

## Analysing Horror By Dr Emma Austin.

Analysing horror films follows the same principles as discussing any film text. Technical effects, the filmmaking process and standard ideas such as script, characterisation, set design, lighting, editing and camerawork follow the same guidelines as any other creation. Horror films are different because of their intended outcome: horror texts aim to induce fear and terror, reactions in the audience that Lockwood discusses as *affect*. *Affect* is an emotional response to the film and identification with situations and characters, which has to be created through attention to particular methods of storytelling and visualisation, and clarifying the threat in the narrative. These are called *generic conventions*, narrative, iconography and themes that we recognise as belonging to the horror genre: the haunted house, the bloodied weapon, screams, darkness and fear. These are present in very specific ways in horror. But not all horror films are the same: *sub-genres* of horror have specific methods of creating fear. So, the “slasher” film may focus on pursuit, entrapment and brutal killings, while the “found footage” horror film (*The Blair Witch Project*, *Rec*, *Diary of the Dead*) relies on a first person perspective to show the terror experienced by characters. In horror films however, we can see some or all of the following elements that are used to construct terror.

***Narrative and theme.*** One of the simplest ways to start analysing horror is through the narrative, the sequence of events that construct the film’s story. In the case of horror texts, there are normally clear narrative patterns, following Tzvetan Todorov’s ideas of *equilibrium* and *disequilibrium*. *Equilibrium* is the state of events or experiences found at the beginning of the text, which in horror texts focus on establishing characterisation, or the form of the *threat*, or the idea of normalcy: many slasher films take time to set up the environment and behaviours of the characters, so that the later threats are contrasted against what is ‘normal’ and ‘safe’: the opening sequence of *Scream* is a good example of this. *Disequilibrium* is where the normal life or behaviours of the characters are interrupted and in horror, threatened. The narrative will then show the reactions to this threat, and whether it is destroyed or not and a *new equilibrium* can be reached. Horror narratives in particular are clear on setting up *Oppositions*: Good/Bad, Light/Dark, Monster/Normal and *Boundaries*: the body and how it is invaded or broken down, the setting, the state of society or safety. These can be major *themes* in horror texts and can also help determine what sub-genre a film belongs to, if any. Andrew Tudor offers some interesting basic

groupings of *Oppositions* or basic categorisations of threats in horror films. He classifies them as Supernatural/Secular, External/Internal and Autonomous/Dependant. Supernatural/Secular relates to where the threat comes from: is it something outside of normal human experience (like ghosts, or vampires) or is it related to science or everyday life (psychotics, the result of science, etc.)? Tudor cautions us that some films may use both categorisations: In *Halloween*, for example, Michael Myers is portrayed as a human threat, but at the end of the film his body has disappeared: "He was the Bogeyman", the surviving female cries, so his status as threat is both secular and supernatural. External/Internal is an idea that responds to the threats relation to human beings: Is the threat outside the human being or inside it? A case to think about would be that of "possession" films: where the threat is outside the human, but can emerge from inside to cause destruction. Monsters are easier to categorise, because they are separate to the human body. Thirdly, Autonomous/Dependant relates to the creation of the threat. Does it simply exist, or has it been created or caused by humans? Responsibility is a key thematic idea here: the titular character in *Candyman* was created by human cruelty, and he is sustained by human belief.

**Characterisation.** The narrative is supported through the portrayal of characters: we can argue that there are two types, the *protagonists* who are generally represented as 'normal', human and who either die or survive. Most horror texts rely on a small group of characters, and the narrative follows their recognition of the threat, their destruction by it or their attempts to survive or defeat the threat. They are used to encourage identification with their situation and their motivations: this links to the idea of *affect*: we recognise their peril, we identify with their struggles and their reactions to the threat: this is where an emotional identification allows us fear and release, central ideas of horror films.

This is also the case with *antagonists*, those positioned against them. The antagonist can be human or a monster (or both), and is the source of the threat in horror texts. It is vital that the film allows the audience to perceive both perspectives: we see the threat to understand where the horror will come from (and we can enjoy being in that position of power) but we need the *protagonists* to identify with human characteristics. Films can switch between the two: in *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* we occasionally see from the killers perspective as well as watching the teenagers. This is what has given rise to the popular criticism that some horror films are sadistic, because we see others inflicting pain, and we share their perspective. While this is possibly true of some films, such as *Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer*, it is notable



that these films are a) not commercially successful: horror audiences need a release of tension for pleasure in viewing films and b) are usually classed as art or exploitation films because they draw our attention to the idea of audience complicity.

**Settings.** This is where the narrative of the film takes place. Again, the idea of Oppositions and Boundaries are useful here: some spaces are constructed as safe or dangerous, and can switch: the home is a very useful setting for horror film makers, as we think of it as a safe space, but it can also be a trap, or invaded. Some settings make the contrast between different types of environment: the urban vs. the rural, or clearly position themselves as in-between environments: such as hotels or motels, or hospitals, where people are not outside but are also not in their own space of safety. The movement of the characters between different settings also sets up fear through pursuit, showing that characters are at risk by being in different environments: *Jeepers Creepers* is a good example of this. Another element of this is the contrast between night and day, when threats emerge from the darkness. We will discuss this later in relation to lighting.

