants also embody the new and culturally relevant fear of nuclear radiation. After learning that the first atomic bomb was exploded near the location of the ant’s nest, the scientists conclude that radiation caused the ants to mutate. The lingering fear at the end of the movie is caused by a character’s comment: “If these monsters got started as a result of the first atomic bomb in 1945 … what about all the others that have been exploded since then?” One of the scientists replies: “Nobody knows.... When man entered the atomic age, he opened a door into a new world. What we’ll eventually find in that new world, nobody can predict.”

The use of mutated, abnormal animals as horror movie monsters becomes a very popular theme throughout the next decade. Films of this type form a subgenre of horror sci-fi in which “the world is destroyed by proliferating, nonindividuated, nonhuman creatures.” Charles Derry appropriately calls this subgenre “Horror-of-Armageddon” (171).

**The Body Snatchers**

In *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1965), the citizens of Santa Mira, California, are slowly being replaced by duplicates of themselves. The duplicates at first seem identical to the originals, but some people begin to discern differences due to subtle changes in appearance and behavior. Dr. Miles Bennell seeks to uncover the mystery of where these clones originated while also preventing himself from being duplicated. Once the vast majority of the town has been taken over by clones, however, it becomes much harder for Miles to remain human.
Unlike previous horror movie monsters, the Body Snatchers look human. Only close family and friends can detect the difference between real people and their clones. This is what makes them particularly scary, just like the real human monsters of the 1960s. The clones, however, are not human. They turn out to be some type of alien plant life that is able to replicate human bodies and then mimic human behavior fairly well.

Although the Body Snatchers appear to be human, they are revealed to be quite inhuman. They could not copy humans exactly. When the protagonists first find a newly formed clone, they describe its face as “vague” with “all the features but no details. No character. No lines.” When they attempt to take the duplicate’s fingerprints, there are none. So the alien plants could copy overall human form, but without all of the essential details.

The cloning process is not only physically incomplete, but also emotionally deficient. The final version of the duplicate is unable to mimic humans on an emotional level. One of the principal reasons why Miles resists being snatched is that he discovers that the clones have no emotion, only the instinct to survive. They cannot love or be loved. Like the Thing and the Mutated Ants, the Body Snatchers are emotionally dehumanized and totally unsympathetic.

Through most the film, the Body Snatchers appear headed toward inevitable conquest of the entire town and beyond. However, just when it seems that Miles has run out of options, he manages to convince a small group of remaining humans that they must band together and take decisive action to stop the invaders. In the end, Miles’ stubborn resistance to being cloned saves the world. Thus, Invasion continues the longstanding optimism that good will conquer evil, but takes it to a new level. The message is that even when everything seems bleak and evil is about to triumph, good people must hold firm, remain hopeful and continue to do whatever they can to prevail. Even one strong, good person can cause evil to be destroyed in the end.
Another important aspect of Invasion is the palpable suspicion caused by the Body Snatchers. The fact that humans are being replaced with emotionless clones makes everybody distrust everyone else. This is partially a reflection of a political ploy of the 1950s that came to be known as McCarthyism. Joseph McCarthy, a junior United States senator, started making “increasingly outlandish claims to have evidence of high-level communist infiltration into U.S. government.” These unsubstantiated claims created a massive amount of anxiety throughout the nation as everybody, even people in authority, became a suspect (Phillips 42). This was directly incorporated into Invasion, where everyone was a suspected clone.

The Body Snatchers also represent one of the same societal fears as the Thing. The clones of Invasion are the result of a type of alien invasion. The clones grow in leaf pods that are sprouting all over town. The pods grow from seeds that came from another planet and took root in a farmer’s field on Earth. Thus, even though the Body Snatchers emerge from an unusual type of alien incursion, they evoke the same fear of alien invasion as the Thing.

Invasion has an enormous legacy, both visually and thematically. The massive throngs of unfeeling clones who look but do not act like humans foreshadow the zombie phenomenon. At one point in the film, Miles pretends to be a clone in order to go unnoticed in a crowd of them. In many zombie movies, live humans use this same strategy of pretending to be undead in order to escape. Later in Invasion, hordes of pod clones making weird noises chase Miles in an effort to clone him. This too has the look and feel of a zombie movie.

2. The Human Monster

In the 1960s, American horror cinema changes drastically. The old gothic horror tales and sci-fi flicks are “supplanted by the new horror film” (Derry 163). Beginning in 1960, there is one
paramount factor that distinguishes new horror films from those of the past: the human monster. Horror films begin depicting seemingly normal human beings killing fellow humans.

Five aspects of the human monster differentiate it from previous monsters. First, they appear to be normal people. Second, they are often more sympathetic characters due to backstories and motives. Third, viewers may readily identify with them as a result of camera angles and other cinematic techniques. Fourth, they are much more violent and more visibly violent on screen. Fifth, they express increasingly cynical attitudes about evil, and this cynicism is frequently delivered through a lack of narrative closure (Pinedo 20). These changes reflect both broader cultural shifts and changes within the film industry.

This section examines the first type of human monster to appear in American horror cinema: the psychopath. During the 1960s, the lone psychopath is the predominant horror movie monster. In the 1970s, American horror films begin focusing on the family as monster and feature a collective unit of psychopaths.

*The Lone Psychopath*

By the 1960s, Hollywood has fallen behind (Cook 845). Unfortunately, “the period between 1953 and 1968 saw a consistent and sustained decline in movie attendance in the United States” (Heffernan 57). Studios were in serious trouble due to the collapse of the studio system and began producing “fewer features every year” (Cook 846, Heffernan 57). As a result, the studios’ financial troubles only became worse throughout the decade (Cook 846).

The collapse of the studio system is exacerbated by changing audience demographics. A new film audience emerges, comprised of “a young[er], better-educated, more affluent, and predominantly middle-class group.” This new audience has different values than the previous one, and studios have trouble appealing to it (Cook 845). Instead, many studios make their
financial woes worse by attempting “to recapture the old audience with spectacular flops” (Cook 846).

Film aesthetics directly reflect the filmmakers’ difficulties in adjusting to the change of audience, because “the industry continued to make films according to the stylistic conventions of the 1940s and 1950s” (Cook 845). Horror movies of this time look much like the Film Noir genre of the previous two decades. Film Noir often consists of a great deal of “expressionistic lighting, deep-focus or depth of field camera work, disorienting visual schemes, jarring editing or juxtaposition of elements, ominous shadows, [and] skewed camera angles” (Dirks). Horror movies of the 1960s borrow many of these elements.

Interestingly, American horror cinema of this era is emphatically reenergized by the emergence of the human monster. The first type of human monster to appear in American theaters is the lone psychopath. This monster is seemingly a normal person. Frequently, he is given a backstory and motive, explaining his horrible behavior and making the viewer sympathetic to his troubled life. These psychopaths are highly emotional, in direct contrast to the emotionless monsters of the 1950s and the emotionally immature monsters of the 1920s and 1930s. Psychopaths seem like ordinary people—someone you might meet on the street—and that makes them even scarier. In addition, they typically kill their victims in more horrifying ways than previous monsters, and their heinous acts are depicted on screen more and more explicitly.

Although American horror cinema is generally in decline at this time, one gem stands out among the horror movies of the early to mid-1960s. That gem is Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). In many ways, this film revolutionizes American horror cinema. It is so influential that in the coming years, “exploitation filmmakers continued to capitalize on the more obvious sources of shock value in Hitchcock’s film” (Maddrey 45).
Psycho is a highly complicated film that begins with marvelous misdirection. A young woman, Marion Crane, steals a large sum of money and leaves town. While on the run, she experiences a broad range of emotions from excited anticipation of her new life of wealth, to fear of being caught, to regret for her immoral behavior. Her dilemma appears to be the film’s main plot.

That evening, Marion stops at the Bates Motel, where she meets the friendly owner, Norman Bates. The two have a lengthy conversation over dinner during which Marion learns about Norman’s odd relationship with his mother. After this conversation, Marion decides that she will return the stolen money the next day. That night, however, in a startling turn of events, Marion is brutally murdered in the shower by an old woman, presumably Norman’s mother.

