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SHOCK VALUE



INTRODUCTION

The first monster that an audience has to be scared of is the filmmaker. They have to feel in the presence of someone not confined by the normal rules of propriety and decency.

Wes Craven

THE MOANS of a woman in pain echoed down the hallways of an office building. Then came the lewd roar of a man enjoying himself. It was Times Square in the early seventies. High above the traffic of Broadway, inside a cramped editing room, a baby-faced director, Wes Craven, huddled over a television screen staring at his first feature film, *The Last House on the Left*. Sean Cunningham, his producer and friend, sat nearby, worrying. This is sick, Cunningham thought, but is it *good* sick?

Cunningham had worked backstage Off Broadway and shot soft-core pornography. He was not naive. After a few years making cheap movies peddling cheaper thrills, he developed a feel for exploitation, for tapping into the desires of sweaty men in trench coats without alienating the other crucial demographic of teenagers necking at drive-in theaters. So when he told Craven he wanted him to make an extreme exploitation movie, he was thinking of some nudity, a splash or two of blood, and maybe even a bit of sadism to satisfy the perverts. But this film, this was, well, what exactly?

What he saw was a curly-haired maniac named Krug, wide-eyed and scowling, sitting on the chest of a girl in the middle of the woods. Her face was a mask of terror and disgust. Krug carved the word “Love” into her chest. A crowd of hooligans cheered. With a half-crazed sneer, Krug, holding a knife, stared lasciviously at the struggling girl. Then he drooled all over her. This wasn’t scary movie stuff that would make your girlfriend cuddle up on your shoulder. This would send her running out of the car. Cunningham didn’t know what to make of *The Last House on the Left*, and he couldn’t believe that Craven had directed it. A father of two kids who left his job upstate as a literature professor, Craven was shy, cerebral, and very, very mellow. Rarely angry or overly emotional, Craven betrayed the habits of a small-town academic whose mild rebellions included long hair, pot smoking, and avant-garde theater. He was more likely to make a terrible pun than to offer a harsh insult. He hardly seemed to fit the part of the bomb-throwing provocateur.

Craven asked one his former students, Steve Chapin, to drop by to discuss working on the music for the movie. When Chapin came in and saw what was on the screen, it made him think of the mayhem caused by Charles Manson, whose recent murder trial had made him the most famous criminal in America. “It’s a thriller,” Craven told him. “Tough stuff.”

Chapin, who had the laid-back affect of a downtown folksinger, watched Krug carve his initials into the body of his victim. There were no cutaway shots, no suggestion, just a graphic, vile assault, shot with the discretion of a snuff film. “You guys sure about this?” Chapin said in a thick Brooklyn accent. “Are you allowed to do this? Are you allowed to do this in America?” Maybe he didn’t really know Craven after all.

Trying to reassure him that everything was respectable, or at least as much as such entertainment usually is, Cunningham said, “Don’t worry: it’s just a joke.” For him, the point was shock value; Chapin later asked to be removed from the credits.

Cunningham struck out into movies when there were not many independent feature companies operating out of New York. He was a natural showman, and his great insight as a promoter was in his adver-

tisements subverting the usual puffery (“Scariest Film of All Time!”) that no one believed anymore. Instead, he told the audience to stay away—for their own good. “Not recommended for persons over 30” the poster for *The Last House on the Left* warned. For those brave enough to attend, the ad urged: “Just keep telling yourself: It’s Only a Movie. It’s Only a Movie.” Craven, however, was not interested in offering such comfort. To him, the point was to make the horrific violence look so real that you might entertain the thought that maybe this isn’t just a movie. Wes Craven was serious.

He wasn’t the only one. On the West Coast, around the same time, another few aspiring filmmakers were watching a maniacal-looking man with scraggly hair wield a knife over a young girl. Dan O’Bannon, the actor playing the sweaty brute with an authentic-sounding southern accent, appeared at first in shadow, a dark shape walking down a hill. The director cut to a virginal babysitter sitting in the living room by herself when she answered the phone. She hears only heavy breathing. Silence. The phone rings again, more breathing. “Is this one of your jokes?” she says, the television blaring in the background. Suddenly the perspective shifts to a shaky camera shot outside the suburban house where the potential victim appears through the window. The phone rings again, but it’s the operator this time: “The killer’s inside the house!” The lulling tone shifts into hectic cuts and a synthesizer sound track as a silent madman races after the victim, ending in police gunfire and death.

The story of the killer stalking the babysitter from inside the house was an old urban legend, but it had yet to become a movie trope. Screened at the USC film school, the fifteen-minute short *Foster’s Release* was later shown at the Edinburgh Film Festival, and largely forgotten. Its director, Terence Winkless, a soft-spoken student with experience acting on television, didn’t care much about horror. He saw it as a lark, and the thought of expanding this movie into a feature did not occur to him.

When Winkless moved on to create something closer to his heart, *Wallflower*, a soulful meditation about the challenges of being an artist,

he received written criticism from his classmates, mostly anonymous, except for one pointed assessment. “I don’t know anything from the ending. Nothing happens one way or the other,” it stated brusquely. “Cutting was at times very effective but you kept coming back to that side medium shot.” The critic signed his name JHC, the initials for John Howard Carpenter.

John Carpenter would go on to direct his own heavy-breathing stalker babysitter movie less than a decade later. *Halloween* became one of the most commercially successful and artistically influential horror movies ever made. Winkless worked on a few films, including co-writing *The Howling*, but his career never took off. The way he describes it, *Foster’s Release* could be considered the Rosetta Stone of modern horror. “John took it from me no question,” Winkless says with no bitterness in his voice. “But I don’t blame him. He was smart. I was too much of a purist to turn *Foster’s Release* into something bigger. That’s fine: I have a good life. I just don’t have his kind of money.”

The year after *Halloween* opened, inspiring countless imitations with similar masked serial killers prowling outside of houses, Dan O’Bannon’s screenplay for *Alien*, a movie that he had been thinking about since his film school days, revolutionized the monster movie. The success of these two movies, which can be traced back to the USC film school in the early seventies, completed the horror genre’s transition from queasy exploitation fare to the beating heart of popular culture.

This book tells the unlikely story of how John Carpenter, Wes Craven, Dan O’Bannon, and several other innovative artists over the course of about a dozen years invented the modern horror movie. In the 1960s, going to see a horror movie was barely more respectable than visiting a porn theater. You watched scary movies in cars or in dirty rooms with sticky floors. Critics often ignored the genre, and Hollywood studios saw its box office potential as limited. Religious groups and politicians sometimes protested, but more often, mainstream adult audiences didn’t pay attention. These young filmmakers revived the genre, and

the results of their work can be seen almost every weekend when a major horror movie opens.

Magazines and television channels are now dedicated to horror movies. Popular video games are based on movies like *Alien*. Universities teach exploitation cinema. Museums curate festivals of low-budget movies that were picketed when they opened. In terms of the box office, zombies and vampires are as close to a sure thing as there is in Hollywood. Relentless serial killers have become the subject of Oscar-winning productions such as *The Silence of the Lambs* and *No Country for Old Men*.

The publishing industry has long relied on that indestructible commercial artist Stephen King, but now *Twilight* helps drive the business, and the undead have brought a new generation to the stories of Jane Austen in the bestseller *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Some of the most popular shows on television include serial killers (*Dexter*), demons (*Supernatural*), zombies (*The Walking Dead*), and vampires (*True Blood*). A-list actresses such as Jennifer Connelly and Naomi Watts now are scream queens. Pop stars like Lady Gaga are just as likely to dress in gothic style and strike zombie poses as to project a bubble-gum image. Horror has become a billion-dollar industry.

Even our politicians communicate in language created by the horror film. In early 2008, a thirty-second advertisement appeared on television sets across the country, commanding the focus of the nation, and for a moment, it seemed to shift the momentum of the Democratic presidential primary. It began with a two-story suburban house in an ominous shadow. The glow of the windows stood out like twinkling eyes through the darkness. Someone was home. The frame of the picture moved unsteadily, swooping downward in a rush, bobbing back and forth, approaching, retreating, suggesting that a threat is out there, staring at the house. The screen dims to black and the telephone screeches. It keeps ringing. Shots of a little girl sleeping inside the house flash for a second, then a close-up of a peaceful baby. "Someone is out there," a gravelly baritone says. Where? The phone rings louder and louder and

louder until the music swells, a shock of light intrudes on the screen, and a new voice announces calmly: “I am Hillary Clinton, and I have approved this message.”

