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The Pessimism of Horror Cinema: A Comparative Study Between Modernist and Postmodernist Horror Cinema

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The Pessimism of Horror Cinema: A Comparative Study
Between Modernist and Postmodernist Horror Cinema

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
School of Mass Communications
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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 Background/Theoretical Framework.....	4
Chapter 3 Literature Review.....	7
Philosophical Overview.....	7
Modernism and Postmodernism Defined.....	10
Pessimism as a Recurrent Theme in Postmodernism.....	11
Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts.....	12
Levels of Fear Defined.....	14
General Traits of Horror Cinema.....	15
Pessimism in Modern and Postmodern Horror Cinema.....	16
Traits of Horror/Documentary Cinema.....	19
Chapter 4 Research Questions.....	22
Chapter 5 Methodology.....	23
Study Design.....	23
Method.....	23
Measures.....	24
Sample.....	25

Chapter 6 Analysis.....	27
Modern Horror Cinema.....	27
<i>Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror</i> (1922), <i>Dracula</i> (1931).....	27
<i>The Phantom of the Opera</i> (1925)	27
<i>Frankenstein</i> (1932).....	29
<i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> (1956)	30
<i>Psycho</i> (1960)	30
Cross-Over Horror Cinema.....	31
<i>Rosemary’s Baby</i> (1968).....	31
<i>Night of the Living Dead</i> (1968)	32
Postmodern Horror Cinema	34
<i>The Exorcist</i> (1973).....	34
<i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> (1974).....	36
<i>Halloween</i> (1978).....	38
<i>Friday the 13th</i> Series (1980-Present), <i>A Nightmare on Elm Street</i> Series (1984-2003)	39
<i>The Thing</i> (1982).....	40
<i>Saw</i> Series (2003-Present), <i>Hostel</i> (2005-2007).....	42
Postmodernist Horror/Documentary Cinema	42
<i>Cannibal Holocaust</i> (1982).....	43
<i>Hungry Bitches/2 Girls 1 Cup</i> (2006).....	44
Chapter 7 Conclusion.....	47
Bibliography	50

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Michael Jeknavorian

ABSTRACT

This qualitative thesis examines levels of pessimism as they relate to modern and postmodern horror cinema. Beyond assumed differences in levels of pessimism between the two genres, the study also examines implicit and explicit moralization of these categories. Specifically, the study questions if postmodern horror cinema's characteristic increase in pessimism is simply a change in the genre's convention, yet a change that is irrespective of either genre's capabilities to moralize. First, the study singularly examines the conventions of each genre as it relates to levels of pessimism. Second, the study discusses works that bridge the two genres. And third, the study speculates on the future of pessimism in postmodern horror cinema, specifically examining the genre's increased reliance on a combination of narrative and documentary techniques. In addition, this study uses content analysis as its methodological framework, whereby representative works of horror cinema (the data) are subjected to in-depth personal reading and textual analysis given the levels of pessimism between the two genres (the

coding) via text immersion. Nonetheless, this study should be viewed more as a guided and informed exploration of certain characteristics regarding the genres and less of a defense since the data will not be quantified.

Chapter 1

Introduction

What is the draw of horror cinema? Beyond the thrill, or whatever emotive response that's associated with watching them, is there any redeeming value to something that is essentially created to illicit fear from its audience? I can remember the first horror film that really got to me. Yes, I remember watching the classic horror films *Dracula* and *Psycho* with my parents, yet, it wasn't one of those films that was first to have a profound effect on me. It was a deceptively—what some might call—benign film that got to me. I was in seventh grade, and the English teacher showed the film for *The Tell-Tale Heart* as a supplement to the story we were reading in class. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something about the way the main character crept up on the “old man” in the film, and then when he saw the old man's eye staring at him before he killed him, is the thing that so disturbed me. Because of that single viewing, I had to sleep with both the light on in the bedroom and my face towards the bedroom door for at least a week, impatiently waiting for the film's memory to fade.

As illustrated with the aforementioned personal anecdote, it is horror cinema's tremendous power to affect that so interests me about it. Yet, are all genre's of horror cinema the same, or are there differences in tone, theme and levels of pessimism that are

conditional to certain eras—eras such as the modern and postmodern ones? Whatever the differences may or may not be between the genres, it is important to frame exactly what will be addressed in this thesis, as well as clear rationale for what won't. To begin, this qualitative study will not address what likely enabled the differences between modern and postmodern horror cinema (as an estimate, it is most likely a combination of the advent of the 16 millimeter news camera, with its newfound portability, in tandem with a focus on more explicit material—material that was made possible by the debut and subsequent proliferation of pornography). Nevertheless, the subject of what actually enabled the differences (particularly, the levels of pessimism) between these variables should be confined to the scope of another study.

It can also be said that this study will not address the reasons *why* there may be differences in levels of pessimism between the genres. On the surface, it appears as if speculated differences of levels of pessimism between modern and postmodern horror cinema would naturally examine why these hypothetical differences occur. However, a thorough examination of why there are differences between the two genres must include social and historical inspection on a grand scale. Therefore, an examination of what the perceived characteristics (looking at the both the similar and dis-similar) of both genres entail is a discussion that is centralized enough on its own. Inclusion of what enabled characteristics of both genres or why it happened would fragment the dialogue.

What this study will address is what the perceived difference of levels of pessimism likely consist of and how the differences are manifest in the genres. Specifically, the study will use content analysis, analyzing the explicit and implicit content of the text. The music and overt style of these selections will be deemphasized in favor of a deeper analysis regarding the mood, tone and overall objective of the works. As will be explained in the literature review, horror cinema from the modern era can be viewed as relatively optimistic considering the struggles its protagonists faced. Therefore, this study will specifically look at what the moralization (the lesson—both implicit and explicit) of horror cinema from both of these eras consists of, and, more pointedly, how levels of pessimism directly relate to each genre's moralization.

Chapter 2

Background/Theoretical Framework

As stated in the introduction, this study will look at changes in modern and postmodern horror cinema as they relate to levels of pessimism. An examination of all the characteristics between these two genres could prove endless, for each genre could in theory be coded as representation of both eras (the modern and postmodern) and therefore subject to examination of every platitude within that genre. As such, the study looks not just at the genre's fluctuation of pessimism, but exactly what these changes in pessimism mean. It is conventionally perceived within media studies that levels of pessimism increased with the advent of the postmodern era, yet how this change has affected horror cinema may not be as clear cut. This study, through deep content analysis, will look at what these different levels of pessimism reflect about the genre itself, as well as the culture that each genre is a product of.

The increasing level of pessimism is a trademark of postmodernist thinking. But, does an increase of pessimism indicate that postmodern horror cinema has abandoned implicit moralization that modern horror cinema can be seen to offer? Upon close inspection of both genres, the idea emerges that works from the postmodern era may in fact contain the

same type of moralization that modern horror cinema offers; however, the lessons in postmodern horror cinema are imbedded, and as such, are presented in a different manner.

