

# EDITORIAL

## The Horror of It All

Film holds a mirror to our times. Horror films shatter that mirror. The anxieties of 9/11 and the Iraq War contort into that subgenre dubbed “torture porn,” where atrocities cued from Abu Ghraib and the Bush-era practice of rendition and “enhanced interrogation techniques” are visited upon Americans at home (*Saw*) and abroad (*Hostel*). Documentary-style horror films, heavy on hand-held video imagery, answer the public craving for “reality” by thrusting live and inescapable images of death and destruction in our faces, as in *The Blair Witch Project*, *Paranormal Activity*, and *Diary of the Dead*, where a veteran of modern horror, George A. Romero, updates and reboots a concept of undying appeal since the late Sixties. In *Drag Me to Hell*, a bank loan officer is victimized by a curse placed on her by the Gypsy crone whose house she’s repossessed, making it the first example of Great Recession horror—but then again the genre has always been preoccupied with consumption, of bodies, souls, and ideals.

All of which makes this an opportune moment to devote a *Cineaste* Special Focus section to contemporary horror films, another norms-breaker along the lines of last winter’s survey of cult movies. Horror cannot be denied. New films regularly open at the top of the box-office charts. They creep in from unexpected places, far from Hollywood; fans caught unaware by what proved to be an influential surge of titles from Asia at the beginning of the decade, like Japan’s *Ringu* series, were no doubt pleasantly shocked when sleepy Sweden produced a classic (last year’s *Let the Right One In*) toward the end of it. And they adhere to the culture. Ten years after *The Sixth Sense*, we still see dead people.

Scratch a cinephile and chances are a horror fan is right under the skin. The illicit thrill of the macabre unites the generations weaned on *Famous Monsters of Filmland* magazine and pre-cable telecasts of the legendary Universal pictures of the Thirties with the generation that grew up on *Fangoria* and DVDs of Michael, Jason, and Freddy. But so, too, does the feeling that the thrill has gone. The glut of those chart-topping horror films tend to be one-week wonders, collapsing once audiences have seen through their watered-down, safe-for-PG-13 visions. The harder films play too rough for viewers who remember the subtler, more sophisticated scares of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and the *Wolf Man*, who were coarsened into action figures for the recent *Van Helsing*. And nothing makes a connoisseur shudder more than the words “Michael Bay Presents” before a stream of unnecessary remakes, including *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday the 13th*.

Our Special Focus considers what’s been lost—and what’s been discovered—in a time of feast and famine for the ravening genre. “Torture porn” is a divisive subject. Tarring horror with the “porn” brush is already off-putting for devotees who feel that the genre has earned its legitimacy, and who find the moral underpinnings of the *Saw* series (the most financially successful horror franchise to date) complex and hard-hitting. But in an assessment that knocks over a few sacred cows, *Cineaste* finds the edge of *Saw* blunted, and more reactionary than revealing. It’s not just the gore that’s troublesome (so much so, it’s hard to find stills that don’t go over the top with the blood and guts), it’s the retreat from the critique of the nuclear family and the status quo that began in the Sixties, and the return to the misogyny of the Eighties slasher flicks, wrapped in conservative garb.

1968’s *Night of the Living Dead* was hugely influential in tearing into silent-majority mores, so, in another article herein, also available online, *Cineaste* naturally turns its attention to the zombie, a figure that shuffled through films in the Thirties, acquired gruesome new appetites in Romero’s ongoing saga, and now rampages as the fleet-footed “infected” in movies like Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later*. That monsters are so flexible, and can mutate according to our fears at the moment, gives them their power.

In another compelling development that’s examined this issue, we look at a monster that after centuries of bad behavior is attempting to go straight, at least in the *Twilight* books and films. Here the vampire has been tamed to a cultivated and ultrasensitive teenager, looking to the heroine for chaste, high-flown romance rather than as a convenient snack. The Frankenstein monster moved audiences by displaying an innocence that complemented, but did not compromise, his brute force. That audiences flock to stories where the lead bloodsucker suppresses his unnatural desires (HBO’s popular *True Blood* is another) for the sake of love, as if vampirism could be held in check by a twelve-step program, is a reversal from the usual scare tactics. We used to like our monsters inhuman; now, we expect them to be our betters, tutoring us on how to live.

When the menacing Other is transformed into a quirkier version of us, there’s reason to fear that horror has lost its potency. But *Let the Right One In*, the best of the new entries in a recurrent subgenre of horror movies explored in this issue, camouflages its evil in the shape of a young girl, and raises questions about gender and sexuality other genres would find difficult to grapple with, or even ask. The value of horror is that it shreds our complacency, exposes the dark heart of our fallibility, and forces us to reckon with what we’d rather conceal. Our monsters hold us accountable.—**The Editors**

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