In the subsequent controversy over the ad, no commentator noticed what was stunningly obvious: Hillary Clinton had made a horror movie. Not just any horror movie, either; this potent short video borrowed conventions that can be traced back to a very fertile cultural moment when John Carpenter put the audience in the perspective of the killer in *Halloween*.

Horror has become so pervasive that we don’t even notice how thoroughly it has entered the public consciousness. It’s on television, in the movies, and in the show that goes on in our minds when we go to bed at night. The modern horror movie has not only established a vocabulary for us to articulate our fears. It has taught us what to be scared of.

In the late sixties, the film industry was changing. Rules about obscenity and violence were in flux. The “Midnight Movie” was reaching a young audience that embraced underground and cult films. Starting in the second half of 1968, the flesh-eating zombie and the remote serial killer emerged as the new dominant movie monsters, the vampire and werewolf of their day. A new emphasis on realism took hold, vying for attention with the fantastical wing of the genre. Just as important was how the writers of these movies shifted the focus away from narrative and toward a deceptively simpler storytelling with a constantly shifting point of view. Movies were more graphic. The relationship with the audience became increasingly confrontational, and that was a result largely of the new class of directors who were making low-budget movies for drive-in theaters and exploitation houses across the country.

This cultural shift took place at the same transitional period when some of the most ambitious Hollywood movies in history were being made. Many of the adventurous mainstream directors who belong to what is known as the New Hollywood got their start in horror. Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and Peter Bogdanovich refined their craft on low-budget scares before moving on to what most people in the

movie business considered more mature work. At the same time, another class of directors more committed to genre was getting started. George Romero, David Cronenberg, John Carpenter, Wes Craven, and Tobe Hooper reinvented the conventions of the horror films outside of Hollywood, while William Friedkin, Brian De Palma, and Roman Polanski smuggled more prestige horror productions into the studio system. Never in the history of the movies had so much talent been put to work frightening audiences.

Movies like *The Last House on the Left* and *Night of the Living Dead* rarely received sustained and serious consideration from critics, and while that has changed in the decades since they opened, the source of their inspiration often remains misunderstood. Alfred Hitchcock is usually cited as the godfather of the genre, but his relationship with the younger horror directors is much more complicated and tense than assumed. Comic books, monster movie magazines, and the short stories of H. P. Lovecraft had an equally significant impact on the directors of the era. And while these movies typically told their stories in a highly cinematic language, the influence of a new school of drama on scary movies has been underestimated. To explain the success of these movies, you need to begin by examining the background and artistic intentions of their creators. But you can't end there, for these movies, besides being in some cases made almost by accident, were the product of a specific cultural context.

Beginning after the end of the restrictive Production Code in 1968 and before special effects took hold of the genre in the early 1980s, these scary movies benefited from coming of age when there was increased artistic freedom but enough technical limitations to keep control in the hands of the director. Their energy focused not on effects, but on the best way to scare an audience. On that question, they shared many ideas. Their intellectual influences were much more diverse than those of future generations of horror makers. This broadened their visions. While most of the directors did not socialize with one another—this was before horror conventions and film festivals became popular—they

kept close track of what the others were doing, borrowing good ideas and generally working in a kind of long-distance collaboration. As a result, a direct line can be drawn from *Rosemary's Baby* to *The Exorcist*, from *The Last House on the Left* to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and from *Night of the Living Dead* to every horror movie since.

The key horror movie artists of this era had very different sensibilities but remarkably similar personality types: outsiders, insecure and alienated, frequently at odds with their parents and other authority figures. The men (and they are exclusively men) are a surprisingly mild-mannered group. They generally dress in rumpled clothes, have broad senses of humor, and rarely seem on the verge of knocking you over the head with a blunt instrument. It's hard to imagine a less threatening group of people. "The truth is that we are sweet," confesses George Romero, who has probably dreamed up more ways for a zombie to eat a human being than any man alive. "A bunch of us back then were stoners, but that's about it. No capes or fangs or anything. Steve King says we don't have nightmares because we give them all away."

Most of the artists who make horror movies got started because of an interest in and, often, a joy in being scared when they were kids. The scares of childhood are generally much more varied and intense than those we experience as adults. These directors recall them most vividly. They hold tightly to them. Many grew up in remote parts of the world and with a set of common assumptions about what things went bump in the night; they dipped into the same small pool of menacing literature, theater, and film. As a consequence, the movies during this period not only addressed the same questions, but their answers had enough in common with each other that a cohesive form of the genre developed by the end of the 1970s, when Ron Rosenbaum described this school of scary movies in *Harper's Magazine*. He called it the "New Horror." Horror, he argued, "seems ready to supplant sex and violence in the hierarchy of mass sensation-seeking."

The popular narrative about the rise of the mainstream studio directors of the New Hollywood is that through the strength of their ideas

they defied the bottom line to make something personal. The success of New Horror also depends on the personal visions of a few artists, but the best films were not merely victories by art in its endless battle against commerce. The best horror movies were products of compromise and dispute, stitching together spare parts and tweaking old, fraying conventions. The making of these movies has usually been seen through the narrow prism of one director. That ignores the essentially collaborative way most of these movies were made. After hundreds of conversations with the leading directors, writers, producers, actors, and executives as well as critics and members of the MPAA ratings board, it's clear to me that these movies need to be seen first in the context of genre and then as a product of a struggle between antithetical sensibilities.

Rosemary's Baby pitted the Old Horror tradition of the producer Bill Castle against the new art house ideas of Roman Polanski. The crafty commercial instincts of Cunningham and the confrontational philosophical bent of Craven provide the central artistic drama of *The Last House on the Left*. In *Sisters* and *Carrie*, Brian De Palma was not stealing from Hitchcock; he was in dialogue with him, and De Palma often disagreed with the master. The making of *The Exorcist* was a battle between the virtues of faith and those of more secular values. The aesthetic of *Alien* melded science fiction rooted in real-world technology with a gothic surrealism.

The tensions behind the making of these movies are not only reflected on-screen. They are essential to why they proved so scary. The disputes made the intentions of the filmmakers more inchoate and at times even incomprehensible. What the New Horror movies share is a sense that the most frightening thing in the world is the unknown, the inability to understand the monster right in front of your face. These movies communicate confusion, disorientation, and the sense that the true source of anxiety is located in between categories: fact and fantasy, art and commerce, the living and the dead.

Fear is personal. Whether it is heights or rats or failure, what fright-

ens us is as varied as what makes us laugh or what we find beautiful. Taste matters. So do experience and culture. But just as there are some paintings that are simply beautiful regardless of context, certain scares transcend the particular phobias of time and place. When we see a sharp knife approach an eyeball, our response is reflexive and even primal. Who has never been afraid of the dark? Then there are the images that not only instantly frighten but endure, sticking in the subconscious and reappearing in dreams. The artistic task for these directors was to locate these enduring scares, the ones that, in a way, we all share.

Death may be the one thing that binds together all horror movies, but its role in scaring audiences is overrated. It's not just that so much violence on-screen desensitized audiences. To some, dying seems rather simple and finite. There's a reason that Hamlet can debate both sides of "To be or not to be" for an entire soliloquy. Dying is terrifying, but the confusion of life can be worse. That may be why some of the most horrifying images of the New Horror—the monster busting out of a man's chest in *Alien*, the devilish baby carriage in *Rosemary's Baby*—examine the beginnings rather than the ends of life.

We will never understand what a baby is thinking emerging from the womb. But try to imagine the shock of one world turning into another. Nothing is familiar and the slightest detail registers as shockingly new. Think of the futility of processing what is going on. No wonder they scream. One of the central pleasures of getting scared is that it focuses the mind. When you experience extreme fear, you forget the rest of the world. This intensity fixes you in the present tense. Overwhelming terror may be the closest we ever get to the feeling of being born. To put it another way, the good horror movies make you think; the great ones make you stop.