Like a dutiful son, Norman cleans up his mother’s mess, covers up the murder, and then goes about his regular business. Soon after, Milton Arbogast, a private investigator hired to recover the stolen funds, tracks Marion to the Bates Motel. After snooping around, Milton is killed by the same old woman, and again Norman cleans up and hides the evidence. After Milton’s disappearance, Marion’s boyfriend, Sam Loomis, and her sister, Lila Crane, attempt to investigate what has happened to both Marion and Milton.

Sam and Lila eventually discover that Norman’s mother died and he has been living alone in his house. Norman has been keeping his mother’s body preserved and treating it as if she were still alive. Norman has conversations with his dead mother and responds to himself in his mother’s voice. Norman actually commits both killings while dressed as his mother and taking on her personality.

Norman is a brand new type of monster, never seen before in American theaters. First, he is truly human. He is a normal-looking human being, as opposed to the traditional monsters who
had beastly characteristics intended to make them look anything but human. Because Norman is so ordinary looking, he cannot be immediately recognized as a monster, and this is precisely what made him so terrifying and the film so suspenseful (Derry 164).

Second, Norman is a far more relatable character than his predecessors. Throughout the film, the viewer learns about his backstory and the cause and development of his insanity. When Marion is killed, the viewer’s natural assumption that she was the central character of the film is abruptly shattered, and Norman takes over as the film’s main character. Throughout the rest of the film, Norman receives the most attention, making him the most well developed character (Phillips 72). This enhances the viewer’s ability to sympathize with him.

While some of the legendary monsters such as Dracula and Frankenstein’s creation are somewhat sympathetic, film viewers cannot fully empathize with them because they are inhuman and their situations unreal. No viewer can truly relate to the difficulties of being immortal or the ramifications of having been sewn together from dead body parts. Norman’s story, however, hits much closer to home because his problems are very real human problems caused by an overly domineering parent. As a result, Norman engenders more sympathy from the viewer.

Third, *Psycho* portrays Norman in a way that almost forces the movie viewer to identify with him. At various times throughout the film, the viewer sees the world from Norman’s point of view. The first time is when Norman spies on Marion through a hole in the wall. After seeing Norman do this, the viewer then assumes Norman’s perspective and directly watches Marion as she prepares to shower. Soon after, as Norman stabs Marion to death, the viewer sees close-ups of the murder and of Marion’s face as if they are looking upon her from the vantage point of the killer. The same type of shot is done when Norman kills Milton. Seeing the world through Norman’s eyes literally puts the viewer in the monster’s shoes.
The fourth aspect of Norman, the psychopath, that distinguishes him from previous monsters is that his crimes are much more violent than anything previously seen on film. Though the famous shower scene in *Psycho* is nothing alarming by today’s standards, it is extremely shocking to the typical audience in 1960. Before *Psycho*, horror films depict violence, but not this explicitly. Violent acts are frequently committed off camera, far away from the camera, or without use of blood or special effects. In *Psycho*’s shower scene, however, the viewer sees quick shots of the knife flashing and the blood swirling down the drain as Marion is stabbed to death. It almost makes viewers feel as if they are in the bathroom with them, but covering their eyes so as to catch only glimpses of what is happening. Later in the film, when Milton is killed, there is a prominent blood splatter on his face. *Psycho* essentially begins the trend that would see horror film violence depicted with increasingly greater degrees of graphic detail.

Fifth, Norman as a monster, represents a new, more cynical outlook on American life. He initially seems kind and innocent when he first interacts with Marion and later acts upset when he discovers her body. When it is revealed, however, that Norman is the killer, the viewer’s faith in him is shattered. If a man so seemingly innocent can be so horribly insane, then anyone could potentially be insane (Derry 164). This theme is perfectly captured by Norman’s famous comment: “We all go a little mad sometimes.”

The arrival of such a vastly different monster in 1960 was not random. Norman’s character is based on the real-life monster, Ed Gein. Just three years before the release of *Psycho*, America is “jolted … by a crime so appalling that, in a very real sense, American culture still hasn’t recovered from the shock” (Schecter 64). Gein’s crimes are so horrific that he gains widespread attention from people who were now suddenly interested in talking about “sexual
deviance, transvestitism, fetishism, and necrophilia” (Schechter 135). As a result, novelists and filmmakers also begin engaging in conversations about these heretofore taboo topics.

Robert Bloch’s novel, *Psycho*, is based on Gein’s story, incorporating both rumors and facts about the Gein case. In summary, Gein is “a shy, bland, completely harmless looking bachelor” who commits “the darkest acts of depravity” because of his “pathological attachment to a tyrannizing mother.” Bloch decides that this real-life horror story is an excellent concept for a novel, and Hitchcock’s famous film is based on that book (Schechter 141, 222).

Many aspects of Norman’s personality are similar to those of the real-life monster, Gein, although some are based more on rumor than fact. For instance, Norman’s hobby is taxidermy, which is based on the rumor that Gein had been an amateur taxidermist (Schechter 107). As another example, Norman keeps his mother’s body in the house, which is based on the rumor that Gein had done this. In reality, however, the police never recovered the remains of Gein’s mother from his farmhouse, probably because his mother’s coffin “was encased in a concrete vault.” Gein may have tried to recover her body, but that is only speculation (Schechter 151).

There are several aspects of Norman’s life that are based upon the facts of Gein’s life. For one, both men initially appear to be perfectly sane (Schechter 36). Also, they both have an unhealthy attachment to their mothers, who were overbearing and controlling (Schecter 13). As a result, neither the fictional nor the non-fictional character reacts well to his mother’s death, and they both take various actions to preserve her. Norman preserves his mother’s body, and Gein preserves her bedroom (Schechter 81). Norman copes by wearing his mother’s clothes, and Gein copes by wearing masks made of human skin that he felt resembled his mother (Schechter 121).

*Psycho* has an enormous impact on American horror movies, and Norman Bates is the first in a long line of psychopathic human monsters. For instance, the film *Homicidal* (1961)
blatantly steals the same concept and twist ending as *Psycho*, while simultaneously showing a major new development. The story is about a woman who commits a couple murders. At the end of the movie, the viewer finds out that the killer was not a woman, but a man named Warren, who was dressed as a woman. Like Norman, Warren is the main character throughout the film, he knows how to be polite and normal, he had an abusive parent, and he is actually a psychopathic, cross-dressing killer.

The new development is that, in just the one year between these two films, there was a noticeable increase in visible violence. When Norman stabs Marion in the shower, the viewer sees striking fragments of violent images, but no explicit shots of the wounds. When Warren stabs his first victim, however, the viewer sees close-ups of the victim’s stab wounds and explicit shots of blood flowing from those wounds. This is certainly a sign of things to come.

Other films that follow in *Psycho*’s footsteps are *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *Dementia 13* (1963), *Strait-Jacket* (1964), *Hush Hush Sweet Charlotte* (1964), *Repulsion* (1965), and *Pretty Poison* (1968) (Phillips 64; Derry 164). These films repeat many of the same themes as *Psycho*: fear of bodily mutilation, the potential for anyone to be insane, a secret crime, an unhealthy relationship, split personalities, abusive parents, the incompetence of authority, and a disguised killer (Derry 164).

*The Family of Psychopaths*

In 1968, the horror film makes a comeback. This is largely facilitated by the gradual demise of the Motion Picture Production Code and its replacement by a new, more lenient rating system. For decades, the Production Code had restricted film content to what was deemed to be morally acceptable. When the Production Code was in place “movies had not been considered a part of
the press, whose freedom is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the Constitution.” This resulted in an extreme amount of censorship (Cook 428).