Conversely, regarding culture, postmodern horror cinema's increase in pessimism could be perceived as dystopian; however, close inspection indicates that this also might not be the case. It's possible that postmodern horror cinema's increase in pessimism is superfluous to the genre's implicit moralization, and therefore, should be read more as a reflection of culture and style, and less as a decrease in the genre's ability to moralize. Therefore, it's also possible that both genres more or less make the same point; however, they do it in different fashions. This difference in levels of pessimism between the two genres, irrespective of moralization, is somewhat justified given that representative works from either genre operate within the confines of the era (modern and postmodern) that they're a product of.

Therefore, the fact that both genres represent different eras is reason that the content and theme of works reflective of these genres have changed. However, saying that there are different levels of pessimism between the two genres isn't offering much to the media studies scholarship (although a case could probably be made that a thorough exploration of levels of pessimism of these genres can help to further understanding of the medium and the audience). Suggesting that there might be an over-arching connection (that both genres moralize, irrespective of levels of pessimism) regarding pessimism of both

genres—one that might not be commonly perceived, is another matter. Therefore, in execution of this study's premise, several representative works from each genre will be analyzed.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

Philosophical Overview

The question of evil, and what purpose it serves, is a timeless one that many have examined. The ideas of Epicurus, the ancient Greek philosopher, are ones that come to mind. Epicurus theorized that god was either wicked for permitting evil in the world, or impotent if he couldn't stop it (Rist, 1972). That the horror cinema genre has historically devoted a large part of its resources to—if not an exploration of this theme, at least exposition pertaining to it—justifies an overview of the nature of evil in relation to the genre.

The first philosophical theory regarding evil (called theodicy) that is relevant to this study is that of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Leibniz pondered how evil could exist in a world that is essentially governed by a benevolent and omnipotent god. Leibniz rationalized about this inequity by speculating that if God chose this world above all other worlds, then this world must therefore be good. Furthermore, in Leibniz's view, evil is functional, in that evil serves as a type of counterpoint for higher virtues—for, how

would anyone know what bad is if they couldn't compare it to what is good (Manuel & Manuel, 1979)?

Another theodical theory (albeit possibly a less consoling one for some) is the idea that freewill could not exist without evil. This belief, called open theism, speculates that God, above all else, desires a true and loving relationship with mankind. Therefore, to facilitate this, freewill must reign supreme, for man must be free to make an active choice to either reject or accept God, otherwise, it wouldn't really be love. In conjunction with this freedom is the inevitability of man's bad choices (with the ultimate Western reference being Eve's betrayal in Eden) (Hartshorne, 1967). What is never explained with this theory, though, is why the full range of human emotions must include evil? It's possible that a counterpoint to good, as suggested by Hobbes, necessitated the creation of evil (Hobbes, Flathman & Johnston, 1997).

Conversely, Leibniz's rationalization of evil is contrasted in satirical fashion by Voltaire (A.K.A. Francois-Marie Arouet) in his landmark work of pessimism, *Candide*. To summarize the plot, the title character of the novella is methodically subjected to the evils of the world, to such a degree that he and his clan inevitably retreat to pastoral life at the story's conclusion. Endless debate has ensued about the significance of the ending—if the story's conclusion represents a newfound cynicism on Candide's part, or if his actions are representative of a new model of appropriate behavior. That said, the apocalyptic tone of the novella, coming off of the real-life heels of the catastrophic 1755 Lisbon

earthquake, is too pessimistic in tone to augment the potential moralization that is represented via the work's coda through use of the rural gardening motif (Voltaire, 1966).

Another take on pessimism and the nature of evil can be found by Arthur Schopenhauer, primarily in his work *The World as Will and Representation*. In the work, Schopenhauer views the world as a place where human desires are paramount to everything else.

Therefore, reason is an expendable luxury in relation to basic human desires—desires such as the need to procreate or to eat, and so on. The pessimism comes into play in that these human desires create endless conflict in the world, such that Schopenhauer felt that life was literally a war of all against all. Furthermore, the ironic twist of Schopenhauer's theory of desire is that mankind, despite being subject to these self-destructive drives, has also been cruelly endowed with reason enough to comprehend his own self-destructive tendencies (Schopenhauer, 1966).

Another form of pessimism can also be found with the birth of modern psychology, from one of its pioneers—Sigmund Freud. Freud, who was directly influenced by Schopenhauer's theory of desire and reason, also viewed mankind as constantly being in a perpetual state of conflict. But, whereas Schopenhauer illustrated the conflict between the two traits, Freud and his contemporaries began to examine, not just the validity of this theory of man in a perpetual state of discord, but what exactly was causing it. Freud theorized that the individual was at war from within, both from the force of his own nature alone, as well as from his relations with others. With this in mind, Freud almost

single-handedly created an entire body of language that examined his premise of man being not only in a constant state of war, but virtually at war with himself (Freud, 1938).

To complicate matters regarding the inner psyche, Freud also believed that all humans were driven by two conflicting desires. These desires were the libido and the thanatos (Greek for the personification of death, which is symbolic of the death drive). Freud theorized that pleasure is related to the death desire because death represents calm (or, an inorganic state), and calmness is viewed as the ultimate pleasure. Conversely, the libido is literally fighting to exist. Thus, the duality between the two creates the conflict (Freud, 1990). This incompatibility creates a grit-in-the-oyster scenario which, in line with Schopenhauer's theory of a world in conflict, adds another layer of pessimism to the discordance of the human experience.

Modernism and Postmodernism Defined

As described in the book *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology Expanded*, there are marked differences between the modern era and the postmodern one.

Historically speaking, the work states that scholars have more or less designated that the modernist era starts at about the time of the Industrial Revolution to just preceding the present postmodernist era. To characterize the period, the modernist era saw an increase in reason and science, and, in particular, the applications of reason and science as a tool to acquiring knowledge and of solving problems. Key in this is that the era's institutions—its schools, churches and families—were strong (Cahoone, 2003).

The contrast to the modernist era is the postmodernist one. As Cahoon's text states, it is generally considered that postmodernist sensibilities emerged in most capitalistic countries as a result of changes attributed to World War II. However, the breadth of the postmodern idea did not traditionally ferment until the middle of the 1970s, when its ideals began to spread across the culture, permeating both society at large and academic disciplines alike. Characteristic of this era is, among other things, an emergence of newfound importance in media and popular culture, a reappraisal of the structure of the family, as well as new concepts about personal responsibility, success and duty. Of particular importance within postmodernist framing is the notion of a loss of hope and a disbelief in objectivity. Therefore, the postmodernist individual displays distrust for institutions and feels as if nothing can be relied upon. Confidence in an absolute reality does not exist within the postmodern world; thus, the postmodern individual has turned, ironically, away from the group and towards the individual personality's struggle for self-realization (Cahoon, 2003).

Pessimism as a Recurrent Theme in Postmodernism

Although there are other postmodernist philosophers who are equally as influential, it is Jean Baudrillard's theories of image and reality that are of particular relevance to the postmodernist horror genre. Baudrillard argued, in his seminal work *Simulacra and Simulation*, that the postmodernist simulacra is not only deficient compared to the original but doesn't even have a basis in reality. The fact that society views the simulacra (Disneyland is used as a metaphor in the book, where its Main Street U.S.A. is viewed as historical reality by some, but bears absolutely no relation to the original) as related to, or

perhaps even equal to the original—and thereby interacts with the simulated stimuli as if it were an accurate copy—produces a hyper-reality from which conflict undoubtedly ensues. Baudrillard showed, with this theory, that he did not have much hope for a society that is predicated on fantasy and reproduction (Baudrillard, 1994).