CHAPTER ONE

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Ladies and gentlemen, please do not panic! But
scream! Scream for your lives!

Dr. Warren Chapin, The Tingler

WILLIAM CASTLE was in bed sweating. This was a good sign. It meant that *Rosemary's Baby* had done what it was supposed to do. But that was not all it did. At first glance, the novel appeared to him to be the usual nonsense about a young woman possessed by Satan, hocus-pocus that has spooked audiences since a three and a quarter-minute French silent film called *The House of the Devil* premiered in 1896. The book's author, Ira Levin, was a comic playwright whose previous three Broadway shows had bombed; his last play opened that year and closed in a week. This potboiler was about a woman pregnant with the Antichrist. Castle had directed this kind of thing many times before and he was looking to stop.

Once Castle started making his way through the first few chapters, however, he recognized that this was also slick, hard-driving storytelling. He was also impressed with how Levin rooted his tale in the real world of contemporary Manhattan. It was about issues that people could relate to—the nervousness of entering the real estate market; struggling in a faltering, sexless marriage; and the yearning, desperate search for



fame. The book puts you in the position of Rosemary imagining what it's like to become isolated from your spouse, the world, and, possibly, your sanity. Levin was also playing on anxieties that ordinary people understand: meddling neighbors, doctors with all the answers, and the frightening uncertainties of your first pregnancy. At the heart is a joke that even critics would appreciate: Rosemary's husband, an actor, sold their child to Satan in exchange for a role in a Broadway show.

It was also clear that this was a book that could turn into a film very easily. The novel was mostly dialogue. Castle began putting the pieces together in his head. His friend Vincent Price would star as the creepy neighbor who sells Rosemary's husband on the plan. That would bring in the horror crowd. The rest of the cast could be filled out with younger actors to appeal to kids. Put the whole thing in 3-D and it would be huge. He saw only one problem: the Catholics would go berserk. The film was after all about a sympathetic believer who lost her faith, moved to New York, gave birth to the Devil, and then learned to make the best of it. And she's the hero! Castle's wife, whom he trusted, read the script and told him he was going to have push-back from the Church. Then again, controversy sells. "Even if they ban it," he told his wife, "Catholics will go."

Only one day earlier, when the galleys first crossed his desk, Castle had passed on it right away. "*Rosemary's Baby* is not for me," he told the agent over the phone. "The bottom has dropped out of horror films." Recent box office numbers backed him up. Only a handful of major new horror movies opened in 1967. With the exception of *Wait Until Dark*, a thriller that benefited from the buzz produced by its star Audrey Hepburn, they were all disappointments. Hammer Productions, the English company that revived interest in the old gothic standbys *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, was running out of ideas, producing a flop in *Frankenstein Created Woman*, the fourth in its series starring Peter Cushing. Castle's *The Spirit Is Willing*, a ghost story starring Sid Caesar, could have been made in the thirties. The most interesting new spin on the old formula that year might have been *The Fearless Vampire Killers*,

an uneven and slowly paced spoof of Hammer films by a young director named Roman Polanski. Despite compelling camerawork, the movie never struck the right balance of laughs to scares, baffling audiences looking for comedy and horror.

Castle lost money in 1966 on *Let's Kill Uncle*, a silly series of scares set on an island where a broken-down haunted house sits next to a pool filled with sharks. Of the four proposed endings, Castle chose the most nonsensical one where the murderous uncle develops a heart. While he was known for advertising campaigns that sold outrageousness, he never really planned on delivering it. When it came to his movies, Castle was happy right behind the curve. He was a master thief with a knack for picking which houses to break into. They were usually the ones built by Alfred Hitchcock. Castle directed, but his genius was in promotion. He took out an insurance policy at Lloyds of London for \$1,000 for any audience member who died of fright at his 1958 revenge film *Macabre*. The next year, he jerry-rigged buzzers to the seats that would vibrate during scare sequences in *The Tingler*, a monster movie about creatures who live inside our bodies that began with Castle's personal warning that the way to protect yourself from the tingling sensation of fear was to scream.

These tactics brought the audience into the movie, gave them a role to play, made everyone a scream queen. Castle played a crucial part as one of the main attractions, putting himself in the ads just like Hitchcock did—a cigar-chomping, rotund ham who impersonated the role of a big-shot Hollywood producer that he never truly was. Castle started with an ingenious marketing campaign, but just as important was the appeal of being a part of a community of tremblers, sitting in a room with other people and freaking out together. His gimmicks turned the movies into interactive events but they also told you something about them. They were often not good enough to stand on their own. They needed something extra.

A publicist at heart, Castle knew enough about the power of image to understand that his could use some improvement. He made movies

for excitable teenagers, but he yearned for the approval of critics and award committees and serious artists. That was not going to happen as long as his showman persona was more famous than his movies. Image matters, but when a new audience of serious-minded film buffs were flocking to new-wave cinema and daring counterculture fare, Castle could tell that he was becoming known as someone out of touch: Hitchcock without the talent. He was looking for a project that could deliver him an Oscar. So after some lobbying by its agent, he took a copy of *Rosemary's Baby* home, because, well, he didn't have any better options. When he started to sweat, he decided to take a risk.

After contacting the agent the next day, Castle bet everything on the book: he sold his house and bought the option himself for \$100,000, plus another \$50,000 if it became a bestseller, which it did, and 5 percent of the net profits. Since he had a contract with Paramount to make cheap shockers, he submitted the idea to an executive. In a few days, he received a phone call.

Speaking in smooth, dulcet tones, Robert Evans, the thirty-six-year-old vice president of production at the struggling studio, laid on the charm. Evans had never cared what Castle had done before. But Evans saw the same thing that Castle did. *Rosemary's Baby* was a new spin on Old Horror. Looking beneath the surface, Evans noticed a movie about the perils of domesticity. Rosemary had made the choices of a very deferential good girl from the 1950s. She wants a child, stays at home, and defers to her husband's career, follows the advice of her older neighbors and doctors even though it makes her unsure of herself. She's polite, kind to friends, and hesitant about challenging her husband. When he rapes her in her sleep, she is shocked, but forgives him. And for all her attempts at being the perfect wife, what does that get her? The movie expressed an au courant attitude about the evils of conformity, youth culture, and the sexual revolution. Now that's something you can sell. But Evans knew it wouldn't work with Old Horror gimmicks.

The last time studios took a big chance on horror movies was during the Depression, when Universal Pictures produced its classic monster

movies. The 1931 premiere of *Frankenstein*, the chilling story of the misunderstood monster based on Mary Shelley's novel, was shot in an expressionist style that was in the same spirit of emerging surrealist artists such as Salvador Dalí. Opening the same year, in the midst of a global economic collapse the depths of which had never been seen before, *Dracula* presented a vision of more uncompromising evil. Both stories exist in a world of shadows and odd sounds, strange creatures and flights of fancy. They transported audiences somewhere far away.

By the next decade, horror had been relegated to low-budget departments, given scant finances and little respect. Producer Val Lewton made the best horror films of the 1940s with modest Freudian films such as *Cat People* that turned the shadows on the wall of a room housing an empty pool into a terrifying hint of a monster. Lewton and a few others could turn these boutiques into a laboratory for great movies, but few in the studio system got behind supernatural horror. It was kids' stuff. In the fifties, a new monster movie craze took hold, along with a science-fiction boom, but horror remained marginal. The classic Universal monster movies—*Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Wolf Man*—began regularly appearing on television. That cut into ticket sales.

Paramount was doing poorly so it had little to lose. Anticipation was already building for the new Warner Brothers movie *Bonnie and Clyde*, which reinvented the gangster drama as a counterculture fable with two killers as glamorous and sexy antiheroes. Evans wanted to do the same thing for horror—update it for a young crowd. But he knew that would not happen with William Castle as the director. Evans imagined the result: workmanlike cinematography, a low-rent cast, standing under dark shadowy lighting on a studio lot waiting for a payoff with a man in red pajamas and a pitchfork. There would be organ music, perhaps, and a spectacular advertising campaign that included no lack of exclamation marks and promises of extreme terror. Vincent Price would probably be involved.