During the 1950s and 1960s, more and more filmmakers begin circumventing or ignoring the Production Code, and eventually it must be abandoned. New freedom is granted to American filmmakers in 1968 when the Production Code is replaced by the Motion Picture Association of America’s film rating system (Maddrey 49; Cook 428). This new system does not “proscribe the content of films” like the Production Code. Instead, it determines what films are appropriate for people depending on their age group (Cook 428). This change from a content-based code to an age-based rating system is particularly freeing for the horror movie genre.

As a result, horror films of the late 1960s and 1970s are aesthetically much more violent and bloody than previous films (Horror Films of the 1970s 3). Pinedo notes that American horror films of this time show a “fascination with the spectacle of the mutilated body [and] the creative death,” which “necessitates its high level of explicit violence and privileging of the act of showing” (21). The new rating system enables filmmakers to explicitly depict decapitation, dismemberment, needles in eyeballs, deadly weapons, sex, nudity, profanity, incest, necrophilia, rape, and cannibalism (Waller 5-6). To increase the shock value, filmmakers use long takes to focus on particularly disgusting acts of violence or gruesome objects.

In this new cycle, a new type of monster appears. Films such as The Last House on the Left (1972), The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) and The Hills Have Eyes (1977) present this new monster and use it to both reflect and critique the current problems then facing American society. In these films, there is no one, single psychopath, but instead a collective unit—usually a whole family—of psychopaths. Films such as these typically criticize both the American family and the youth movement of the 1960s.
The Last House on the Left (1972) is an early example of the horror films of this era that portrayed a family of maniacal killers engaged in visibly graphic violence. This film also “prompted major Hollywood studios to take the horror genre more seriously” (Maddrey 52). The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) is another excellent example because it was “more explicit, and far more intense, than previous horror productions” (Horror Films of the 1970s 29). Texas Chainsaw also has many examples of the long take on gruesome visuals. For instance, at the beginning of the movie, there is a long shot focused on two badly decomposed corpses positioned on top of a tombstone, which lasts for approximately one minute and fifteen seconds.

The monstrous families of the 1970s are very much an extension of what Psycho started. Though Norman Bates was a lone psychopath, he emerged from a dysfunctional family that bred insanity. Kendall R. Phillips notes that “horror films since Psycho had continuously focused on the family as a cause of insanity and monstrousness” (119). The Bates family was only the first of the many demented families to be featured in American horror cinema.

The Krugs and the Collingwoods

Wes Craven’s The Last House on the Left is about a teenager named Mari Collingwood, who leaves her country home one night to attend a concert in the city with her friend, Phyllis. Before they get to the concert, the girls are attacked by a gang of psychopaths, consisting of four individuals: Krug, the leader, his son Junior, his buddy Weasel, and his girlfriend Sadie. After raping Phyllis in front of Mari, Krug and his gang head out of town. They take the girls with them by putting them in the trunk of their car. They take off, leaving the city, but their car breaks down on the side of a country road. Stranded in the middle of nowhere, Krug decides that he and the gang should have some fun torturing the girls in a variety of ways.
Out in the woods, Mari and Phyllis are forced to engage in humiliating and degrading acts before they are killed. The Krug family then cleans up and seeks shelter. They just so happen to find the Collingwood house. After the Krugs explain that their car has broken down, the Collingwoods invite them in, not knowing that the Krug family has killed their daughter. They eat dinner, and then the Krugs sleep there for the night.

Upon entering Mari’s bedroom, the Krugs discover that they are staying in the bed of the girl they just killed. Mrs. Collingwood overhears them discussing this, and she and her husband decide to seek brutal revenge. Mr. Collingwood sets traps around the house to kill the Krugs. Mrs. Collingwood brutally kills Weasel and Sadie outdoors. In the end, the entire Krug family has been slain, and the Collingwoods are left with an enormous amount of blood on their hands.

The Krugs are as normal looking as the Bates, but there is something that makes the Krugs even more terrifying. Norman lives by himself in the middle of nowhere. Anyone who finds him may think that he is a normal man at first. The Krugs, on the other hand, demonstrate their ability to blend in and behave as a normal family during the dinner scene with the Collingwoods. In fact, the Collingwoods do not suspect that the Krugs have done anything wrong until Mrs. Collingwood overhears them talking about Mari.

Because the Krugs are a family of psychopaths, the sympathy that the film viewer may feel for them varies. Krug is completely evil and inhumane, so it is hard to sympathize with him. Weasel and Sadie, on the other hand, are controlled and manipulated by Krug, so the viewer may wonder whether they would have become so evil had they never met him. Then there is Junior, who is the most sympathetic character. Although he has little interest in participating in his father’s atrocities, Krug controls him by keeping him addicted to heroin. In the end, Junior tries to stand up to Krug, but Krug convinces him to kill himself. At this point in the film, the viewer
understands Junior’s torment and, therefore, can empathize with him. Most of the monstrous families that follow are similarly varied and, therefore, arouse differing degrees of sympathy.

The Krugs, however, are not the only monsters in Last House. The Collingwoods also are presented as monsters via a series of comparisons with the Krugs. The two families are introduced back-to-back, first the Collingwoods and then the Krugs. Both families are seen having mundane conversations with their families in their living spaces. They interact like ordinary American families, chatting naturally about each other and about the world. Then, once the similarities are established, the film “crosscuts between the activities of the two families with regularity” (Horror Films of the 1970s 212).

The contrast between the two families emerges as the Krugs display their cruel insanity, while the Collingwoods express typical parental concern for their missing daughter. This contrast vanishes, however, with ironic emphasis when the Collingwoods greet the Krugs and welcome them into their home. As the two families dine together, they again interact like two normal American families. The familial comparison then comes to a stark conclusion when the Collingwoods take brutal revenge on the Krugs, showing that both families have stooped “to heinous acts of violence” (Horror Films of the 1970s 213).

Importantly, the Collingwoods are not only more violent than the Krugs, but also more violent than any monsters previously seen in American horror cinema. The tremendous increase in cinematic violence during this cycle, which is enabled by the new rating system, also serves to reflect the societal upheaval of the time. Between 1960 and 1972, America experiences a vast amount of violence and starts to become inured to it. This development is impeccably captured in Last House when Mrs. Collingwood asks her husband, “What’s new in the outside world?,” and he nonchalantly replies, “Same old stuff—murder and mayhem.”
Against the backdrop of the seemingly endless Vietnam War and while still coping with the shocking assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the American public of the 1960s is confronted with a continuous stream of violent and disturbing events: Richard Speck’s torture and murder of eight nurses in Chicago; Charles Whitman’s shooting spree that left his wife, mother, and 14 random victims dead in Texas; the capture of the USS Pueblo by North Korea; the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in Atlanta and the ensuing race riots in many cities across the nation; the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy in California; the violent clashes between police and protestors at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago; and the National Guard massacre of unarmed students at Kent State University in Ohio (Phillips 88–89; Derry 164). This list, which includes some of the most heavily publicized events, is only the tip of the iceberg. During this time, random acts of violence and mass murder become normal and leave the country traumatized (Derry 164).

This dramatic increase in violence happens at the exact same time as the explosion in availability and use of color television. Thus, there is a correspondingly massive increase in the delivery of vivid violent images to the public. No matter how remote people are from the actual violence; they cannot escape its impact because they see constant images and reports of it on television and in other mass news media. The continual recording, reporting and publicizing of catastrophes like those listed above make “the American television news … bloodier and more graphic than ever before.” Even those who sit in the safety of their own homes are confronted with “images of war dead, bombings, napalm, [and] political assassinations” (Phillips 89).

Not only does Last House ratchet up the degree of violence in American horror cinema, but it also ratchets up the degree of cynicism. Norman Bates represents a significant degree of cynicism by introducing the idea that anyone could be evil, but the Collingwoods take this much
further. Their actions suggest that everyone can be evil and also that evil can endure. Even though the original monsters, the Krugs, are killed, the Collingwoods emerge as the more insidious monsters and their evil survives in the end. The Collingwoods, like many other horror movie survivors, “must come to terms not only with the irrationality of the situation but with their ability to be as single-mindedly destructive as the monster” (Pinedo 22).