**Mise en scene.** All of these elements are represented visually, and the overall term is *mise en scene*, literally what appears in the film frame: setting, costume, the behaviour of the figures, use of colour and the lighting. We can think of aspects of the *mise en scene* in terms of how they relate to reality (costumes, acting style and settings that look 'real') or how they are altered to create a mood or effect: make up effects or supernatural settings in horror films, for example. A good example are the 'Poe' films made by Roger Corman, who used saturated colour in costumes and set design to highlight the gothic theatricality of the stories and for emotional impact. It is a good idea to think about contrasts between 'reality' and 'unreality': make-up and CGI effects can be used to construct the monstrous: the Brundlfly in *The Fly* is both an attempt to make the effects look as realistic as possible, but also draws attention to its monstrous status. Costumes and props can also draw attention to 'normal' characters and the status of the monster: the killer who relies on masks and carries weapons is a standard iconographic creation in horror: we recognise their appearance as belonging to the genre.

**Lighting.** The contrast between light and dark is a key thematic concern of horror, but in practical terms, shadows can conceal threats within the frame, or key lighting can pick out areas of the *mise-en-scene* that are important: A light can pick out a characters face and their reactions, or draw attention to

an area of the frame that is empty but might potentially be filled with threat: lighting can imply space (see Cinematography: Frame Composition below). In the *Blair Witch Project* the use of handheld cameras with lights attached means that in the final nightmarish run through the woods to the house, the contrast between light and dark become pronounced, not only showing what the characters see, but also indicating the surrounding darkness of the woods. “Hard” light is strong and creates contrasts, sharp edges and shadows, whereas “soft” light is equal illumination. The direction of lighting is also important: what is the light source? As Bordwell and Thompson note, “the filmmaker will usually strive to create a lighting design that is consistent with the sources in the setting”. *Blair Witch* does this, but so does *Scream* in the opening sequence, with the lamps and lights in the set design supposedly providing the warm “soft” light, or the patio light providing the “hard” light.

**Cinematography: Frame Composition and Depth of Field.** Lighting also helps in the composition of a shot, the frame which shows us what is happening on screen. Depth is a useful idea here, as a film is a two dimensional representation. In particular, depth of field is the clarity of vision the camera lens gives us: this exaggerates what is in focus and what is blurred, normally in the background. Scenes and images are framed in a way that can suggest depth and space: interior shots use walls and background to imply the walls of a room, while doorways, stairwells and corridors can be both symbolic and also give a sense of scale to settings. In some horror films they are also where the threat is framed. In horror texts it is useful to see what space is left unfilled, as this may be where the threat is going to be, or may be used to misdirect our attention. Pay attention to background and foreground: while a character is in the foreground, the threat may be visible to the audience in the background, causing tension through our knowledge (which the character does not share). Vision, obstructions to vision and the need to see to survive are key horror elements, and are achieved through the filmmakers use of camera angles and shots.

**Cinematography: Camera Angles, Levels, Height and Distance.** The framing also gives us our perspective on what is happening, so it is important to look for how perspectives change and why. Camera angles refer to the angle which the *mise en scene* is viewed at: Straight-on is exactly that, the framing and camera are looking straight at the shot, whereas high angle shots position us as looking down, and low angles as looking up. This is apparent in horror films to give indications of power relations: looking down



puts us in a powerful position, whereas looking up (at a building or monster) symbolically puts us in weaker position. Camera levels are similar: if the framing is level, the parallels and perpendiculars in the frame will be straight, if the level is canted, it makes objects and distances seem canted or off balance: an illusion which draws attention to the unfamiliarity of the environment. (See Distance: Dutch Tilt) Height is also simple, and can sometimes be implied through the camera level, but occasionally shots will be at ground level, or low/high to watch a character move or important aspects of the environment: the first view of the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining* is from an aerial perspective, showing the hotel and its scale (and isolation).

The distance of a shot is also important, and we recognise distance in shots like close-ups. There are lots of different shot distances (See Bordwell and Thompson for a very good guide) but some of the simplest and easiest to recognise in horror films are the following. In long shots, human figures are present, but the framing shows more attention to the environment. Medium long shots frame human beings from the waist up, while still showing some environment: in horror films we see this while characters have conversations with each other, while establishing their motivations: The three girls walking home and talking in *Halloween* uses this shot. Medium close-ups frame the human from the chest up, while close-ups focus on elements like objects, hands, and importantly facial expressions: horror films use these to show the reactions of characters to events, or the detail of a monster. A dutch tilt is also useful in horror: this is where the angle of the camera and its distance are both off centre, so emphasis is placed on an unusual angle of perspective: this is commonly used to denote madness or terror, as things being out of kilter.