Another form of pessimism in postmodern society stems from the ideas presented by Jean-Francois Lyotard. Lyotard, in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report of Knowledge*, suggests that one of the main characteristics of postmodernism is the abolition of societal narratives. In the work, Lyotard theorizes that postmodern society's dissemination of information via mass media, progressive communication and computer technology has destroyed common narratives. Thus, this narrative has been replaced with symbols, and ultimately, relativism. As such, the postmodern world sees everything as relative. Given this, common relativisms—such as, beauty is in the eye of the beholder—can be seen as a metaphor for any number of relativist experiences that postmodern society can offer. The result of this reduction of common narratives in favor of mini truths can be unsettling (Lyotard, 1984). If the theory is valid, it shows a conspicuous lack of a center in life in favor of different ways to interpret things.

Modernism and Postmodernism in the Visual Arts

Modernism in the performing arts can be seen as trademarked by self-consciousness. This self-consciousness is manifest throughout the era's works. After the dust settled from the numerous wars and revolutions that occurred in Europe during first part of the nineteenth century, what is characterized as modernism began to emerge in political and

social though in the second half of the nineteenth century. Once the western world was awash in this era and its sensibilities, the arts—first in painting, and then followed by the visual arts—began to reflect the movement (Wallis, 1984). Cinema itself was slower to adopt modernist sensibilities in that the medium didn't begin until roughly around 1877 with the successful photography of a galloping horse (ironically, photographed to see if all four hooves are off the ground at the same time) and subsequent make-shift projection of it at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago a few years later (Nowell-Smith, 1996).

It would not be until the turn of the century, though, that cinema would transition from technological novelty to that of an art form that was fully capable of reflecting the modernist era. Arguably, the short films of Parisian George Melies were the first films that were reflective of modernism, with their science fiction and fantasy-themed plots, which were representative of what was occurring in the literature of Victorian-era Europe at that time. It was from this point forward that cinematic grammar was further developed with notable American entries such as *The Great Train Robbery* from 1903, leading up to D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) (Norwell-Smith, 1996). It is with these entries that modernist traits of cinema, such as self-consciousness and moralization, began to emerge. Evident of this is that each entry is clear in its representation of who the protagonist and the antagonists are, and that each entry is precise concerning tones of its moralization and lessons (Wallis, 1984).

In contrast to modernism in cinema, is postmodernism. Postmodern cinema mirrors the postmodern era and its invariable distrust in progress. Whereas the modern era's sensibilities of hope, progress and a belief in science are intrinsic within the era's cinema, cinema works from the postmodern era negates this. Postmodern cinema is characterized by its use of irony and parody, as it is believed that these are the only things that are capable of enduring future scrutiny. Likewise, postmodern cinema rejects modern cinema's emphasis of the grand narrative in favor of a more individualistic approach. This approach does not show society as evolving, but if anything, actually contracting. Therefore, it is the artist's ability to destroy the boundaries between high and low art, to dispute myth and to show how all platitudes are inherently unstable (Wallis, 1984).

Levels of Fear Defined

In predication for this study's contextual examination of horror cinema, it might be helpful to be familiar with the levels of fear that horror cinema can illicit, as they have been typically conceived:

Fear/terror: This type of fear is completely galvanizing and, suffice it to say, is the purest form of the emotion. The effects of fear/terror are singular, primal and intense (Prince, 2004).

Horror: Horror contains aspects of fear, yet, there in an overt connotation of revulsion. The essence of horror is that revulsion of the material initially creates

fear, but that this revulsion usually then culminates in the act of rejection of the source material (Prince, 2004).

The offensive: The next (and lowest) level is that of the offensive. The offensive can conversationally be thought of as the “gross-out.” This classification of fear is the most easily marginalized by audiences. As said best by the horror writer/director Stephen King, “First I go for fear, then I go for horror, and finally, I go for the gross-out—I’m not picky” (Prince, 2004, p. 25).

General Traits of Horror Cinema

It is also helpful to summarize what a horror cinema work consists of. To some who analyze horror cinema, there is an assumption that the world is governed by natural laws, and that society, for the most part, operates in tandem with these given natural laws. H. P. Lovecraft, a popular horror writer from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, further suggests that when one of these natural laws is broken, horror is created (Weaver, 1996). If horror is created when a natural law is broken, the general consensus from horror cinema scholars is that, essentially, the more spectral and anxiety-inducing a film is, the more it will affect an audience. Whether the anxiety and spectral affect is created by conventional or unconventional antagonists (monsters, for example), or by narrative patterns, is incidental. The over-arching point is that both anxiety and a spectral affect in horror cinema are predominantly the most effective means of frightening an audience (Schneider, 2004).

Given the previously mentioned characteristics about how anxiety and a spectral effect are particularly efficient at creating fear, why then do certain horror films simultaneously attract audiences while frightening them as well? True, if one accepts the former premise, an effective horror film will create anxiety and a spectral aura, but are there other factors that affect the audience as well? Phillips argues that the most successful and influential horror films are the ones that not only create tension through the medium, but that literally tap into cultural anxieties as well (Phillips, 2005). Phillips further elaborates that the things society fear reveal a great deal about the culture of the viewer as well as giving insight into society as a whole. Therefore, many viewers use identified fears and phobias from horror cinema as a resource to examine fear triggers from their own culture. Ultimately, analysis of these fear triggers can be a powerful tool that an individual uses to make choices about how he or she interprets and reacts to certain facets of their own culture (Phillips, 2005).

Pessimism in Modern and Postmodern Horror Cinema

The fear of death is a multi-cultural and ancient fear whose theme has been adequately documented through various art forms and literature throughout the ages. Yet, a twist emerges when analyzing contemporary society's view of death, and ultimately, of its conception of the human body. As suggested by the postmodern philosophy Michael Foucault, death has more or less emerged as one of the 20th century's (and by extension, the 21st century's) dominant taboos, and as such, the Thanatos (or death) drive has been ultimately repressed (Foucault & Rabinow, 1984). The postmodern idea of the body as more sacred than the soul is a relatively novel one. Postmodern society's recent

repression of the thanatos drive while simultaneously elevating the body to that of the ultimate commodity (or, art form, for that matter) has opened up a new playing field for horror filmmakers. An arena that purveyors of the trade have collectively responded to in sheer delight, given the proliferation of postmodern horror cinema that exploits this theme (Badley, 1995).

And, as some writers have in essence assaulted what civilized society holds as inviolable (the fiction of the 16th century writer the Marquis de Sade comes to mind), so have some horror filmmakers. In its infancy and then subsequent sound period, horror cinema was predominately sanguine about what protagonists of the genre were capable of doing. Not so, though, with the postmodern horror film (Crane, 1994). The trend in contemporary horror cinema has been to isolate what society esteems and then to thereby attack those sensibilities. For instance, when the character “Jason” from the popular *Friday the 13th* horror series attacks, it’s a random event. Jason—in contrast with horror cinema characters from, for example, modernist horror films—is void of moral condemnation, and as such, strikes all (Crane, 1994).