_Last House_ ends with no real sense of justice, only a sinking feeling of devastation. Thus, the previous almost universal theme that evil will be defeated in the end, which endured all the way up through _Psycho_, finally meets its end in _Last House_. This tone is set from the very beginning of the film with the theme song’s key lyrics: “And the road leads to nowhere. And the castle stays the same.”

The Collingwoods also reflect a cynicism about the stability of the American family. This cynicism is shown through the familial comparison that reveals the Collingwoods to be no better than the Krugs. This pessimism is rooted in the significant transformation of what had been considered the normal American family. For ten years, the divorce rate in America has been climbing quickly, while at the same time the inversely proportionate birthrate is in a drastic decline. Both changes become even more severe throughout the 1970s until they peek in 1981 (U.S. Divorce Rate Falls to Lowest Level since 1970; Phillips 109). The traditional American household is disappearing. There are increasing numbers and types of nontraditional households: singles living alone, single parent households, blended households resulting from divorce and remarriage, and almost every other permutation imaginable. As a result, the stability of the American family structure seems to be collapsing. This is a major reason why horror movies post-_Psycho_ follow its lead in making the family the source of the monster.
Wes Craven further refined his ideas of the psychotic American family in his later film, *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) (Baca 71). The film depicts a supposedly normal American family driving to California in their recreational vehicle. While arguing with his family, the father crashes the vehicle in a desert and the family is stranded. As the sun sets, they soon realize that they are being hunted by a family of cannibals (Derry 167-168). The supposedly normal American family does not work well together. The father is not a good person. He is a racist and does not treat his wife with respect, which is shown by the way he blames her for the accident (Derry 168). The cannibalistic family, on the other hand, functions quite effectively as a team.

*The Hills*, like many films of its time, includes a narrative that “is propelled not only by the monster’s violence but by the protagonist’s” (Pinedo 22-23). *The Hills* ends similarly to *Last House*, with the brutal stabbing of one of the cannibals, thus showing that the supposedly normal family has sunk to the level of the original monstrous family (Derry 168). Craven has once again made important points about the American family and the pervasiveness of evil.

**Leatherface and Family**

Tobe Hooper’s infamous *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is about a group of five teenagers, Sally, her brother Franklin, and her friends Jerry, Kirk, and Pam, who are traveling in a van through rural Texas. They are on a voyage to visit Sally and Franklin’s grandfather’s house. Along the way, they stop at a gas station and pick up a hitchhiker. Eventually the hitchhiker violently lashes out at Franklin, so they kick the dangerous stranger out of the van.

When the teenagers reach the grandfather’s house, they discover it is empty. After exploring the area a bit, all five teenagers eventually end up in a nearby house that belongs to the Leatherface family, a clan of psychotic cannibals. The Leatherface family consists of four people: Leatherface himself, who is wearing a mask made of human skin; his brother, who was
the hitchhiker; their father, who is the gas station attendant; and their grandfather. Four of the five teenagers are brutality killed by the Leatherface family. Only Sally barely escapes.

While the Krug family varies by level of sympathy, the Leatherface family varies by appearance. The hitchhiker and grandfather are quasi-throwbacks to earlier monsters. The hitchhiker is extremely ugly, and his strange mannerisms reveal his insanity to such an extent that the protagonists quickly become uncomfortable. The grandfather appears to be a lifeless corpse. He barely looks human and hardly moves at all, more like the monsters of the 1950s. On the other hand, the father is fairly normal looking. Though unattractive, he is not grotesquely ugly and could easily blend in with society like any of the psychopathic monsters of the 1960s.

Leatherface, however, is something entirely new. He is a giant man carrying a chainsaw and wearing a mask made of human skin. He is definitely human, but his size and attire set him apart.

Because of his appearance, Leatherface does not incite much sympathy from viewers. He is dehumanized largely because of his mask. He has no visible emotions and never speaks, and the story provides neither explanation nor context for his insanity (Pinedo 23). Unlike with Norman Bates, there is nothing about Leatherface that evokes a sympathetic reaction.

Leatherface is, however, humanized to a degree through his family relationships and interactions. He lives with a brother, father, and grandfather. He interacts in familiar ways with his family as they prepare dinner, and he and his brother and father attempt to help their grandfather kill Sally (Horror Films of the 1970s 338). The Leatherface family works together to accomplish goals, even if some of them are morally abhorrent.

*Texas Chainsaw* further increases the levels of violence and cynicism in American horror films. Both are evident in the brutal but nonchalant way that Leatherface treats his victims. To Leatherface, human beings are nothing but meat to be carved up. In this sense, “Leatherface and
his family see no difference between Sally, a rabbit, or a cow. To him, they’re all merely ingredients” (Horror Films of the 1970s 337). This, in a way, marks a turning point in American horror—a time when human victims stop being human and are reduced to the status of mere meat. This is a theme that will be repeated again and again (Carroll 211).

*Texas Chainsaw* also deepens the cynicism about evil that began in the 1960s. In *Psycho*, Norman is brought to justice, but the fear that anyone could be insane lingers. In *Last House*, the Krugs are killed, but that does nothing to assuage the Collingwoods’ grief over their daughter’s death, and they themselves are not brought to justice. In *Texas Chainsaw*, nothing is resolved. No members of the Leatherface family are killed; they are simply left behind in the dust. Though Sally manages to escape, she is left hysterical and traumatized, and there is the distinct possibility that she will soon die because Leatherface and his family are still out there. At the end, Leatherface himself is still standing in the middle of the road, swinging his chainsaw. The menace remains, and no one is safe. As with many films to come, the villain cannot be defeated, and no one is able “to overcome the irrational, chaotic forces of disruption” (Pinedo 22).

Interestingly, the Leatherface family, like Norman Bates, is based on the character of Ed Gein. Hooper grew up hearing tales of Gein and decided to incorporate those childhood recollections into the villains of *Texas Chainsaw* (Schecter 237-238; Phillips 102). The major difference is that *Texas Chainsaw* is able to depict the more gruesome aspects of the Gein case that would have violated the Production Code, which was still in force for *Psycho*, and would have been unacceptable to film audiences of 1960.

As in *Psycho*, some parts of the *Texas Chainsaw* story are based on myth and some on fact. For example, the Leatherface family is cannibalistic, which is based on the rumor that Gein was a cannibal, even though he claimed not to be and there was never any proof that he was
In addition, Baca notes that “there are no female members [of the Leatherface family] alive. The only one present in the house is a mummified woman.” This is based on the rumor that Gein kept his mother’s corpse in his house (72).

Other aspects of the Leatherface family are based on facts about Gein’s life. First, both Gein and the hitchhiker were grave robbers (Schechter 97, Horror Films of the 1970s 333). Second, both Gein and the Leatherface family lived in utter squalor, surrounded by a vast amount of human scraps. Third, both Gein and the Leatherface family used their human scraps to fashion a variety of every-day objects such as utensils, decorations, and furnishings. Fourth, both Gein and Leatherface wore masks of human skin (Schechter 78-81, 124).

*Texas Chainsaw* has a major impact on American horror cinema. The masks worn by Leatherface are highly influential, spawning a major cycle of masked or otherwise dehumanized-human monsters, as seen in films such as *Halloween* (1978). Even the most recent slasher films, such as *The Collection* (2012), feature a giant, masked killer, just like Leatherface.

*Texas Chainsaw* also continues the trend of criticizing the American family that began with *Psycho*. To this day, the American family continues to transform, and there is virtually no possibility that the “ideal” pre-Psycho family can endure. Although the divorce rate has lowered since the 1970s, it remains high, and household stability seems to continue to deteriorate (U.S. Divorce Rate Falls to Lowest Level since 1970). This is one key reason why movies like *Psycho* and *Texas Chainsaw* continue to be remade again and again. It also explains why family instability continues to be reflected in more recent movies such as Rob Zombie’s *House of 1000 Corpses* (2003) and *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005).
3. Later Incarnations

Thus far, this paper has shown that the American horror genre undergoes drastic changes beginning in 1960 and continuing into the 1970s. These changes reflect major upheavals in American society as well as new developments in the film industry. The most significant change is the transition from traditional beastly monsters to human monsters. As discussed in the previous chapter, five key traits differentiate human monsters from traditional monsters: a normal appearance; a higher level of sympathy accomplished through character development; viewer identification achieved through cinematic technique; an increased level of violence; and an increasingly cynical outlook on evil.