Evans understood showmen like Castle because he was one himself. Through force of will, he transformed himself from a clothes salesman

in New York to a golden-skinned lothario, a studio executive who understood the counterculture, and a populist who traded in art. He knew that you needed someone with more class to turn *Rosemary's Baby* into a hit. He called Charles Blühdorn, the head of Gulf and Western Industries, which had recently bought Paramount, and made his case.

Four days later, Blühdorn and Castle hammered out a deal. After shaking Castle's hand, Blühdorn walked back behind his desk and asked what was not an innocent question. "How old are you, Castle?" The producer knew what that meant. At fifty-three years old, he was considered almost over the hill. "Have you heard of Roman Polanski?" Blühdorn said, making the case that Castle did not want to hear. "A genius. And thirty-two years old. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Polanski, with his youth, directed *Rosemary's Baby* and you, with your experience, produced," he said, sticking in the dagger. "You could teach each other so much."

Castle's heart sank. He had seen movies by Polanski and there was no questioning his talent. But *Rosemary's Baby* was *his* chance at respectability. Ever since he left school to work as an assistant to Bela Lugosi, Castle had imagined mainstream success, but the wait had been too long. Castle stood up and angrily resisted. "Look, Mr. Blühdorn, the reason I bought *Rosemary's Baby* with my own money was to direct the film," he protested. "It's going to be an important motion picture, and I'm not going to miss the opportunity of directing. I direct *Rosemary's Baby* or no deal!"

It was an empty threat—and they both knew it. Paramount could tie up his film forever, and with all his savings in the bank, Castle couldn't afford to have it languish. Backed into a corner, he did the only thing he could do: agree to terms and sign up as a producer who would monitor shooting. It was a decision that would haunt him. Even though his name was on the film—and he even made a cameo, showing up outside a telephone booth—Castle was given little power over the artistic direction of the movie, and even less credit for it. While the hiring of Roman Polanski seemed like another example of the kind of backstabbing and

office politics that went on in Hollywood, it represented something more than that: a passing of the torch from the Old Horror to the New.

It took a producer from the Old Horror to recognize the potential of a book about the Antichrist, but a new kind of director to shake all the dust out of the story. The man who would modernize the Devil was, pointedly, an agnostic Jew. Roman Polanski did not believe in the supernatural. But he did believe in the existence of a certain kind of evil. He had seen the effects of the Holocaust firsthand growing up in Poland. His mother died in a concentration camp. He and his father escaped. After a stint in France, he moved to London, where he developed a reputation for stylish clothes, a prodigious sexual appetite, and movies with dark, anxious subject matter. Hollywood, to him, meant success, glamour, and fun. Robert Evans sold him on *Rosemary's Baby* with the promise of following it up with a movie about skiing. Polanski agreed and started planning a project based on the idea that straddling the line between real and fake is much more dangerous than jumping to one side.

THE DEFINITION of the horror film was fairly narrow in the late 1960s. It almost always involved the supernatural. In one of the first serious histories of the genre, *An Illustrated Guide to the Horror Film*, published in 1967, the critic Carlos Clarens gives only brief mention to movies about human killers. In a short appreciation, he describes *Psycho* not as a horror movie but as a “pathological case study.” He also argues that the purpose of the horror movie was not merely to scare, but to sublimate those fears. “The more rationalistic a time becomes the more it needs the escape valve of the fantastic,” he writes, arguing that horror films allow man to curb his natural tendency of violence.

At the time, the most important figures in the genre were actors. Horror directors were largely unknown and considered easily replaceable. Stars like Christopher Lee, Peter Cushing, and Boris Karloff were the main attraction. But no one in horror was bigger in the sixties than

Vincent Price. Speaking with a slightly fey, mellifluous ghost story voice that provided a steady sound track to several decades of movies that made little kids shake, Price would play, in movie after movie, a man haunted by the past. As the star of a series of Edgar Allan Poe adaptations directed tastefully by the prolific independent producer Roger Corman, he specialized in ominous characters frightened by the dead and surrounded by the putrid, crumbling buildings of a gothic world that no longer existed. There was something sneaky about his performances, a sexual ambiguity and camp humor on display. He seemed on the verge of a wink, his eyebrows ready to arch. This style made him a popular talk show guest. In July, around the same time that Castle discovered *Rosemary's Baby*, Price guest-hosted an episode of *The Mike Douglas Show*. The subject was horror movies.

Douglas might have been the least frightening man in America. He flashed an easy smile that had a brightness matched only by the white set of his television show. The generation gap didn't exist in this happy world of canned gags, silly sketches, occasional songs, and glib, sunny banter. Nor did any political discord or any of the cultural divides of the sixties. Douglas was for everyone, parents as well as kids—or at least that was his goal. When asking Price to describe the essence of the genre, he sounded like a bemused nineteenth-century anthropologist looking to explain an exotic indigenous tribe to a civilized nation. At the start of the show, the host posed this question: How do you make a scary movie?

Price responded with a little, mischievous smile, the kind he was known for. "An essential part of any horror film is a cape, preferably blood-red," he told Douglas, stressing that costume is key. Cobwebs are important. The atmosphere must be gloom and doom, including rain, lightning, and thunder. Then he sang a song, punctuating the rhymes with a theatrical scowl. Price telegraphed what he thought many people already believed—this whole genre was absurd. In other interviews, Price would say that he didn't like the word "horror," which connoted,

he felt, something insubstantial. He preferred “gothic melodrama,” but his banter served a promotional purpose. Horror needed a makeover.

To show that the violence and scares of the genre were nothing for parents to worry about, Price emphasized that horror was pure escapism. Its appeal was not in confronting demons, but in making them go away. After the actor made his case, Douglas introduced the German psychiatrist Fredric Wertham. For horror fans, there was no scarier monster than this slight old gentleman. He had built a career as a popular scold arguing that certain kinds of irresponsible popular culture led to juvenile delinquency. His most famous accomplishment was demonizing the horror comic book, especially the beloved EC Comics, in the 1950s. After he testified to Congress about its dangerous effects on children, shining a light on the blood-soaked stories of a human head used as a baseball or served on a platter, the industry was forced to censor itself, and the era of violent comics came to an abrupt end. Now with a new book to sell, he had turned his sights to horror movies. That he was sitting next to Vincent Price made this a clash of the titans for horror fans.

Strolling onstage, Wertham looked frail and formal when attempting to make casual conversation, paying Price a few mild compliments. But he appeared to grow in stature after going on the attack. “He has done incalculable harm to American children,” he said of Price in a thick accent that made him seem like a villain from a World War II comedy. He described how the worst horror movies are shown in cities that have been wracked by violence and riots, casually implying a connection. “Horror shows teach cruelty,” he said soberly, “that it’s fun to kill and choke a girl.”

Price chuckled, uneasily. He clearly didn’t expect the severity of this ambush. This doctor took horror films very seriously; and Price, to engage him, would have to get serious himself, which is exactly what he didn’t want to do. Price was more ambivalent about the genre than he let on. Tired of playing the same old monsters, he had grown increasingly

unhappy with the quality of his films, stuck in a contract that kept him appearing in cameos in teen films that he felt were beneath him. Price would have liked to do other kinds of movies and plays, but the audience wants what it wants. So he would remain Mr. Horror. Instead of firing back, Price collapsed. “I don’t condone them,” he said, “but as a matter of fact, in most of them I don’t play the meanie.”

After presenting the horror movie as harmless fun full of silly capes and goofy costumes, Price contradicted the image and made a pitiful concession, absurd on its face. Of course he played meanies. In front of all his fans, Price confessed his sins to the genre’s worst enemy. It was evidence of the irrelevance of the horror movie in 1967. Even Vincent Price couldn’t defend horror! After regrouping, Price did offer one defense that focused on what would become the central divide of the modern horror film. The real horror, he said, is not the fantasy at the movies, but the real world of violence and war. The studio audience applauded.

In other words, how can you get worked up about vampires and werewolves when kids are dying in Vietnam? Price added there was more murder in *Medea* than in any horror movie. Wertham returned fire immediately. “Fantasy and reality are not separate,” he countered. “One spills from one to the other.” The serene confidence of the authoritative doctor stunned Price into an awkward silence and inadvertently made one of the arguments for the New Horror. Price made pure fantasy—or at least it was a kind of fantasy where the line between the real and the unreal was clear. Audiences knew that what they were watching was fake, obviously, so showing them terrifying violence would do no harm. But what if they didn’t know? Or more to the point, what if they could be fooled, ever so briefly, into suspending their disbelief?