The same harsh examination can be applied to the postmodern re-make of the 1950’s science fiction/horror film *The Thing from Another World*. As the work was originally conceived, the film’s protagonists defeat “the thing from another world” while sustaining—if not an adequate amount of psychological trauma—minimal casualties and physical damage. Not so for the postmodern revisionist version of the film. In this re-appraisal of the tale, resistance against the “evil” force is unproductive to the point of

being pointless. No matter what the characters in the film do, they can't defeat the violence. More so, the film's characters essentially make all the right decisions in the story, yet they still die (Crane, 1994). This apocalyptic assault on societal values can increasingly be seen in other postmodern horror films as well. The postmodern view of the body as sacred, in and of itself, and not primarily as a vessel for the soul, has proliferated since the 1980s. To the postmodern eye, the body itself is something to be worshipped, refined and transformed (Badley, 1995).

Postmodern horror cinema registers this recent shift in values, and its subsequent repression of the Thanatos drive, by assaulting it. Therefore, the postmodern horror film is keen to assault society's new physical totem by either attacking the body itself (as seen with the clinical attack on the body in the horror film series *Saw* and *Hostel*), or by using the body as a playing field, such as in the horror film *The Exorcist* where the battle is literally fought within the flesh itself (Badley, 1995). In conclusion, the most disturbing to some may be postmodernist horror cinema's exploitation of bodily taboos. According to *The Horror Film*, bodily products are universally profane because they are viewed as being both me and not me, thereby blurring the lines between self and world. In line with postmodernist's somewhat antagonizing nature, the orifices that produce these products, as well as the byproducts themselves, have become a convention of the genre (Prince, 2004).

Traits of Horror/Documentary Cinema

Along with the changes of attitude that postmodernism brought, a new format of cinema—one that was beyond sensibilities that were broadly representative of the narrative style—was ushered in. This format was one that combined aspects of documentary cinema with that of horror—one that falls between moralization and perversion, between entertainment and edification. This type of cinema, with its simulacrum-like effect of hybridized fiction and reality, has its roots in the shock effect of the Grand Guignol, which is a style that can be graphically naturalistic in its intent. As described in *The Horror Film*, the documentary/horror format represents an undiluted collection of moments that their traditional counterparts (works of absolute fiction, in other words) could not reveal (Prince, 2004).

As such, the genre was more or less launched with the 1962 debut of the Italian documentary film, *Mondo Cane* (translated as a dog's world). This original mondo film (as the genre has become to be known) was, despite its somewhat exploitive tone, something of a cultural documentation that was mostly intended to shock western audiences who were for the most part unfamiliar with certain non-western practices. However, it is with the series *Savage* trilogy, and in particular, the series debut entry, *Savage Man Savage Beast*, that proved to redefine the genre. Yes, the *Mondo* series have always staged some events, but they were never death scenes (Prince, 2004). That *Savage Man Savage Beast* crossed that line warrants discussions of it.

The work's shift in theme was initially perceived as snuff-like and exploitive of death in its scope. Critics were initially offended at the manipulative and callous nature that the work subjected its "characters" to, such as where Caucasian mercenaries torture and murder tribesmen, and a tourist is eaten alive by lions while his family watches in horror from a car, before it was discovered that at least one of the scenes (the mercenary one) was staged. This discovery of footage that the work presents as genuine, but in actuality was re-created, cast suspicion at the genre as well as diminished any educational value the footage might have possessed were it in fact authentic (Prince, 2004).

Along with mondo-inspired works such as the pseudo-documentary series *Face of Death* and *Death Faces*, is the film *Snuff*. Not that the work is revered, which it's not, but it earns its mondo status as being one of the first films to successfully distort the divide between documentary and fiction. To recount the plot, the work primarily operates as a B-grade film up until the film's conclusion. However, at the work that the camera pulls back and the film's "director" enters the frame to praise the lead actress, which is then followed in quick succession by a subsequent rape and mutilation of the actress as the crew members enter the frame hold her down. Critics saw through the scene quickly enough, with its patent phoniness, yet the damage was done, so to speak, due to the producer's histrionic skills at staging events that coincided with the work's debut—events such as false leaks to the press in outrage over the film's authenticity, sending counterfeit letters of condemnation to the media and hiring fake protesters to picket the film as well (Brottman, 1997).

Regarding the current annexation of the mondo style, the genre has recently co-opted some new techniques straight from current documentary footage. These techniques—the shaky camera, uneven soundtrack and vague picture quality—have been appropriated from, among other things, terrorist beheading videos of, for example, Daniel Pearl and Nick Berg, as well as footage of Saddam Hussein’s execution. For various reasons, the traits of the documentary footage just mentioned, and others like it, seem to contribute to the mise-en-scene of the footage rather than detract from it. As a direct result of this, the public has become conditioned to perceive that footage such as this is real, irrespective of its authenticity. And as such, postmodernist practitioners of the mondo genre have been quick to utilize these techniques (Prince, 2004).

Chapter 4

Research Questions

Research Question 1 (R1): When examining what the perceived differences are between modern and postmodern horror cinema, does postmodern horror cinema tend to exhibit greater level of pessimism than modern horror cinema?

Research Question 2 (R2): Does it appear that, despite postmodern horror cinema's level of pessimism and subsequent assault on the viewer, works from this era still tend to contain implicit moralization and instructional value?

Research Question 3 (R3): When examining postmodern horror cinema, does it appear that there may be an increase of the horror/documentary style?

Research Question 4 (R4): Does horror/documentary cinema tend to contain even higher levels of pessimism than postmodern horror cinema that is purely fiction?

Chapter 5

Methodology

Study Design

The chosen methodology for this study will be qualitative analysis. This methodology, according to *Mass Media Research*, “relies mainly on the analysis of visual data (observations) and verbal data (words) that reflect everyday experience” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000, p. 102). The complex and varied nature of the contextual differences between modern and postmodern horror cinema makes it virtually impossible to statistically measure the “what,” “where” and “when” that would typically constitute a quantitative research proposal. Therefore, qualitative research is more conducive to yielding the answers to “why” and “how” (although, the question of “why” has been mitigated in this study, as previously discussed) that this proposal will be primarily exploring.

Method

Given the qualitative methodology, the chosen method of examination will be contextual analysis. As previously mentioned in the “Background/Theoretical Framework” chapter, the goal of this study is not to prove but to discuss and inform. Therefore, the given

method will be contextual analysis. Field observations were rejected, for there is nothing to really observe when levels of pessimism between modernist and postmodernist horror cinema are examined. Likewise, the focus group was rejected as a method, for, group interviewing of a small body of individual would be constrictive in its yield of information, and therefore, not in line with this study's goals.

Intensive, or in-depth, interviews were originally considered as a study method; however, they were ultimately rejected based on their limited scope. It is possible that intensive interviews would have yielded valuable information about certain variables; however, the crux of this study is a comparative examination of different genres of horror cinema regarding levels of pessimism. Therefore, unless a potential interviewee could speak on some platform of authority (of which, none were available), this method would be pointless. In addition, case studies—where multiple data sources are used to investigate phenomena (Wilmer & Dominick, 2000)—might have been an appropriate method, but it was rejected based on, one, its general lack of scientific rigor, and, two, its massive and time-consuming scope. Therefore, contextual analysis is most feasible within the range and condition of this study.