***Cinematography: Movement.*** This can relate to both the camera movement and also zooms, where the camera focuses in on objects or people. More commonly however, the actual frame of the image moves, so panning means the camera 'scans' left or right, as if taking in the action or setting. The tilt movement moves the camera up or down, as if looking up or down. In a tracking shot, the camera moves in any direction following its particular object of interest: two characters can walk along, while the camera moves ahead of them to keep them in a medium close-up, for example. Of particular interest in horror films is the use of Steadicam technology, which allows a smooth movement either at a fixed angle and height, or the illusion of a moving point of view shot: the beginning of *Halloween* is the classic example of this in horror films (though John Carpenter was using Panaglide,

not Steadicam). More recently, the easy availability of digital cameras and filming equipment means that many modern horror films that belong to the “found footage” sub-genre use the idea of the “eyewitness” recording events: the camera movements will be jerky to mimic the perspective of the camera operator. *Rec* is a good example of this as we can only see what the camera sees: when people step in front of the lens or it moves suddenly, the images we see change rapidly and adds to the disorientating experience.

**Editing.** Editing is when all the shots of the film are put together to construct the overall narrative, joining different shots and sequences together. The simplest edit is a *cut* from one shot to the next, for instance when we see an action and then a cut to a shot of someone reacting. This links cause and effect, and is known as continuity editing, which tells the story. However, there are other types of editing: fade-in and fade-outs use the darkening or lightening of the screen to indicate a change, whether in time or place, whereas wipes replace one image with another by movement across the screen. Dissolves are when one image gradually morphs into another. Editing is a key factor in all films, as editing determines the length of the shot (the time it is seen on screen) and makes links between the images of one shot or another. Cross cutting, for example, cuts between different lines of action taking place, indicating they are taking place at the same time. More often, cuts join two shots whose compositional elements match, helping to establish continuity of action. This is called matched cuts. Montage is also a key element, when lots of shots are joined together to give an effect, whether it is to show actions and time (lots of quick shots which cut between different characters and actions is used in action films to give a sense of the speed and impact of the actions) or rhythmic, when the editing can be fast or slow, to show shots which are similar to each other in composition or shot length. This can give an emotional and symbolic meaning to the shots. So, establishing shots can be long to show the establishing environment the narrative will take place in, while “found footage” horror films may minimise the effect of editing by introducing it when the camera is ‘switched off’, or there is a loss of light. *The Blair Witch Project* does this by cutting between the perspectives of the two cameras, and stating that the footage has been edited, whereas a film like *Rec* uses sudden darkness and the turning off and on of the camera to impose cuts and move the narrative forward. Editing also gives the pacing or rhythm to the narrative: it is usual for horror films to include longer or more action and tension sequences later in the narrative, to show how the threat is developing: the editing makes these sequences fast or slow, increasing the



audiences response to the events on screen.

**Sound.** One of the final areas to discuss is the use of sound. In all films this can be diegetic (it belongs to or is “caused” by what is happening on screen) which includes dialogue, or sound effects of movement or weather, and occasionally music if there is a source on screen from where this sound can come from. Non-diegetic sound is added onto the images, so soundtracks or loud sounds (sometimes called “stingers”) which cause “jump shocks” are examples of these. The most common form of soundtrack is a musical accompaniment, but in horror there are particular forms which are worth looking for. The contrast between sound and silence is important, especially in a tense scene where concealment and silence are important: this can be broken and cause shock by a sudden loud noise in the soundtrack, whether diegetic or non-diegetic. In the case of threats, particular monsters may have their own *leitmotif* or passage of music which belongs to them: the “dah-dum, dah-dum” of the shark in *Jaws* identifies its presence even when it is not visible.

The classic example of how sound is used to generate tension and shock is the shower scene from *Psycho*, where the use of high pitched violin sounds accompanies the movements of the shower curtain, the reaction of Marion and the slashing actions of the killer. The speed and volume of the sounds contrast with the diegetic sounds of the shower, reinforcing the violence and shock of the sequence, as well as providing an auditory support of the speed of the visual cuts between different shots. There can also be a use of bass rumbles or high pitched atonal (noises and sounds which seem to have no melodic structure) sounds. The screeches that accompany the curse video in *Ringu* are particularly notable: in one of the best known sequences, Sadako slowly advances towards a man from inside his television. The slow sounds that accompany her movement are reminiscent of squeaking chains or sharpening knives. As she breaks through the screen of the television a low note is heard, which gradually develops into violins playing as she pulls herself out: this is a traditional horror soundtrack, as high pitched noises in particular may be linked to our primal recognition of sounds that indicate danger or urgency: Mark Grimshaw's discussion of predator sounds is a very useful addition when thinking about sound in horror.

### **Analysing Horror: Starting Analysis for students**

It is best if you can watch a film several times, firstly to get a sense of the narrative and pacing, the main characters, settings, and threats, and any key themes or ideas you think are being emphasised. You will then be able to

identify key sections (or sequences) which are important to understanding the film. Invest in a good guide to film language: I've referred here to Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction* [6<sup>th</sup> Edition], which has lots of examples and step by step discussions of editing, shots and other factors in filmmaking.

It depends on where you watch the film, but pausing films, replaying sequences, keeping a list of shots or edits you think are important, noting colours, costumes or set designs, changes in music: all of these help make analysis detailed and more importantly academic: you should make notes as you watch if possible, so that you don't rely purely on your memory.

### **Useful Sources:**

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