ROMAN POLANSKI knew this deception was the key to *Rosemary’s Baby*. He had been strongly influenced by R. L. Gregory’s *Eye and Brain: The*

Psychology of Seeing, which argues that our ideas about reality are based on perceptions shaped by memory, that we see what's in front of us much less than we think we do. Polanski made the movie strictly from Rosemary's perspective and maintained that it must be always possible for all the supernatural elements she starts to believe in to be a series of coincidences. His goal was to create an anxiety about reality itself. There would be no Vincent Price or any 3-D. Otherwise remaining faithful to the novel, he did make a few departures from the script in the casting. The book called for a "strapping all-American" woman, and he originally favored his wife Sharon Tate's friend Tuesday Weld for the part. Jane Fonda was also asked to play the role and turned it down. The studio settled on Mia Farrow, who was married to Frank Sinatra and a star on the TV series *Peyton Place*. Polanski thought her delicate quality would project vulnerability, so he cast her even though she wasn't exactly the heartland type described in the book. Polanski knew he needed a central performance that could tempt his audience to indulge in paranoia, the sneaking suspicion that everyone is out to get you. In *Repulsion*, his 1965 film that takes place in the mind of a mad Catherine Deneuve, the suspense hinges on finding out whether the bizarre things happening (arms coming out of walls, etc.) are real or the product of delusion.

Rosemary's Baby is also about a lonely, isolated woman unsure if she can trust her own mind. Could her husband really be in cahoots with the Devil? How could that be possible? What's really unnerving in the film is not the Devil, but that one can be so fragile as to even believe in such a thing. It's a movie about the terror of neurosis. As such, Polanski told his crew and actors, establishing a strict ambiguity about just about everything was important. He showed only parts of the action, often keeping the camera away from the people talking; motivations are hinted at, but rarely explained.

The movie starts with the young couple, played by Farrow and the director John Cassavetes, buying an apartment in Manhattan. Production designer Richard Sylbert suggested the Dakota, an Upper West

Side apartment building known for its famous residents, as a stand-in for the haunted Bramford from the novel. The couple falls in love with the apartment right away. He's a hungry, desperate actor, and she's an innocent. No shadows or ominous messages. It's a scene notable for its banality. But the mundane quickly turns absurd.

Polanski loved *Waiting for Godot* and in the sixties in France had met Samuel Beckett, who had always wanted to be a filmmaker and was interested in Polanski's mounting an adaptation of *Godot*. The plans never went anywhere, but Polanski's ideas about terror, like those of many of his peers in film, were shaped by the theater. He lived in London in the sixties when Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, and Beckett were all the rage. In 1966, Kenneth Tynan, the legendary critic then working at the National Theatre, wrote the then artistic director Laurence Olivier, advising that he give Polanski a short-term contract. "He has exactly the right combination of fantasy and violence for us," he wrote.

Trained at the Lodz film school in Poland, Polanski displayed his agility with the camera in the unorthodox way that the stars of *Rosemary's Baby* were shot. Farrow is frequently seen in profiles, her face sliced in half. Other times he showed us her back. When she talked, the audience sometimes saw only the person who was listening. Breaking with the conventions of most Hollywood movies, he stayed on location to root the fantastical story in a hard, tactile realism. Against the wishes of Bill Castle, he shot on Fifth Avenue during the lunch hour: "I want realism, Bill, it can be done," he insisted.

The first death took place right on the streets of the Upper West Side. Rosemary found the girl's body splayed on the sidewalk after she jumped out of a window. Polanski shot the scene during midnight and insisted on veracity. "Blood is phony, does not look real," he shouted at his production team. For a movie about the Devil, Polanski insisted on a faithful portrait of contemporary New York. While shooting on Park Avenue, he asked Mia Farrow to walk into actual traffic to get a shot of the pregnant Rosemary that looked authentic. "Nobody will hit a pregnant woman," he assured her.

Polanski wanted the details of the environment to be very specific. He called Ira Levin to ask which issue of *The New Yorker* was referred to in the book. Levin had to confess that he just made it up. But even though *Rosemary's Baby* established right from the start a much more modern, realist style, it proceeded to undermine this repeatedly by alternating the scenes of domestic naturalism with snatches of dreams and the bizarre. We first see this when Rosemary has a dream where a nun scolds her before the voices of the next-door neighbors intrude.

“All she has to be is young, healthy, and not a virgin,” squawks her neighbor Ruth Gordon. Here is the movie in essence, the targeting of Rosemary, a Catholic girl who lost her faith to become an agnostic, and the sound of the real world bleeding into her dream. An even more surreal series of images flashes in montage when she is impregnated by the Devil—including one on a yacht with John F. Kennedy, who tells her the cruise is “for Catholics only” when she asks about her friend Hutch, who warns her against moving into the new building, supposedly haunted by a coven of witches. Even the supernatural elements display human weakness and flaws. Polanski insisted that the old witches be nude, causing headaches among the brass at Paramount.

This psychedelic dream may be the most dated-looking scene of this film. Years later, Polanski, who drew on his experiences with a bad trip on LSD, said he wished he could shoot it again. Its hazy look is in stark contrast to the crisp cinematography of the apartment. “We prefogged the film for that scene,” says the cinematographer William A. Fraker. “We exposed the film to light and then ran it through and put it in the camera. We were trying to do new things.”

The scene ingeniously hinted at what was really going on without wasting time on a clunky expository monologue. It also reflects the mental state of the heroine, who begins to question her own faculties. Everyone seems to be lying. Guy tells her she looks great when she clearly is gaunt and sickly. Her doctor thinks she's delusional. The older next-door neighbors are untrustworthy. But she also thinks it might just

be paranoia. The movie has the groovy feel of a paranoid bad trip. “This is no dream!” she shouts. “It’s really happening.”

Polanski often used a wide-angle lens to make the environment of the Dakota as much a part of the movie as the actors. The floors creaked and the dark elevators made for a gripping central character. “When you use a wider lens, you are always aware of the set around her. If you go long, the focus becomes only on her,” said Fraker. “Roman wanted the focus to be on the house.”

Rosemary’s Baby was something relatively new: a horror film for adults. Not surprisingly, it ran into conflicts from the studio. When filming slowed down and costs rose out of control, there was talk inside the studio about firing Polanski. Evans held firm. He also earned brush-back for opening the movie in June, traditionally the time for family fare. The advertising departments wanted to sell the stars, the shocks. Instead, Polanski went with a subtle, iconic image—a baby carriage with the tagline hovering over it: “Pray for Rosemary’s Baby.” Then there was the phone call from Frank Sinatra demanding that Evans let his wife Mia Farrow out of the contract to appear in *The Detective*, a film that Sinatra was to star in. Evans dodged the issue. After he called a meeting with Farrow, and made the argument that if she stayed on with *Rosemary’s Baby* she could win an Oscar, she told Sinatra to wait. That made him angry. He served her divorce papers on the set and she never won the Oscar.

As the shoot came to a close, one major issue remained to be resolved: what to show in the final images. The whole film had built to this moment. Rosemary, pale and sickly, had suspected that her pregnancy has gone terribly wrong, that her husband and her neighbors are not to be trusted. So she flees to the doctor who promptly sedates her and she goes into labor. When she wakes up, Dr. Sapirstein tells her the baby has died but she doesn’t believe him. She walks into Castevet’s apartment, where she finds a coven hovering over a bassinet. Walking toward her child, Rosemary holds a knife, trembling, with a hint of a smile. She discovers that this is the Devil’s son and when the

moment comes to decide what to do with him, her maternal instinct takes over.

She decides to raise the baby—a good, conservative girl to the very end, she can't abandon her own, even if he is the son of Satan. By pitting the values of the family against those of religious purity, Levin hit upon an ironic finish that refused to resolve itself with the defeat of the evil force as in a typical monster movie. The Devil wins. In this final passage of the book, Levin describes the claws of the baby. Rosemary, as Stephen King would write, “has given birth to the comic book version of Satan.”