Measures

Contextual analysis, or, content analysis, is a popular “method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for purposes of measuring variables” (Wilmer & Dominick, 2000, p. 135). The method can be applied to either qualitative or quantitative studies. However, strict guidelines for research using

either method must be in place. First, the content that is analyzed is systematically organized, in that variables were equitably selected concerning their genre. Furthermore, the contextual analysis that occurs within the analysis chapter was uniform. Two, the contextual analysis is objective. Therefore, the researcher has mitigated personal biases to the best of abilities, with consideration given that other researchers, should they replicate the study, might yield similar results. And third, the study aims for precision, whereas the over-arching goal is an accurate representation of a particular body of messages (Wilmer & Dominick, 2000).

Sample

The represented works in this study are attributed with being either seminal works or highly representative of the era or category that they are coded to (Bordwell & Carroll, 1996). Therefore, each film was carefully selected so that it meets the criteria. In addition, most readers who are familiar with media studies will probably recognize many of the represented works here, for many of them are products of—as well as being ingrained within—the arena of popular culture. As such, the representative works are as follows:

Works representing modernist horror cinema include: *Nosferatu* (1922), *Dracula* (1931), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), *Frankenstein* (1932), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Psycho* (1960).

Works representing cross-over horror cinema include: *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).

Works representing postmodernist horror cinema include: *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* series (1980-present), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series (1984-2003), *The Thing* (1982), *Saw* (2003), *Hostel* (2005).

Works representing postmodernist horror/documentary cinema include: *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), *Hungry Bitches/2 Girls 1 Cup* (2006).

Chapter 6

Analysis

Modern Horror Cinema

Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror (1922), *Dracula* (1931)

Though much is not examined in these two works above their classification as a precise example of societal reproof concerning levels of pessimism, given their nature as seminal works of horror cinema, they are nonetheless mentioned. That said, both of these films portray the antagonists as successfully defeating the satanic evil of the vampire character (commonly known as “Dracula”). Though, as is the convention of most forms of horror cinema, from either the modern or postmodern era, some of the main characters do fall by the wayside.

The Phantom of the Opera (1925)

The lessons and morals of this work are particularly literal, and as such, are rather tangible. To quickly recount the plot, the film centers around a Parisian opera house that is presided over by a mysterious, yet dominant, figure who dictates his wishes about the venue’s productions through intimidation and force. It can be understood to a degree why the phantom character is rigid in his beliefs in the work when the severity of his

physical deformity is made plain to the viewer (albeit, in spectacular fashion). In keeping with this insight, the film indulges the phantom character to a degree, but ultimately he is not viewed favorably. In truth, “The Phantom/Erik” is too intense in his desires, and can be seen to have, for example, more in common with other self-destructive cinema characters that equally lack perspective, such as “The Wicked Witch of the West” from the film *The Wizard of Oz*, than a character who is earnestly striving to persevere against legitimate foes.

This shift in tone, from that of semi-sympathetic character that is cloaked in mystery, possibly licit in his actions given his hidden past, literally comes crashing down when the physicality of the character is revealed with an emphasis on shock. Once the film moves past this point, The Phantom can be viewed—more so as the character increases in severity—from the modernist perspective as something of a lame dog requiring euthanizing. Once The Phantom is killed by an angry mob at the end of the film, order is therefore restored. In line with modern cinema’s moralization and somewhat explicit emphasis of ethical productivity, the object of The Phantom’s desire in the work, “Christine Daae,” successfully resists the trickery of The Phantom, and—although she may have psychological scars as a result of the trauma—she will live, as each audience member from the modernist era would of given that they were in the same situation.

Frankenstein (1932)

To a degree, there is in actuality an explicit warning in this work. As will be familiar to many, the plot concerns a doctor who imbues life via electricity into a grotesque stitched-together composite of various corpses. The dilemma comes in, though, in that the doctor, “Victor Frankenstein,” creates life, but fails to accept the awesome responsibility that comes along with power such as this. Therefore, Frankenstein is punished for not accepting that responsibility, in that, his bride is killed. However, the creation (colloquially known as Frankenstein himself) is punished for killing as well. The work does levy some empathy at the monster character, the created, but mostly the character is viewed as an abomination in the film, and is therefore subject to destruction.

Moralizing comes at the end of the work, when the doctor realizes the error of his ways. This realization, despite coming near the end, can be viewed as the warning. The message can be refined as such that if one tries to play God—or, attempts to technologize female reproduction, as is the case in the work—success will be denied, and as such, misery will follow. In addition, there is one more telling level of instruction that the film can be seen to offer as well. That the work indicts the creator, Dr. Frankenstein, to a certain degree, is also prevalent in the dichotomy of the monster character itself. Given the somewhat sympathetic light the monster is shown in at the end, it can be concluded that society should never again view the monster and the hero as fixed, for, one has the potential to become the other. Therefore, in summation, the one who aligns themselves most favorably with nature, is the one who receives the highest degree of favor.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

As is at this point commonly believed by film scholars, the body snatchers in the work are symbolic of communists (Jancovich, 1996). The metaphor is that, as the body snatchers are trying to take over Americans (as was conventionally perceived by some during the debut of this film), so goes the assumption that communists are trying to poison, or, “snatch,” the minds of God-fearing Americans. Although some of the characters (and by proxy, members of society) fall by the wayside in the work, even this—in and of itself, beyond the defeat of the antagonist in the film—can be seen as a type of moralization, for the implication is that if these characters hadn’t been vulnerable to the evil in some way, or if they had only resisted more, they probably wouldn’t of been co-opted by the body snatchers in the first place. Therefore, the over-arching lesson of the work, manifest by the protagonist’s defeat of the body snatchers, is, that if one is tenacious in his or her resistance of communism (or any other foe that America, at that time, collectively perceived as having), perseverance is assured. That the other characters in the film succumb to the body snatchers, only serves to illustrate that those characters had a propensity for this—what the film implies—destructive political/economic system in the first place.

Psycho (1960)

At first glance, this film appears to be a type of cross-over film, whereas the work could be perceived to bridge the gap between modern and postmodern horror cinema. This is most likely not the case, though, as the moralization of the film is explicit, despite the film’s dark, some would say, macabre tone. To quickly re-tell the work’s plot, the film

centers on a woman, “Marion Crane,” who seeks respite in an unpopulated motel after impulsively stealing a large amount of money, only to come into contact with the homicidal proprietor of the motel who is murdering women (ritualistically committing them cross-dressed in the persona of his dead mother) who excite his passions. In an ironic twist, though, Marion is punished in the work (when she’s murdered by the proprietor in the famous “shower scene”) virtually moments after she has decided to retribute her crime. And, in continuation with this theme, despite the trick ending of the work, where the proprietor’s mother persona is revealed in a gruesome fashion, order is restored when Marion’s murder is vindicated by virtue of the proprietor’s arrest, literally at the hands of her sister and fiancé.