The human monster and most of these five attributes remain prevalent in American horror cinema well after the 1970s and continue to evolve in the coming decades to reflect new societal fears and industry changes. Sympathy for the monster wanes during the 1980s and 1990s, but resurfaces in the 2000s. Viewer identification with the monster becomes even more common in the 1980s and continues thereafter. Finally, increasing violence and cynicism also continue as trends and, in fact, accelerate from the late 1970s through to 2010.

This chapter examines the most recent incarnations of the human monster. The stalker becomes popular in the late 1970s and remains popular into the mid-1990s, but finally loses its momentum toward the end of the millennium. Then for a brief period, the human monster seems to disappear, but he returns in the form of the torturer in the mid-2000s.

The Stalker

In the 1980s, American horror cinema reaches one of its most profitable and successful phases (Horror Films of the 1980s 6; Maddrey 81; Wyrick 122). Through the previous two decades, “the modern horror film became both increasingly popular and well-defined, more and more
separated from its sister-genre and predecessor, the psychological thriller” (Wyrick 122). These films are so successful that “production spiked by as much as one-third … and the genre asserted itself as consistent juggernaut in box office competitions” (Horror Films of the 1980s 6). With this success comes an important new development: “the popularization and proliferation of franchises.” Franchises become so popular that “every minor cinematic success had to produce a sequel” (Horror Films of the 1980s 13-14).

By this time, “adult-oriented horror” had essentially run its course. In the late 1970s, filmmakers realize that “youth [is] … the engine driving the American movie business,” and begin successfully marketing to teenagers, specifically young females (Nowell 121, 128). The “prime audience for early teen slashers was youth, which encompassed twelve-to twenty-nine-year-olds of both sexes.” Filmmakers appealed to this target audience by using protagonists in the same age range (Nowell 120). They specifically appealed to young women by highlighting the “portrayals of female bonding” in films such as Halloween (1978) and presenting “a tough heroine and some romance” in films such as Friday the 13th (1980) (Nowell 129, 130).

Visually, these films are gorier than ever because of “the latest advances in special effects prosthetics” (Horror Films of the 1980s 11). These improvements allow independent filmmakers to make “more concerted efforts to push the envelope on screen violence” (Maddrey 81). Violence, however, took on a new goal during this time: “instead of violence meant to force the viewer to look away, violence became the excuse for elaborate special effects—effects that may have been intended to disgust, but were just as much intended to fascinate” (Wyrick 122). Aside from being graphically brutal, these films frequently paid homage to Psycho by using first-person camera angles to make the film viewer identify with the killer.
At the beginning of this age of success, a new sub-breed of human monster, the stalker, is born with a unique combination of traits. Perhaps most notably, stalkers are more aggressively proactive than their predecessors. From Norman Bates to the cannibal clan in *The Hills Have Eyes*, previous monsters are mostly opportunistic and content to wait for victims to come to them. This changes radically with the new stalker monster, who relentlessly tracks down his chosen victims.

*Halloween* (1978), though made before 1980, is the best example of a 1980s stalker film because it inspired all of the others. This is the first film to depict the stalker monster. *Friday the 13th* (1980) also serves as a fantastic example because it employs some of the newest special effects of the time. Furthermore, both films use a significant amount of first-person camera angles, have female protagonists, and gave birth to major long-lived horror franchises.

Unfortunately, the most successful era of American horror cinema eventually runs its course. As John Kenneth Muir explains it, “the 1980s horror explosion resulted in a 1990s horror contraction” (*Horror Films of the 1980s* 15). Throughout the entire coming decade, filmmakers would struggle to make a profitable and popular new type of horror movie. Laura Wyrick notes that “these films were the culmination of an exhausted genre, a horror genre worn out by relentless sequels that pandered to an audience whose tastes were clearly changing” (124).

In the 1990s, horror movies are no longer what they used to be. Studios now had larger budgets and better casts, but the bigger budgets often result in “excessive creative compromise” and the films being “much more generic” (*Horror Films of the 1990s* 10, 12). In order to draw in the largest audience possible, horror films of this time “could not afford even to be known, simply, as a horror film” (*Horror Films of the 1990s* 10). Instead, filmmakers chose to mash
genres together, leaving it unclear whether any of these films are actually horror movies (*Horror Films of the 1990s* 11).

Competition from television shows is also a major issue for horror filmmakers of the 1990s (Jancovich 7; *Horror Films of the 1990s* 13). *The X Files* (1993) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) provide much more interesting stories and attract more attention than many of the horror films of that time (Jancovich 7).

Aesthetically, horror films of the 1990s become much prettier. Computer-generated imagery “ushered in a brave new world of special effects” (*Horror Films of the 1990s* 3, 12). In contrast to the excessive special effects make up and props previously used to create blood and gore, computer-generated violence is much cleaner and more sterile-looking. At the same time, films displayed “increasingly realistic, naturalistic settings.” (*Horror Films of the 1990s* 9). With the more realistic settings and computer generated graphics being used to make gore look more convincing, horror films of the 1990s feel more real.

One of the most successful horror films of the decade was *Scream* (1996), which stands as the best example of a 1990s horror film for many reasons (Jancovich 7). First, its cast boasts three popular actors of the time: Drew Barrymore, Neve Campbell, and Courtney Cox. Second, it is directed by Wes Craven, already well-known for directing such classics as *The Last House on the Left*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Third, the film is a mash-up, including both horrific and comedic elements. Fourth, the film’s title is simple. Fifth, the setting is realistic and familiar, while the violence is very sterile compared to the 1980s stalker films.

**Michael Meyers**

The plot of *Halloween* is simple. In the beginning, the young Michael Myers murders his older sister on Halloween. Myers is convicted and confined to a distant mental institution, but when he
is twenty-one, he escapes and returns to his hometown. On Halloween night, while wearing a frightening mask, he stalks and terrorizes three teenage girlfriends, Laurie, Lynda, and Annie. Two die brutally, but Laurie manages to escape.

Michael’s appearance and mannerisms are striking. He always wears a full facemask and moves in a deliberate mechanical manner. Michael’s mask, though simple, is surprisingly scary. Inspired by Leatherface’s skin mask, Michael’s mask is also completely dehumanizing. Though Michael’s grunting and breathing noises sometimes make him sound like a normal, living human, his ever-present mask and robotic motion transform him into an inhuman, punishing force. There is, therefore, no way to sympathize with Michael. He has no backstory other than the opening scene, and he shows no emotion.

Even though he represents a new sub-breed of the human monster, Michael continues the trend of viewer identification that originated with Norman Bates. There are several scenes in Halloween that are presented from Michael’s point of view. The first is during the horrifying opening sequence, when the viewer watches through Michael’s eyes as he murders his sister. Later, the viewer sees from Michael’s perspective as he observes his victims through the windows of their school and homes. To augment this affect, the viewer sometimes hears Michael’s breathing, almost as if they are inside the mask with him. This focus on Michael’s vantage point makes him as central a character as the heroine, Laurie.

Michael also embodies the increasing cynicism that is so prominent in human monster movies and, in fact, raises that cynicism to a new level. At the end of Halloween, Michael is shot six times and falls off a second floor balcony to the ground below, where he lies motionless and seemingly dead. Both the characters in the movie and the viewers of the movie justifiably believe that Michael is dead. All soon discover, however, that he is gone. The viewer then sees from
Michael’s perspective and hears him breathing one last time. This is very similar to the ending of *Texas Chainsaw*, but *Halloween* extends the cynical message to its ultimate conclusion.