Polanski decided to eliminate it, offering only a quick glimpse of a sinister pair of eyes. Castle couldn't believe it. The title is *Rosemary's Baby*. Where was the payoff? The audience would be furious. But Polanski insisted. Castle pleaded: Let's at least shoot another scene just so we could have an option. At this moment, Evans's decision to hire Polanski paid off. The Old Horror, the kind where the seats buzzed when the monsters appeared, required the payoff, but this film was never about the Devil. By not showing us the cartoon devil, Polanski removed the last traces of childish comedy, the final gimmick.

IN MAY OF 1968, right before Paramount released the film, Polanski attended the first premiere at the Regency Theater in San Francisco. A team of studio executives sat in the back listening carefully to the audience. The reaction was muted. Evans waited at the door when the crowd filed out. One woman walked up to him and pointed a finger: “You should be ashamed of yourself.” Evans smiled and thought to himself: This is going to be big. The movie opened in June of 1968 to huge box office, and controversy. The Catholic League protested. On August 8, a theater manager in Vermont banned the movie from four theaters after the Burlington Roman Catholic Diocese said it distorted religious beliefs and appealed for Catholics to stay away. If they did, their absence wasn't reflected in the box office, which brought in over \$33 million.

When the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures gave the movie a condemned rating, a representative from the office told *The New York Times*, “the very technical excellence of the film serves to intensify its defamatory nature.” Many reviewers compared the movie’s ambition unfavorably to Polanski’s earlier work. You could sense the dismissive attitude toward the horror genre in the review by *The New Republic*’s Stanley Kauffmann, who wrote: “Only a director satisfied with ephemera could have lavished his gifts on the whole project.”

One of its harshest critics was Charles Champlin, the respected chief reviewer of the *Los Angeles Times*. After praising the performances and the direction of *Rosemary’s Baby*, singling out Farrow and Polanski, he wrote:

Having paid my critical respects, I must add that I found *Rosemary’s Baby* a most desperately sick and obscene motion picture whose ultimate horror—in my very private opinion—was that it was made at all. It seems a singularly appropriate symbol of an age which believing in nothing will believe anything.

Whatever you might think of his conclusions, Champlin noticed something about this film that many critics missed—that its carefully maintained ambiguity was a break from the past. “Traditional horror films turn on an agreed dichotomy of angel and devil, right and wrong,” he wrote. “Its surfaces are too accurate and Miss Farrow’s anguish too real to let us be comfortable in some never-never land of escape.” Champlin wrote a follow-up story called “Toward a Definition of Good Taste in Movies” that argued his point with a refreshing candor. Simply, for a horror movie, the movie was “too well done.”




CHAPTER TWO

THE PROBLEM WITH *PSYCHO*

You know what they call my films nowadays. Camp. High camp. My kind of horror is not horror anymore. No one's afraid of a painted monster.

Byron Orlok, Targets

N NOVEMBER 4, 1965, Alfred Hitchcock wrote a curt telegram to Bernard Herrmann, his longtime collaborator who had written music for seven of his movies, including *Vertigo* and *Psycho*. It was an incredibly fruitful relationship, perhaps the greatest ever between director and composer. But you wouldn't know it from the tone of this message. It had become increasingly common for studios to release a single with their movie, hoping to exploit the growth of the music business. Songwriters were replacing composers, but Herrmann refused to follow this trend in his work for Hitchcock's new thriller *Torn Curtain*. Pressured by Universal Pictures to deliver a hit song, Hitchcock, still smarting over the failure of his last movie, *Marnie*, was not pleased that Herrmann did not deliver a catchy tune ready for the pop charts. "We do not have the freedom that we would like to have because we are catering to an audience that is why you get your money and I get



mine,” he wrote after expressing his displeasure. “The audience is very different to the one we used to cater.”

The irritated message anticipated the ugly fight that would follow. Hitchcock eventually fired Herrmann from the movie, and they never resolved their differences. There was a silver lining, however, since Herrmann moved on to lend moody scores to movies by the next generation of directors such as Brian De Palma (*Sisters*), Larry Cohen (*It's Alive*), and Martin Scorsese (*Taxi Driver*). But the episode revealed that Hitchcock was worried he was losing his hold on his audience.

Through most of his career Alfred Hitchcock was a reliably popular entertainer who the critics carped was not willing to address themes worthy of his talent. Many of his classic movies received harsh reviews. *The New Yorker* described *Vertigo* in 1958 as “farfetched nonsense.” By the mid-sixties, his reputation as a hit-maker had started to suffer. *Torn Curtain* opened in 1966 and was a flop. Three years later, *Topaz* was another disappointment. The irony is that at the same time that he was losing the mass audience, he was gaining cachet in elite opinion.

A concerted effort by European critics that started in the fifties, which was later picked up by their American counterparts, led to a re-evaluation. Hitchcock became known as the ultimate misunderstood mainstream artist. He was a studio showman who, his admirers argued, smuggled his own distinctive visual style into canny entertainments. This was always a slight oversimplification, since Hitchcock worked within a system that helped guide his vision. But the image of him as a powerful, single-minded auteur who made his movies through an uncompromising force of will reached a crucial turning point in 1967, when the French critic and director François Truffaut published a book-length interview with the master. Treating his works, even the minor ones, with the seriousness afforded a major painter in a museum retrospective, the book became essential reading for students of film and aspiring directors. Among other notable elements, Hitchcock laid out his theories about scaring audiences, which would become tenets of moviemaking.

He articulated his famous distinction between “surprise” and “suspense,” illustrating it by comparing two scenes. In the first, characters are sitting at a table when a bomb goes off. That’s surprise. In the other, there is a shot of the bomb under the table and then another of people having a conversation above who do not know the bomb is there. The audience waits for the explosion. That’s suspense. In outlining these two strategies, Hitchcock implied that more artistically serious movies, such as those he made, employed suspense, while cheap ones tried surprise, a distinction that hardened into a common wisdom. But most of the finest scary movies, including some by Hitchcock, have both.

Hitchcock also popularized the term “Pure Cinema,” which became something of a religion among horror directors. French avant-garde artists from the 1920s first used this term (or *cinéma pur*) to describe a kind of film language that transcends story and character, but many American moviegoers learned about it through Hitchcock. Communicating information visually became a goal for most of those who made horror movies after Hitchcock. Once the province of talky Victorian ghost stories, horror, in large degree thanks to Hitchcock, evolved into one of the most cinematic of film genres.

Hitchcock had a long career, but among the new generation of horror fans, two movies had the biggest impact, and they premiered during a fallow period for the genre. *Psycho* revolutionized the then small sub-genre of serial killer movies in 1960. Three years later, *The Birds* became the most potent example of an evergreen brand of horror—when nature attacks—that exploded in the early seventies. Rats (*Willard*), snakes (*Stanley*), frogs (*Frogs*), and even bunnies (*Night of the Lepus*, starring Janet Leigh) stalked innocent humans before animals calmed down for a while, only to be roused again by *Jaws* in 1975. As much as *The Birds*, starring Tippi Hedren as the blond survivor, inspired these movies, however, it did not have the impact of *Psycho*.

Hitchcock shocked audiences throughout the world by violating one of the oldest rules of Hollywood: the star, good or bad, does not die until the end. The setup of Janet Leigh as an ordinary woman caught

up in a crime, stealing money so she can elope with her divorced boyfriend Sam Loomis, worked hard to put the audience on the side of the criminal. She may be stealing and running away, but it's out of love. Then forty minutes into the movie, she takes a shower and, in a series of hectic cuts, is killed by the stiff-arm of a character in shadow holding a knife aloft like a torch. This murder took one week to shoot and lasts less than a minute. There was no gore, but blood did swirl down the drain. Norman Bates did not just murder a woman. In the context of the movie, he does something even more dramatic: he kills a plotline.