Cross-Over Horror Cinema

Rosemary’s Baby (1968)

If there ever was a film that represents a more postmodernist and pessimistic shift in horror cinema, being right on the cusp of a change in tone between the genres, this represented work may tend to be it. In summation, the plot of the film concerns a young couple that moves into an apartment building in New York City. The crux of the story, though, is about the title character’s (“Rosemary”) attempt to decipher whether her elderly neighbors and others who are close to her are closet Satanists who secretly desire her unborn baby for the purposes of ritualistic sacrifice, thereby causing her to launch herself into an amateur, yet paranoid investigation, all-the-while as she slips further and further into a hysterical descent. The revelation of actual occultism, and that Rosemary was in fact inseminated with Satan’s son, is reserved for the work’s bitter end.

That said, Rosemary resists in the film as long as possible, but it's to no avail—she delivers Satan's offspring. This would be fine, though, and in keeping with the moralization and affirmation of society's abilities to overcome obstacles—which is trademark of modernist cinema—if Rosemary persevered in her resistance until the end of the work. But, with a sardonic twist, the film ends with Rosemary indicating possible reception towards the infant. If, for instance, Rosemary had tried to attack or harm the infant, regardless of success in that act, it would have indicated resistance toward the foe. The work's combination of showing a protagonist who, not only does not successfully resist an adversary, but subsequently embraces it, can be viewed as a one-two effect on the audience; not only has the protagonist failed, but the enemy has acquired another ally. This depreciatory shift in tone and theme must of no doubt had a sobering effect on horror cinema audiences from the modern era who have been accustomed to more favorable endings in the past.

Night of the Living Dead (1968)

This work as well, like the former one, can be viewed as a film that bridges the gap between modern and postmodern horror cinema, for, there are moments of human success in the film, but at other times, this success is overshadowed by the antagonist's intermittent, yet supreme dominance. To summarize, this seminal work of horror is about the newly dead (otherwise known as zombies) who reanimate with an insatiable desire to consume human flesh. The work portrays the protagonists as initially successful at opposing the zombies, but eventually they fail. This failure can be viewed as a statement

of inevitability and seen to symbolize a newfound tone of pessimism in society, for despite appropriate resistance, failure is unavoidable. Given this, though, there still is an implicit aspect of moralization in the work which is somewhat in contrast to the more more pessimistic films of the postmodern era.

Where, the postmodern film is typically trademarked with a predication of doom from the work's commencement, *Night of the Living Dead* reads in a different way when viewed symbolically. Depending on how a viewer perceived the implicit message of the work, determines how pessimistic the film actually is. To illustrate the point, the symbolic nature of the zombies themselves must be examined. Therefore, depending on one's point of view the zombies in the work can represent those who were sending ripples of shock and disruption through 1960s society, most commonly through the mode of the civil rights movement. Those who viewed the film from this figurative perspective at the time of the work's debut most likely considered the film as pessimistic, for, the zombies (acting a surrogate for civil rights activists) appear to be winning at the film's close.

On the other hand, though, those (civil rights activists themselves, perhaps) who viewed the work from the opposite perspective quite possibly had a different take on it. These viewers might have seen the zombie's attack on the living as merely representative of what the establishment had subjected them to for generations anyway. As can be seen, then, the duplicitous nature of the work, depending on what segment of culture was viewing it, designates it as a work that bridges the divide between modern and postmodern horror cinema.

Postmodern Horror Cinema

The Exorcist (1973)

The only horror film to receive a nomination for the prestigious “Best Picture” Academy Award, is testament to, if nothing else, how enduring this work was (and most likely still is). That the film does not contain positive results given the character’s efforts, is evidence of a shifting tone in horror cinema and culture alike. To begin, this film can be viewed as a work that contains a thoroughly apocalyptic tone, for there really is no character in the film that is not destroyed, or, at the very least, adversely affected by its main antagonist. To summarize the plot, the work concerns a 1970s-era exorcism of a 12-year-old girl. However, despite the fact that the girl, “Regan,” appears to be purged of whatever malevolence possessed her at the end of the work, the victory is bittersweet.

Both of the priests who conducted the exorcism die, some secondary character’s die, the girl’s mother has no more faith at the end of the film than at the beginning, and the girl herself has repressed the memories of the trauma (which potentially is even worse than active retention, given the psychological predilection that repressed events that are negative contribute to pathology). As such, there is little for the viewer to learn, morally-speaking, from the film. In contrast, embodying this new shift in tone representative of postmodern horror cinema, the work’s moralization is implicit in the beginning, as opposed to the end, thereby denying the audience moralizing conclusions based on character’s abilities or accomplishments.

The message of the film can be viewed as something like this: as previously suggested in the literature review, if society values the body so much, the body will be assaulted (and in this film, not only through the actual possession itself, but by the extensive display of intense medical examinations and procedures as well). This itself can be read as a type of moralization about society's misplaced values, for, if society didn't value the material over the spiritual, the film wouldn't be as effective. However, on the other hand, it's possible that there is no moralization in the work at all. It's possible that the work is simply meant to disturb by attacking society's values, with no goal above and beyond this jolting aim. With this in mind, examples of the film's pessimistic tone emerge more clearly.

The work suggests that the girl becomes possessed after playing with an Ouija board. Therefore, it could be moralized that the girl invited the evil in by purposely interacting with this metaphysical tool, the Ouija board. However, the film shrewdly undercuts its own potential moralization by, one, circumventing any explanation for the possession, and, two, in a more preponderant fashion, never even confirming if the girl was in fact even possessed at all. That said, there is another level of the film that is privy to examination within the postmodern construct—a level that, if true, conveys great pessimism.

To understand this dimension, the Christian bible must be referenced. There is a belief within Christianity that the battle between Satan and God has already been won by Jesus. Given this, it can be suggested that those who are affected by the devil, ones who dance

to the tune of his misery, are impressionable because they are not “one with Christ” to begin with. Therefore, if the girl is in fact possessed by Satan, the intent of the possession is not to harm the girl herself (as some film scholars have suggested), but to create chaos and cause those around her to lose faith in what they believe in. If this is true, this would probably not have been a comforting thought for 1970s film audiences given the demise of, among the work’s other characters, two Catholic priests.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974)

This work, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (which is something of an inversion fairy tale, complete with its fable-like introduction at the beginning), is another example of a postmodern work that contains high levels of pessimism, in addition to an over-sweeping apocalyptic tone as well. Like the former work, *The Exorcist*, this film shows characters that are generally unsuccessful at opposing malevolent forces. Every protagonist in the work dies with the exception of the lead protagonist. Lest it be viewed that this character, “Marilyn,” fares well because her life is intact at the work’s end, for, any satisfaction the audience may have attained due to her escape is mitigated by, one, the fact that her break from confinement is more due to sheer folly than any kind of ingenuity on her part, and, two, that the audience is left with the impression that the character has probably been driven half insane from the trauma inflicted on her (as indicated at the end by her hysterical laughter as she’s driven away to safety) by the work’s antagonists, thereby extenuating her quality of life in the future to begin with.

The work also conveys other levels of pessimism beyond what was just described. The film's antagonists, an entire recluse family of homicidal cannibals who behave in an antisocial and erratic manner, portray a new kind of enemy. Gone now are foes that can potentially be rationalized with. This work's enemies cannot be dismissed as alien (as in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) or as a product of mysterious forces (as *Night of the Living Dead*). These antagonists are merely members from postmodern society who have chosen to cannibalize, both literally and figuratively, members of their own race. And society's assumed marginalization of the family (which will be discussed momentarily) is not reason enough. If moralization is sought, though, it can most likely be found, albeit implicitly, in some of the work's opening montages.