This discomforting closing message of the film is that Michael is immortal. He cannot be stopped. He is still out there and, therefore, still a threat. In this way, *Halloween* resurrects the centuries-old legend of the bogeyman, a mythical monster who frightens and punishes misbehaving children. This is a warning to teenagers of the time that the bogeyman, in the form of Michael Myers, will get them if they continue to misbehave, and there is nothing they can do about it. Thus, the long-standing theme that evil will be defeated in the end, which took a hit in the 1970s with movies ending in an ambiguous or unsatisfying manner, is completely turned on its head by *Halloween*. The new message is that evil is eternal and can never be defeated. It would be difficult to be more cynical than that.

Another significant aspect of *Halloween* is the nature of Michael’s relationship with the community he terrorizes. The stalker typically “rises from the community itself and comes into conflict with the members of that community.” As a boy, Michael lives in a normal, Midwestern suburban community. After he kills his sister, he is removed from and ostracized by this community. Like many stalkers to come, Michael later returns to the community that betrayed him and seeks revenge. He and his ilk, therefore, represent “a struggle of interior forces, of opposing attitudes” existing within American culture (Dika 99).

Although Leatherface was a clear influence on Michael, it is Michael who firmly launches the very influential trend of a serial killer wearing a mask while stalking and murdering his victims. These masks always play the same role of dehumanizing the killer (Dika 88). Numerous films follow in the footsteps of *Halloween* by portraying the new stalker monster. Examples are *Prom Night* (1979), *Terror Train* (1979), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *My Bloody

Pamela Voorhees

Friday the 13th has virtually the same plot as Halloween, but it is implemented in a very different way. Camp Crystal Lake is being prepared for its grand re-opening. The young, co-ed camp counselors have already arrived at the campsite, and on Friday the 13th an anonymous killer stalks and terrorizes them.

The killer, Pamela Voorhees, is presented differently than any previous monster. She is not seen throughout the majority of the film. For most of the film, viewers experience Pamela only by seeing from her perspective. Interestingly, in the end, she turns out to be a harmless looking middle-aged woman, although she is obviously far from harmless.

This manner of presenting Pamela makes her quite unsympathetic until late in the film. She is completely dehumanized throughout most of the movie, leaving the first-time viewer to wonder who or what she is. However, when Pamela and her dramatic backstory are finally revealed, she suddenly becomes exceedingly visible and emotional and, most importantly, extremely human. She then becomes a very sympathetic character.

Like Michael Meyers, Pamela returns to her community to seek revenge for something that happened years earlier. For Pamela, the motive is as wrenching as they get. Her son, Jason, drowned in Crystal Lake because of negligent camp counselors. The camp was then closed for many years. The film begins with the camp reopening and Pamela returning on Jason’s birthday to seek vengeance against a new generation of camp counselors.

During the final chase sequence, Pamela’s disturbed mental state fully emerges. She begins speaking for her dead son, saying in a childlike voice, “Kill her, Mommy. Kill her. Don’t
let her get away, Mommy. Don’t let her live!” Thus, even though Pamela spends most of the movie as a dehumanized stalker, she is ultimately revealed to be a Norman-Bates-like psychopath, albeit via a marvelous role reversal. In Psycho, the son assumes his dead mother’s persona; in Friday the 13th, the mother assumes her dead son’s.

This theme of revenge becomes a continuing trend in stalker movies. This is likely attributable to America’s overall weakened and frustrated state during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The defeat in the Vietnam War, the Watergate crisis leading to President Richard Nixon’s impeachment and resignation, the severe energy crisis of 1979, the Iranian Hostage Crisis, and the assassination of John Lennon are only a few of the major events that contribute to widespread feelings of disillusionment and futility. Perhaps many Americans at that time feel that the perceived excesses of the 1960s have come back to haunt them. Thus, it makes sense that, in the stalker films of that era, “the killer comes out of the past and continues his vengeance against those guilty of wrongful actions” (Dika 98).

Considering the revenge theme, the extreme dehumanization of the monster, and the many camera angles from the monster’s perspective, Friday the 13th has much in common with Halloween. The viewer is again forced to identify with the killer in many scenes. For example, when Pamela murders two teenagers at the beginning of the movie, the viewer sees entirely from her point of view, just as in the opening scene of Halloween. Throughout the rest of Friday the 13th, the viewer frequently sees from Pamela’s perspective. In addition, there are many exterior shots that give the viewer the sense that they are spying on the camp counselors with Pamela. These shots provide “the necessary feelings of voyeurism and peeping” and foster identification with the monster (Horror Films of the 1980s 98).
Pamela, however, is much more violent than Michael Meyers. Michael seemed to prefer to strangle and stab his victims, but Pamela is more vicious. She prefers to slit throats and drive axes into the heads of her victims. At one point, she hides beneath a camp counselor’s bed and thrusts an arrow up through the mattress and into his throat.

Although Pamela is more violent than Michael, their stories share the common theme of cynicism. At the end of *Friday the 13th*, the heroine, Alice Hardy, decapitates Pamela, which is an excellent misdirection because the first-time viewer naturally but mistakenly assumes that good has prevailed over evil. Alice then gets in a canoe and slowly drifts out over Crystal Lake, believing she is safe. Just as the police arrive, Jason springs out of the lake and pulls Alice into the water. Alice later awakens in a hospital bed and asks about the boy in the water. No one remembers seeing him pull her out of the canoe. In the end, it is not Pamela but her son Jason who is still out there, haunting Camp Crystal Lake as yet another immortal masked monster—another bogeyman. It is no wonder that Leatherface, Michael, and Jason all return many times in sequels and remakes. They represent three of the most notorious franchises in horror film history.

The stalker trend continued until the late 1990s with films such as *Scream* (1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), and *Urban Legend* (1998). These films followed the same pattern of having a masked, costumed, or otherwise dehumanized killer stalking a group of teenagers or young adults.

**Billy and Stu**

Compared to *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, *Scream* has a more complicated plot. In the opening scene, a teenage girl and her boyfriend are brutally killed by a man in a costume. These victims attended the same high school as the main character, Sidney, who hears about the horrible murders. Sidney too is eventually terrorized by the killer, but manages to elude him. School is
suspended after the masked killer stabs the principal to death, and that night, Sidney’s friend, Stu, decides to throw a party. At this party, the killer claims a few more victims. At the conclusion of the story, it is revealed that there were actually two costumed killers working together: Sidney’s boyfriend, Billy, and her friend, Stu.

Billy and Stu wear the same exact costume throughout the movie to create the illusion that there is only one killer. Their masks are white and look like the face of a cartoon ghost. The rest of their costume includes a simple black cloak, black gloves, and shoes. These costumes have the same effect as the masks worn by Billy and Stu’s predecessors—they dehumanize them. Billy and Stu remain dehumanized until the movie’s conclusion, when they are finally seen unmasked as they discuss their reasons for killing people. In this way, *Scream* borrows the central plot device of *Friday the 13th*.

Billy’s backstory eventually makes him a somewhat sympathetic character. Sidney’s mother destroyed Billy’s family, so he sought to destroy hers. Stu, however, never provides a clear motive for joining in Billy’s killing spree, so he initially presents as very unsympathetic. The broader story of *Scream*, however, provides a cultural backstory that arguably makes both killers more sympathetic because they are portrayed as victims of a larger societal problem.

Although Billy and Stu are in the role of stalkers and slashers, the news and entertainment industry is ultimately revealed as the true monster of *Scream*, reflecting current societal concerns that American life was becoming overly saturated by media. The story clearly implies that the news and film media are at fault for bombarding the two teenage boys and their friends with constant images of bloodshed and horror. The news media are depicted as exceedingly focused on horrific incidents, and the main characters are portrayed as relentlessly preoccupied with horror films and violence. This media-as-monster idea is personified in the
character of an unethical reporter whose only motives are to increase ratings and make more money. *Scream* goes on to demonstrate how “intense, consistent exposure to tabloid television, movies and even music videos” causes kids to be desensitized, callous, jaded, and cynical (Phillips 175; *Horror Films of the 1990s* 470).