Hitchcock's influential ideas repeatedly appeared in horror movies of the sixties and seventies. Not just his shots and visual tropes, either. John Carpenter cast Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* to exploit the fact that her mother was Janet Leigh. Tobe Hooper patterned the madman in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* after the same serial killer who inspired Norman Bates, whom the school in Brian De Palma's *Carrie* was named after. De Palma, who would cast Hedren's daughter Melanie Griffith in *Body Double*, was probably Hitchcock's most persistent imitator. He fell in love with the way Hitchcock manipulates the audience through a shot from a character's point of view. "There's nothing like it in any other art form," he explains. "You're seeing exactly what the character is seeing. It puts you right in their position. It's unique to cinematic storytelling and that's why Hitchcock is such a master—because he developed it."

As influential as he was, the notion that Hitchcock is the inventor of the modern horror genre is overstated. The relationship between Hitchcock and the younger generation of genre directors was sometimes even hostile. They borrowed some ideas, but rejected others. The French critics loved Hitchcock, but appreciating him was slumming. American students and exploitation artists couldn't afford to do that, and in several crucial ways, their movies represented a pointed backlash against the style of Hitchcock. They respected the elder statesman but also felt the need to rebel.

The directors of the horror movies of the late sixties and seventies

wanted more sex, gore, rock music, ambiguity, and political thrills than they got from Hitchcock. Personally, Hitchcock was not a natural father figure. At best, he was the competitive kind who had no interest in revealing his secrets. Hitchcock, a private man, had little interest in mentoring directors. He scoffed at a screening of De Palma's *Dressed to Kill*, another homage to *Psycho*.

"He was personally insulted because in the ads, all the critics said that the movie was Hitchcockian," says John Landis, who showed Hitchcock the movie in a screening room on the Universal lot. "He was going on and on and being very nasty. And finally I said: 'Wait a second, Hitch. He's not stealing from you. It's an homage.' Taking a breath, he said: 'You mean *fromage*.'"

The most serious grudge that horror directors hung on to was that Hitchcock ruined *Psycho* when he explained the madness of Norman Bates in the final scene. Much of the movie attempted to see life through the eyes of a psychotic, but when the police caught Norman and locked him in a room for questioning, Hitchcock returned to a more comforting point of view—the safety of a diagnosis from the medical establishment. By contrast, most New Horror directors thought that ambiguity and confusion are not only scarier than certainty, but also reflect the reality of a world where the Vietnam War and Watergate are in the headlines.

Even in his movies that owed the most to Hitchcock, such as *Sisters*, which killed off its star early on and used a score by Herrmann, Brian De Palma did not pay homage to the last scene, refusing to put the audience at ease. Instead of order restored, he more often added a disorienting dream sequence as a coda. William Friedkin, whose movie *The Exorcist* includes long scenes where doctors are unable to explain the problems of a troubled little girl, calls the last scene of *Psycho* the masterpiece's major flaw. "If you took the scene out and you end on just Norman Bates, with Bernard Herrmann's music, it would have iced people in a way that it did not," he said. "Most intelligent people do not want simple answers."

Hitchcock also had a teasing style that handled murder and crime with a dry sense of humor. He made films when the Production Code mandated a certain morality. He got around the censors through suggestion and subtle manipulation of point of view. By the freewheeling seventies, such subterfuge seemed about as relevant to some young horror directors as Tennessee Williams's old winks at homosexual subtext. Immorality was fair game now and you could joke about almost anything you wanted. To the new generation, Hitchcock's movies could seem stuffy. "*Psycho* was kind of restrained I always thought," Craven says.

Hitchcock surely knew about this criticism, and he mounted a defense of himself in one of his most underrated films, *Frenzy*. His penultimate movie, the 1972 thriller had a typical Hitchcock suspense plot involving a mistaken identity and a detective trailing a killer, wrapped inside a piece of film criticism.

Telling the story of a serial killer who murdered London women by strangling them with a necktie, the movie includes one notorious on-camera rape and the murder occurs at the beginning of the film. The camera pauses on the woman's face as you wait for Hitchcock to turn it away, to shift to a quick-cutting sequence as in the shower scene in *Psycho*. It never happens. Instead of building suspense through indirection and clever pacing, he plants the camera in front of a brutal act of violence and then gets closer and waits. The tenor of the horror film changed. It wasn't enough to titillate or direct the audience. Now you had to assault them. Later in the movie comes the real shock.

After following the killer upstairs to the room of another victim in what appears to be a murder, the camera this time, right at the moment of confrontation, backtracks down the hall, through the stairs, and out the door. It sits there watching foot traffic, discreetly standing outside, while the audience waits for the inevitable scream. In a quintessentially meta-cinematic joke, Hitchcock is telling us something with these scenes—that he can do rape and torture and mayhem with the best of them, just like the young guns, but the worst crime on camera does not compare with the hint of one offscreen.

. . .

IN THE SIXTIES, most scary movies still left much to the imagination. This opened up a niche for the unabashedly hard-core violence pioneered by the low-rent auteur Herschell Gordon Lewis, the director of drive-in gross-outs such as *A Taste of Blood* and *Scum of the Earth!* He didn't cut away from a sliced neck or a gaping wound. He showed it to you, again and again. In doing so, he invented gore. The impetus, he claims, was *Psycho*. "I thought it cheated," says Lewis. "Hitchcock showed the results but not the action because he couldn't risk getting turned down by theaters who wouldn't accept his product. We didn't care."

After leaving a secure position as an English teacher at Mississippi State College, to the chagrin of his mother, Lewis, a pragmatist, tried his hand at business, stumbling into advertising, shooting commercials, and eventually making some short, sexually suggestive films whose main purpose was to get scantily clad women to cavort on a beach. Teaming with the producer David Friedman, a Barnum-like promoter with extensive ties to the worlds of freak shows and carnivals, Lewis made several movies in the early sixties featuring topless girls that were part of the genre of "nudie-cutie" movies. When they did so-so business, the duo changed tactics and made a trilogy of movies with women getting limbs chopped off, brains and intestines dribbling out, and blood pouring from open wounds.

Three years after *Psycho* opened, Lewis presented *Blood Feast*, a terribly acted horror film made in four days for \$24,000 without a script or much of a clue. The main idea was that bathtubs of blood would be spilled in an effort to portray an Egyptian meal cooked with the bodies of virgins and a tongue ripped out of a woman's mouth. For the watershed last effect, the moon landing for gore films, an actual sheep's tongue was used. Lewis knew he needed something slithery, disgusting, and real so he imported the body part from Tampa Bay. Everything else in the production was found locally. But Lewis took this tongue very seriously.

Although he did care about a few aesthetic matters—the movie must be in color, the better to see the red blood—Lewis basically made his film based on one principle: show the audience something that they could never see in a mainstream movie. Lewis did not have much talent as a storyteller or a handler of actors (the style varies from effusive hamming to comatose mumbling) or a creator of images or really much of anything having to do with the art of movies. But when it came to really gruesome blood and guts, he had the market almost all to himself. Word got out fast.

On the first night of *Blood Feast*, thousands of mostly young audiences arrived to a sold-out drive-in in Peoria, Illinois, looking to see something outrageous. The advertisements promising “Nothing so appalling in the annals of horror” got people’s attention—or at least certain kinds of people. “Our audience was ninety percent men,” Lewis says. “If a woman showed up, she was dragged there. Anyone under thirty-five howled with pleasure. Anyone older than fifty-five, simply howled.”

The press took notice. “A blot on the American film industry” roared the *Los Angeles Times*. Before long, the movie became a hot property. Friedman, who had a background in advertising, upped the ante in his following movies such as *Two Thousand Maniacs!*, which showed the nipples of a woman cut off, milk dribbling out of the holes in her breasts. It wasn’t the same. The shock was never as great, and Lewis knew he would never get good reviews or a large audience. He would never top that tongue.

At the other end of the artistic spectrum of the low-budget horror genre in the 1960s was the Italian director Mario Bava, the shy son of a cameraman from the silent film era whose stylish movies repeatedly proved the endless variety of startlingly elegant ways you could brutally kill a woman. Bava managed to be artful and gruesomely graphic. “He was the first to be very mean with his horror,” says his son Lamberto, who continued the family business. “The American movies were more fantastic, atmospheric. He got more directly to the point.”