The moralizing essence of the film (if in fact there is one) can likely be caught in the cattle imagery from the beginning of the work. The images of cattle in the work are probably not collectively just a thing to be commented on by the film's protagonists or for audiences to gawk at. More likely, the cattle can be viewed as a figurative comparison to the family, who as such, are presented as criminally insane. Like the cattle, the family has been delegated by most of postmodern society as either, one, an expendable nuisance (no doubt as a result of widespread deinstitutionalization that occurred in the 1950s and 1960s), or, two, a potential commodity. The work further suggests that the film's antagonists descended into homicidal madness after the local slaughterhouse that they were working at was closed down.

Therefore, the cattle's analogous comparison to the family can be viewed as an indictment of society's lack of compassion—or, at the very least—interest in others who are from the lower echelon. Moralizations or not, though, there will be no happy ending for the film's protagonists. In line with the tone set by postmodern horror cinema, the message levied at the audience is one that implicitly cries for change, as opposed to an indication of what society is capable of overcoming. That the work makes its point posthumously (or, maybe in prologue), after nearly every character has been annihilated, is where the increase in pessimism comes in, thereby operating as a prime showcase of the difference in levels of pessimism between the two genres.

Halloween (1978)

At first glance, this film (which is about a homicidal man who escapes institution only to return to his hometown for a motiveless killing spree) appears to be a puritanical representation of a modernist horror film, for, the work shows its protagonists as mostly either living or dying in relation to how much attention they pay to their surroundings. That fact that the majority of the protagonists that are killed in the work are distracted with prurient interests, is where potential for moralization is introduced, for, the work's main protagonist, "Laurie Strode," is chaste throughout. However, it is the end of the film that probably reveals the true nature of the work, and of which, is more in line with postmodernist sensibilities than modernist ones. This idea can be seen in two platforms.

First, the supernatural revelation of what the protagonists had to oppose is only revealed in the last moments. At the end of the work, the antagonist, "Michael Myers," is shot six

times and falls from a second story balcony before disappearing, thereby shifting the characterization of him from a human foe to one that is more than likely supernatural in some capacity. The twist, in that the protagonists were facing a virtually impenetrable force beyond their initial knowledge, is something of a connotative affirmation of their grand misjudgment. Second, this err of judgment is stressed by the works final scenes, presented in static display, where the locals of violence are shown in conjunction with a voice-over of Myers' trademarked heavy breathing, indicative that the warrior's work is still not done. The fact that this theme is introduced at the work's end, and not at a point where knowledge of it could benefit the protagonists, is a postmodernist statement in and of itself, affirming that society itself is now faced with seemingly impervious enemies.

Friday the 13th Series (1980-Present), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* Series (1984-2003).

Both of these long-running film series are superfluous in their feature debuts concerning the postmodernist sensibilities of their main antagonists, given the contributions these villains have made to the genre. That said, *Friday the 13th* has "Jason Voorhees," and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* has "Freddy Krueger." As was mentioned in the literature review about the Jason character, and can be said about Freddy Krueger, both are unstoppable foes that strike all, yet, their own idiosyncratic traits emerge when viewed from the postmodernist perspective.

In the *Friday the 13th* series, Jason (with the exception of the first film in which his mother is doing the killing) succeeds, via the work's formula, in executing everyone in

each installment with the exception of the final protagonist. The fact that the final protagonists live in the films is in reality a manufactured conceit that is used to stage epic battles of good and evil. Therefore, this conceit should be viewed solely as a narrative tool, and should not be perceived as an indication of capabilities that the final protagonists possess. What can be appraised from the films (if anything moralizing can be), though, is that destruction is unpredictable, yet imminent for most.

Conversely, the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series (which feature a malevolent postmodern sandman who sprinkles dust in the eyes of children who won't sleep before delivering them their nightmares) subjects its protagonists to even harsher treatment than the *Friday the 13th* series does. Not only does Freddy attack the living, but he manages to do so on two fronts: in both the waking and dream states. And, which is traditionally the case with the series (as can be seen with the series debut), each installment usually ends with a final infringement of the protagonist's dreams, not only indicating that the battle has not been won, but also suggesting that the final protagonist will likewise lose the struggle. With this in mind—given that the Freddy character can be viewed symbolically as a 1980s-era AIDS patient, with his grotesque appearance and back-story of ostracization, fueled by the country's fear of the disease—it further compounds the aura of dread to see, in installation after installation, Freddy successfully killing people.

The Thing (1982)

It is not that this film is a seminal example of postmodernist horror cinema (although, despite its initial lackluster reception, the work is highly regarded by some) but, more so,

it is in contrast to the original film version of the story that so successfully illustrates the genres differences (as well as demonstrating the similarities in subtext regarding moralization) when filtered through the perspective of levels of pessimism. It must be said, though, that *The Thing* is not necessarily a re-make of the 1951 film, *The Thing From Another World*, but is in essence more true to the literary source material, and therefore, qualifies as a variation. Given this, the work also warrants examination because it's illustrative of one of a handful of films that is based on the same source material despite being from different eras. Therefore, as mentioned in the literature review, the characters in *The Thing* make informed, practical decisions, yet they all die or are left for dead. Therefore, can the work be viewed as a supreme example of postmodernist pessimism?

Once again, the work shares similarities with the *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series in that the only moralization, if it can even be viewed as such, is that hope, and therefore resistance against the foe, is in vain. The difference between this work, and, for instance, the *Friday the 13th* series, is in tone and theme. Whereas some may view the violence in the *Friday the 13th* series as hyper-realistic, almost to the extreme of being tongue-in-cheek, and may thereby fixate on the series final confrontations and the protagonist's ensuing victories, or conversely, Freddy's use of humor from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* might distract as well, this claim is not as easily made about *The Thing*, for, the outlook at the end of the work is bleakly stated. Therefore, the work can be viewed as the very embodiment of a dystopian view of society. A trademark which is characteristic of postmodernism, and as such, clearly indicative of the differences between the two eras.

Saw Series (2003-Present), Hostel (2005-2007)

Both of these series are more or less the most current continuation of postmodern horror cinema sensibilities within the confines of works that are purely fiction. Despite the hoopla and commercial success of both series (in particular, though, the *Saw* series, which is currently in production on the sixth installation) their main contribution to the genre is, one, that they are commercial products that have been seen by many (which is in contrast to some of the more controversial entries in this study that have had lower viewership albeit more influence over the genre), and, two, that as commercial products, the work's protagonists (both minor and major ones) are subjected to unyielding brutality and torture at levels which probably have not been seen within the spectrum of a commercial cinema until the debut of these works.

Postmodernist Horror/Documentary Cinema

It is with this style of cinema, the horror/documentary postmodernist film, that, as the genre evolves, new patterns emerge. One, it appears as if this style of horror cinema, the horror/documentary style, is on the rise. And two, these works appear to display a conspicuous lack of moralization. Or, it might be better said that moralization through tone and theme is secondary in this hybridization of genres—secondary to unmitigated exposition. For, it is the exposition, in and of itself, that is of paramount concern with these entries, with their complex blend of reality, fiction and simulacra. Whether this style of filmmaking—with its, at times, controversial blend of trifectic stimulus—will continue to proliferate in the future, remains to be seen.