Naturally, Billy and Stu are much more violent than their predecessors, having watched, studied, and obsessed over most of the previously discussed films. Pamela Voorhees may have been vicious by 1980 standards, but the monsters of 1996 make her seem timid when they disembowel their victims in the opening scene of *Scream*. Later in the film, one of Sidney’s friends is brutally crushed by a garage door.

Although the degree of violence has risen again, the level of cynicism can only be maintained at the same ultimate level reached in *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*. Just like Pamela Voorhees, Billy and Stu are killed, but evil nevertheless endures. In *Friday the 13th*, that idea is represented by the resurrection of Jason. In *Scream*, it takes a new turn, using the broader societal issues raised by the film. *Scream* ends with a vast array of cameramen and news reporters at the crime scene, inundating the public with images and reports of the gruesome killings. In the immortal words of Mr. Collingwood: “Same old stuff—murder and mayhem.” Thus, the real source of evil lives on. Media saturation will continue and will produce more monsters like Billy and Stu.

*Scream* launched yet another horror film franchise. Its enormous popularity did have some influence on subsequent horror films such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and *Urban Legend* (1998). The overall popularity of slasher films, however, faded quickly after the release of *Scream*, as fears of the new millennium began replacing fears of the media and calloused youth.
The Torturer

The torturer is the next strain of human monster to appear in American horror cinema, but not until the early 2000s. After the stalker craze ends in the mid-1990s, American horror cinema goes through a brief period of about five years without the human monster.

In the early 2000s, horror films make yet another comeback. This resurgence is fueled by filmmakers’ ability to perfect what they first attempted in the 1990s. In order to increase the audience for horror films, studios continue to blend genres by combining horror movies with fantasy and action-adventure. Studios also begin making “quiet horror films” such as The Sixth Sense (1999) and The Others (2001), both of which are ghost tales (Hantke xxi).

The Sixth Sense and The Others share two major attributes. First, they both show an inherent confusion. Each has ghost characters who are not aware that they are ghosts. In The Sixth Sense, the ghost’s lack of awareness leads him to doubt the existence of ghosts. In The Others, it leads the ghosts to fear the living characters. Second, both films lack any horrible monster. There are threatening entities, but they turn out not be evil once the main characters learn to understand and interact with them.

Through these shared attributes, both films present the same underlying message of uncertainty. There is real fear but no clear objects of that fear. It is almost as if both films are saying, “I’m not really sure what I’m afraid of.” This is a reflection of the amorphous angst Americans feel at the turn of the millennium. As Phillips explains:

For many Americans 1999 represented more than just a change in the calendar. It represented a final moment, an end of what had been known, and the beginning of an unknown era. The twenty-
first century had long stood as a mysterious age of the ‘future,’ and as America prepared to enter it, anxieties were high. (181)

Anxiety about the new millennium dissipates quickly after September 11, 2001, when Americans acquire an obvious new fear of terrorism and an active debate about torture ensues. Thus, it is no surprise that the torturer enters American horror cinema in 2002. Given that the torturer is the most violent and brutal of the human monsters, his time is short-lived (Davis and Natale 48). During the 2000s, it became clear that the less gore in a horror film, the more money it will make and the more successful it will be (Davis and Natale 46). Even though the torturer films are less popular and profitable than the quiet horror films, they nevertheless reflect important developments in American horror cinema and American culture.

Aesthetically, the torturer movies present gore in a new way. Throughout the decade, there is an increase in passive gore, which is “imagery stemming from the consequence of acts of violence that have already occurred” (Davis and Natale 44). While depictions of corpses, severed body parts, and blood splatters are on the rise, the amount of “active on-screen acts of gory violence” do not increase (Davis and Natale 44). In previous decades, passive gore is used “as a means of punctuating a given scene before moving on to a new one.” In the 2000s, filmmakers begin using passive gore “as a compositional element of the scene” (Davis and Natale 45). Meanwhile, computer-generated imagery also improves during this decade, making the gore look even more realistic (Davis and Natale 51).

*Feardotcom* (2002) serves as the best example of a transitional film. It has three monsters with three totally different origins: supernatural, technological, and human. Although the film has difficulty juggling all three monsters, the human may be considered the first torturer. In this way, *Feardotcom* is before its time because it falls squarely in between the release of *The Others*
(2001) and The Ring (2002), two movies that present entirely supernatural threats and no torturers. Amidst these supernatural horror thrillers, Feardotcom is able to stand out despite its flaws and to usher in the era of the torturer.

Hostel (2005) is an interesting example of a torturer film of the 2000s for a number of reasons. First, it shows a blending of genres because the first three quarters of the movie are relatively silly and have no elements of a horror film. Second, while there is some active gore in Hostel, there is much more passive gore being used compositionally. Third, the graphic brutality is very realistic, to the extent that it may be tough for most viewers to watch.

**Ghost Girl, Alistair Pratt, or the Internet?**

The plot of Feardotcom is convoluted. The film attempts to pull together so many different themes that it becomes tiresome and difficult to watch. At its most basic level, the film is about a dangerous website. Anyone who looks at it will die in forty-eight hours and their death is always related to their worst nightmare. Eventually, the people attempting to solve the case must view the website, risking their lives in order to save potential victims.

Feardotcom maintains the supernatural uncertainty of the other horror films of its time. The website’s visitors end up mysteriously dying, but before they pass, they always see an odd, ghostly girl playing with a large, inflatable, white ball. Though the police initially believe that a virus is killing people, the audience knows from the beginning that the deaths are somehow linked to this ghost girl and are, therefore, supernatural in nature.

The film does break away from previous trends by introducing a new type of monster. Alistair Pratt, one of the villains of the film, is a serial killer who tortures women on camera for online viewers to watch. There are many scenes of Pratt torturing women for the pleasure of anonymous, online viewers. Though Pratt does not play an important role in the film until the
end, he is more broadly significant because he embodies a new sub-breed of the human monster: the torturer.

The torturer first appears in 2002 for obvious reasons. A full-blown war on terror had erupted after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Terrorists are real life monsters who terrify, torture, and murder innocent victims, and they are very difficult to apprehend and defeat. In this scary environment, more and more people want to fight fire with fire by torturing the torturers. The basic argument is that using torture could potentially save many lives. This notion, that torture could be justified and considered ethical, struck fear into the hearts of many Americans. The morality of “enhanced interrogation techniques” was being heavily debated, and torture was becoming a “fashionable topic” (Humphries 69-70) Feardotcom and the ensuing torturer movies “rose to prominence as torture rose to prominence within our media and national debates” (Wetmore 97).

Feardotcom, however, expresses an uncertainty of the sort presented in The Sixth Sense and The Others. There are many things to fear, but no definitive source. The film may be characterized as just another supernatural horror movie with the ghostly girl being the primary monster and the biggest concern being a fear of the unknown. An alternative interpretation, however, is that technology and especially the Internet are the monsters because they facilitate live torture to be streamed and viewed instantaneously. Finally, the film may be viewed as presenting the fear of torture emerging in American society, with the torturer as the main villain. If the underlying message of The Sixth Sense is, “I’m not really sure what I’m afraid of,” then the underlying message of Feardotcom is, “I’m not sure what I’m afraid of, but I think I know.”
By 2005, the torturer cycle is in full swing after the extraordinary success of *SAW* (2004). Many films follow in the footsteps of *SAW*, including its own sequels that are released each year until 2010. Before and after the release of *SAW: The Final Chapter* (2010), many other torturer movies and series become popular, including the *Hostel* series. While the *SAW* series is brilliant in its own unique way, the *Hostel* series is able to use *SAW*'s brutality in a more politically and culturally relevant context.

*Hostel* is about two American college students, Paxton and Josh, who are backpacking through Europe with their Icelandic friend, Oli. They begin in Amsterdam, where they have a bad experience. They soon head to Slovakia on the recommendation of a man they meet in Amsterdam. After a night in Slovakia, Paxton realizes that his friends are disappearing. In a horrifying revelation, he learns that they have been abducted by a group called Elite Hunting. Josh and Oli have been taken to a facility where they are sold and then subjected to torture by European men. Paxton is soon captured and put in the very same situation.