Cannibal Holocaust (1982)

This work, although not widely seen in a commercial sense, is notorious, nonetheless. In summation of the plot, this quasi-documentary work, with its appropriation of the mondo style, centers on a group of young documentary filmmakers who go to any lengths necessary to secure tantalizing footage of indigenous peoples, interacting with them to such a degree that the infringed upon tribe who's being documented subsequently attack and cannibalize the filmmakers as a hysterical reaction to their own society's moral collapse. That the work can be viewed as an indictment of western exploitation and excess (as portrayed by the filmmakers treatment of tribes) is duplicitous given that the pursuit of this judgment is tempered by, one, execution of live animals in substitution of special effects, two, is less than favorable (some would say hyperbolic) in its portrayal of indigenous peoples, and three, uses shocking and gratuitous imagery to convey this very aim—images that some would argue are equally, if not more heinous, than the western behavior that the work appears to be condemning.

As can be seen, the film defies simplification, for it is neither wholly a work of fiction nor one of reality, but lies uncomfortably and indefinably somewhere in the middle.

Regardless, the work's level of pessimism and apocalyptic tone (all of the main protagonists are killed by the end of the film) once again defy clarity, for the work is not easily deciphered on this level, either. Based on the annihilatory ending of the film, the work could be read as a condemnation to some degree (such as, the western world needs to change its ethnocentric values, or something to that effect), yet, despite this seemingly

implicit moralization, the work denies the audience this fictitious boon by essentially undermining its own premise.

The work's narrative shows recuperation of the protagonist's documentary footage—including their subsequent murder at the hands of the indigenous peoples—along with initial discussion of the footage's relevance, before the footage is ordered to be destroyed. Therefore, the final taste-in-the-mouth that the work leaves smacks of pessimism with its marginalization of material (the documentary footage). Material that was literally acquired with blood and tears, but is dismissed in vain and thereby denied its chance of exhibition and therefore of any subsequent value that could have been acquired from it.

Hungry Bitches/2 Girls 1 Cup (2006)

To preface, it is not the feature length work itself, titled *Hungry Bitches*, that has received such notoriety, but more so, a derivative aspect of it. The film's trailer, an approximately one-minute condensation of the work which is colloquially called *2 Girls 1 Cup*, has seen mass distribution on the internet as a viral video. That most viewers are watching the derivate material, *2 Girls 1 Cup*, filtered through the perspective of horror cinema and not as fetishized pornography, can be corroborated to a degree given the public's reaction to the work. As described on Wikipedia (academic sources about the work could not be located), the trailer features “two women defecating into a cup, taking turns consuming the excrement, and vomiting into each other's mouths [as] "Lovers Theme", from Hervé Roy's *Romantic Themes*, plays throughout” (Wikipedia, 2009). That said, the work's

producer does admit that some of the situations in his films are recreated, thereby further diluting the boundary between reality and fiction.

However, the work is included in this study because—as outlined in the literature review, where different levels of fear are described—many viewers are watching the work, not for prurient interests, but to shock themselves with content that they collectively perceive as offensive. As proof of this, one need only to consult any of the numerous videos available on the video sharing website, YouTube, of viewers watching the trailer with the specific intent of shock and disgust, some to the point of vomiting while they observe it. More in line with this study's premise, though, is an examination of the work's levels of pessimism.

As such, pessimism is explicit within the film's content itself. To illustrate this point directly from the work, consuming excrement (which is usually toxic for humans to do) and eroticizing defecation would most likely be considered paraphilic to the majority. That said, it is not so much the graphic content of the work itself that shocks (for, coprophilia is not unheard of within the realm pornography), but—considering its forbidden and masochistic themes—the level of notoriety it has received in postmodern society. This notoriety, solely itself, is more telling than the work's content could ever be, for its fame can be seen to solidify that, one, society has redefined what it perceives as taboo, and, two, that society is in the midst of transcending, literally redefining, the boundaries of narrative and documentary, for, the very proliferation that the work has

enabled via the mode of video sharing websites of viewers-watching-viewers viewing the work is a meta-narrative all to itself.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This qualitative thesis has examined levels of pessimism as it relates to modern and postmodern horror cinema. Beyond assumed differences in levels of pessimism between the two genres, the study has examined both the implicit and explicit moralization of these categories as well. Throughout this guided and informed exploration, it has been speculated that cinematic moralizations might be made irrespective of perceived levels of pessimism. That said, the study examined the conventions of each genre singularly (with examples of modern works such as *Frankenstein* and *Invasion of the Body Snatcher*, and postmodern examples such as *The Exorcist* and *Halloween*) as it relates to levels of pessimism, as well as discussing works that could be seen to bridge the two genres (with representative works such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Rosemary's Baby*).

Does the study answer its research questions? Regarding if postmodern horror cinema displays a greater level of pessimism than works for the modern era, this question was answered because pessimism tends to be at a higher level in postmodern works than ones from the modern era. It appears, with examples such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Rosemary's Baby* or *The Thing*, that postmodern works such as these and others support

the idea that pessimism is a recurrent theme in postmodern works. These films, in contrast to works from the modern era, show characters that blur the lines between antagonist and protagonist. The works also follow their own mini narrative, as opposed to following a grand narrative. Furthermore, most of the represented postmodern works tend to portray pessimism because they are apocalyptic in tone and they rarely display protagonists as successfully opposing the foe, if a clear foe is even presented.

Likewise, given that pessimism is a dominant construct within postmodern works, does that mean that horror cinema from this era does not—within the confinement of their own mini narratives—have an ability to moralize? The study uses postmodern horror cinema examples such as *The Exorcist* or *Night of the Living Dead* to illustrate that postmodern works do have an ability to moralize despite exposing audiences to confrontations that are usually undefeatable. Moreover, the represented postmodern works show that irony and parody are recurrent themes within the era. Whatever society values, postmodern horror cinema attacks it. This attack, though, is not merely an assault without purpose but is a reflection of the postmodern idea that all platitudes are inherently unstable. So, when *Night of the Living Dead*, for example, assaults the viewer with its apocalyptic tone, the film is using this theme as a tool to show how belief in a meta-narrative is false—for the work's apocalyptic tone is relative to who's viewing the work and from what perspective—as well as disputing myths that the modern era has mythologized.

The study's last research questions asks if there is a proliferation of the horror/documentary (with its reliance on a combination of both narrative and

documentary techniques) within postmodern society, and, more specifically—given that pessimism tends to be a dominant construct within postmodern horror cinema—if representative works of postmodern horror/documentary cinema tends to contain even higher levels of pessimism than postmodern horror cinema that is purely fiction. With examples such as *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Hungry Bitches/2 Girls 1 Cup*, as well as referencing terrorist beheading videos, it seems as if works of this nature are increasing in number. More importantly, though, these works tend to show a conspicuous lack of purpose beyond their own mini narrative of shock and awe. Whereas the use of irony in postmodern horror cinema that is purely fiction may be used to refute myths and illustrate that society's tenants are capricious, horror/documentary cinema tends to substitute those aims in favor of exposing the viewer to a total bombardment of spectacle.

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