The monsters of *Hostel* are not unemotional stalkers like Michael Myers. They are much more like Norman Bates—psychopaths with backstories and ordinary appearances. Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of the torturer is that he is frequently very humanized. He is usually a character with whom the film viewer can sympathize. This is because the torturer has the strange tendency of baring his soul to his victim before the torture begins.

For example, the Dutch businessman in *Hostel*, who tortures Josh to death, tells him beforehand:

I always wanted to be a surgeon. But the boards would not pass me. Can you guess why? … So I went into business, but business
is so boring. You buy things. You sell them. You make money.

You spend money. What kind of life is that? A surgeon—he holds
the very essence of life in his hands—your life. He touches it. He
touches it, he has a relationship with it, he is part of it.

From this and other interactions between the main characters and the Dutch businessman, he
becomes a very real and believable character. He is not simply a dehumanized, masked maniac
with a knife.

One reason the torturer is so terrifying is that he commits far more horrific and graphic
acts of brutality than other types of human monsters. This extra degree of violence captures two
fears that are central to the whole subgenre. First, there is the direct fear of being tortured
(Wetmore 105). Second, there is the indirect fear of seeing people one cares about be tortured.
For instance, when Paxton is first captured, he is dragged down a hallway in the facility where he
is forced to see various scenes of torture and hear the screams of others. After Paxton escapes, he
endures this again and soon comes face-to-face with Josh’s corpse.

The torturers in Hostel, however, not only embody these two fears, they also continue the
broader horror film tradition of reflecting significant societal concerns of the time. Kevin J.
Wetmore notes that “the torture provided by Elite Hunting visually suggests Abu Ghraib.”
Wetmore goes on to compare the real torture to the on-screen torture: “A former [Abu Ghraib]
prisoner recounts the use of restraints, a bag over head, being kept naked and receiving physical
beatings,” while “in Hostel, the young men are restrained, tied to chairs, bags are placed over
their heads. They are kept naked and subjected to beatings and physical abuse” (106). It is clear
that in Hostel, there is not just a conceptual fear of torture, but a fear of a very degrading type of
torture that has actually happened.
The torturers from Elite Hunting provide the most extreme amount of cynicism seen so far. In *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, it is possible that Leatherface will find a way to continue to pursue Sally. In the stalker films, the leading female is never truly free because “the threat against her continues” (Dika 95). Michael Myers will definitely continue to terrorize Laurie, but Laurie may continue to find ways to evade him. In Paxton’s case, there is an absolute guarantee that he will not survive, even though he manages to leave Elite Hunting’s facility and board a train. It is clearly implied several times that Elite Hunting has connections in many places, including law enforcement. Thus, the film ends without even a remote sense that Paxton is safe. Elite Hunting will eventually find him and make sure to finish what they started. Michael Myers served as a warning to misbehaving teenagers. Elite Hunting serves as a warning to Americans. The final message of *Hostel* is that Elite Hunting will get them if Americans continue to act ignorantly and unethically.

The torturer monsters in *Hostel* are particularly noteworthy because they are used to criticize Americans. The fact that the torturers are foreign and the victims American is no coincidence. The film is specifically calling out Americans for their ignorance and hypocrisy. For example, before Paxton and Josh are abducted, they continually cause trouble. In Amsterdam they start a fight in a club and when they are removed, they refuse to leave quietly, specifically announcing that they are American. Later, they are locked out of their hostel because they missed the curfew. When they ask to be admitted, their request is denied, and they begin to act obnoxiously, yelling loudly. As a result, people in the nearby homes bombard them with glass objects. Once in Slovakia, Paxton shows that he thinks the world revolves around him and his American friends. He watches a film on the television in the lobby of the hostel and comments: “How the hell are we supposed to understand this without subtitles? Fucking gay.”
The foreign torturer monster is used as a way of expressing that the rest of the world hates Americans for this type of ignorant behavior. Even the man in the film who says, “not everyone wants to kill Americans,” is the one who ultimately leads Josh and Oli to their deaths. Later, when Paxton is about to be tortured, a man tells him to talk.

“What the fuck do you want me to say?” Paxton asks.

“American,” the man immediately responds.

“No. No. No, wait! I’m not fucking American! … Look at me! I’m not fucking American!” Paxton shouts back

But it is too late. It becomes clear that Paxton will be tortured because he is American. As Wetmore explains, “in the Hostel films, one is tortured because one is an American. Wealthy businessmen and women from around the world come to Eastern Europe in order to torture young people to death, and Americans are the most sought after” (99).

Because of this harsh, though somewhat truthful, depiction of Americans, Hostel started a trend within the torturer subgenre. Many films begin depicting foreign torturers wanting to kill Americans. It became fairly common in torturer movies for ignorant, young Americans to travel abroad and find themselves in situations where they are “tortured and exploited for a variety of reasons.” This trend continues in Turitas (2006), The Ruins (2008), and The Last Resort (2009). The point always seems to be “that if foreigners could get their hands on Americans they would do far, far worse than we have done to them” (Wetmore 109).

4. Conclusion

Horror movie monsters embody society’s worst fears. In American horror cinema, the early monsters are beasts and creatures reflecting fears of science and foreigners. Then come aliens
and mutations symbolizing fears of space invasion, war, communism, and radiation. In these early films, evil is always ugly and strange, and it is always defeated in the end.

In 1960, the genre’s single most drastic change arrives in the person of Norman Bates of *Psycho*. The human monster swiftly becomes the dominant force in horror and remains so for over fifty years. Although the human monster continually transforms, from the solitary psychotic and cannibalistic clan to the merciless stalker and terrifying torturer, he remains immensely popular as he continues to mirror major societal concerns. Human monster movies reflect the violence and chaos of the 1960s and early 1970s, the frustration and disillusionment of the late 1970s and 1980s, the unsettling uncertainties of facing the end of a millennium, and the war on terrorism of the 2000s. For five decades, these films consistently echo America’s greatest fears.

The longevity of the human monster is partly due to the ability of the audience to sympathize and identify with him. The human monster is often presented as normal in appearance and demeanor, and sometimes has a compelling backstory that explains why he became a monster. Evil is no longer consistently ugly, at least not on the outside. In addition, cinematic technique frequently enables the viewer to see and hear from the monster’s viewpoint. Evil is also no longer consistently distant and foreign.

Throughout the reign of the human monster, the levels of violence and cynicism reflected in his movies climb. Increasing amounts of graphic violence appear on screen, enabled by changes in the film industry, technology, and rating systems. Cynical views of the appearance, scope, and duration of evil change dramatically: from “evil is always ugly” to “evil may look normal”; from “anyone may be evil” to “everyone may be evil”; and from “evil is always defeated” to “evil is immortal.”
The popularity of the human monster seems to diminish after the torturer cycle runs its course, sometime toward the end of 2012. One of the last torturers seen on screen is the Collector from *The Collection* (2012). Though this movie is humorously over-the-top with its gratuitous violence, it is sadly unoriginal. There is an undeniable similarity to the earlier *SAW* series. Thus, it seems that filmmakers have run out of ideas for the torturer, but more importantly, they have run out of ideas for the human monster in general.

In the first half of the 2010s, American horror cinema sees a rise in popularity of demons and hauntings in films such as *Insidious* (2010), *Sinister* (2012), *The Conjuring* (2013), and *Deliver us From Evil* (2014). These films represent a return to the supernatural horror movies of the late 1990s, but with the increased levels of blood and gore from the torturer films.

At this point, the current direction of American horror cinema is difficult to discern, and in fact it may lack a clear direction. Recent societal concerns include the financial crisis, unemployment, and political gridlock, all of which are difficult concepts to incorporate into the horror genre. It appears, however, that the human monster has been laid to rest, at least temporarily. However, if he is indeed immortal, he may be resurrected at any time.
Works Cited


Filmography