The same year that *Blood Feast* sickened small-town American movie audiences, *The Girl Who Knew Too Much* premiered in Italy, inventing the subgenre that would become known as the *giallo* (meaning yellow), referring to a kind of cheap pulp novel. It was typically characterized by dark stories of deception, voyeurism, and betrayal, involving a masked man who committed a series of elaborate murders that the police struggle to figure out. *The Girl* is a twisty tale of a foreigner who thinks she witnesses a crime but is helpless to stop it. The next year, Bava refined his technique with the stunning *Blood and Black Lace*, a meticulously composed and flamboyantly bloody cinematic Grand Guignol about a maniac wearing a white mask killing fashion models.

Bava sets up a traditional detective plot but makes little attempt to respect it, paying cursory mind to whodunit mechanics as he builds his movie around a half dozen elaborately composed murder scenes, designed with startling splashes of color and swirling, theatrical camera-work. Early on, the killer, wearing black gloves, which would become a staple of the *giallo*, strangles a woman on the street with a wire, leaving her undressed, with a face lined with streaks of blood. Other beautiful women meet equally nasty ends, eyes gouged out by a claw, faces burned, and another suffocated by a pillow, her curved legs kicking in the background. But the quintessential Bava death might be the last one, when the two killers hug, pull each other into an erotic embrace before a gun goes off, one shooting the other in the stomach. No director tied sex and violence together as tightly as Bava. The dual skewering of a couple in the middle of sex in *A Bay of Blood* was the apotheosis of his brand of violence, imitated numerous times, most famously perhaps in *Friday the 13th, Part 2*.

With the possible exception of Hitchcock, no director working in the sixties had more influence over the horror genre than Bava. Since he dabbled in many genres, including westerns and science fiction, his impact on subsequent genre artists has been far-ranging. Yet he was underappreciated in his own country. *Blood and Black Lace*, for instance, earned back only half of its \$150,000 production cost. By the sixties,

independent companies such as American International Pictures, home of Roger Corman's Edgar Allan Poe movies, had started moving aggressively into buying films abroad, making deals from sales agents at festivals, which turned into enormous markets. It singled out Italy as the first stop to find cheap foreign product, in part because Bava placed American actors in lead roles.

"Most of the Italian pictures used a washed-up American name," says William Immerman, the former lawyer for American International Pictures, in his office in Los Angeles. "The guy who got arrested as a drunk and couldn't work would go to Italy to resuscitate his career. Jack Palance, and Aldo Ray and Dana Andrews, virtually everyone with an alcoholic problem who couldn't work in the studio would go to Italy. It didn't matter that they didn't know their lines because they were dubbed."

Bava had trouble in the States, too. Incredibly, American International Pictures turned down *Blood and Black Lace* for distribution, and when it was released in the United States (many of his movies were mangled in dubbed American versions) the critical response was not generous. *The New York Times* dismissed it in under 120 words that began with this insult:

Murdering mannequins is sheer, wanton waste. And so is "Blood and Black Lace," the super-gory whodunit, which came out of Italy to land at neighborhood houses yesterday sporting stilted dubbed English dialogue, stark color and grammar-school histrionics.

More generous reviews of the film saw Bava's interests as similar to those of Lewis. "Bava is simply trying to titillate a very specialized segment of his audience," Carlos Clarens writes. In some regards, that may be true, though not the way that most people read it. Bava was more of an artist than a sadist, but he also didn't feel that you had to choose.

Bava's vision was more visually ambitious, but in the sixties, it didn't matter. Gore films were simply not taken seriously.

THAT CHANGED when a black-and-white movie made in Pittsburgh opened at a few drive-in theaters to admiring reviews in the summer of 1968. It told a bare-bones story about a town overrun by flesh-eating zombies who meet their match in a defiant African American hero who is mistakenly gunned down by a local policeman. The movie combined the bloodletting of Herschell Gordon Lewis with what looked to be a hip political message about race relations and mindless conformity. "When it came out, *Night of the Living Dead* was powerful shit," says director John Landis (who paid homage to the movie in Michael Jackson's video *Thriller*). "When the law enforcement show up at the end and say 'Shoot him in the head,' it was very real and current."

The horror genre was hardly known for exploring issues of race. And in the late sixties, most liberal Hollywood movies preferred to portray African American characters as strong stoics who triumphed by maintaining their dignity in the face of racism. The hero in *Night of the Living Dead* was a man of action. He was going to survive no matter what and didn't care how it looked if he slapped a white woman as long as it helped save lives. That he died fighting invited comparisons to other fallen civil rights leaders of the era.

This political subtext was a revelation to horror directors. Wes Craven saw *Night of the Living Dead* in a theater in Times Square and describes it as the first horror movie that wasn't shackled to a sense of decorum. At around the same time, John Carpenter saw the movie while attending film school at USC and Dario Argento, then a film critic, enjoyed the film in Rome. Chomping, lurching, and drooling their way across the country, George Romero's zombies became popular in Europe, where they were interpreted by some critics as a searing indictment of American warmongering and racial prejudice. The in-

fluent French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which championed obscure or underappreciated American movies, praised the movie as a political rallying cry about American racism. Argento, an Italian film critic turned director, who built on Bava's legacy to make even more surreal and dreamlike giallos, raved about Romero to his friends. As a critic, Argento celebrated him in print, and invited him to screenings in Italy, before starting his own horror movie career.

Night of the Living Dead was also proof for a generation of directors that you didn't need the support of a studio, big or small, to make an effective horror film that would attract large audiences. You didn't need money, much experience, or stars. You didn't even have to leave Pittsburgh. Film students noticed. *Night of the Living Dead* might never have received a huge national release, but it ran for years at small movie theaters and inspired countless directors to pick up a camera. It did for horror what the Sex Pistols did for punk.

The movie itself, however, was actually much more rooted in the past than the reviews of the day would have you believe. Unlike Polanski, Romero didn't look down on the old traditions of horror. Growing up in the Bronx, Romero was a precocious kid whose loving parents encouraged his artistic interests even though they wouldn't allow him to bring scary comic books into the house. His amiable, laid-back style hid a single-minded drive and dedicated love of fantasy films. As a teenager, he told his parents he was going to the prom, dressed up in a tuxedo, and instead went to Times Square to see a movie. "In my mind, horror wasn't the poor relative," he said. "It wasn't the penny dreadful. It was legit."

What he was less excited about, however, were the films of Alfred Hitchcock. As a teenager Romero worked on Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* as a volunteer on the set. His responsibilities were mainly limited to fetching things, but he did pay attention to the director and noticed his chilly demeanor. But it wasn't just his imperious manner that bothered him. He thought the movies were mechanical. They didn't have the gleefully bad taste of his favorite comic books or the goofy fun

of monster movies. He found Hitchcock's suspense sequences overly technical. "Take that scene in *The Birds*, when the birds are in the cage and they're on the windy road," Romero says, describing a relatively mundane scene that adds to the ominous mood. "He obviously just wanted that shot. He often does some effect just so he can get a shot and it often takes you right out of the story. You got to respect the guy, but it's a lot about him."

Night of the Living Dead has a more spontaneous feel. It wasn't the work of a control freak so much as one who understood that things could easily get out of control. Chaos was at hand, and the movie reflected that in content, style, and even the process by which it was made.

The movie was a backup plan for Romero. When he couldn't get funding for "Whine of the Fawn," a Bergman-inspired coming-of-age film set in the Middle Ages, he tried something more commercial. "We didn't know anyone who had any horses, so a western was out," says the producer Russ Streiner. "And we didn't live by the water, so we couldn't do a beach movie. That left horror."

Night of the Living Dead was made in the spirit of the hippie communes of its era, shot by a group of recent college graduates who smoked pot and tossed some ideas around. Romero was not a dictatorial auteur, and he gave little thought to how to position himself for a future career. He was just having some fun. The stakes were very low. Romero and nine of his friends put up \$600 each to make the movie—which eventually cost a little more than \$100,000—and then, in good democratic fashion, opened up the floor for debate over the question of who would direct. There were several candidates, but Romero made the most persuasive case, which rested on his experience making industrials and working in TV news for years. Romero had even made short movies for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. "One of my first films was 'Mister Rogers Gets a Tonsillectomy,'" Romero says. "Possibly the scariest film I ever made."

Even though he was the director, many of his friends had input and the movie was a collage of different styles and ideas. At the beginning

of *Night of the Living Dead*, two young siblings, Johnny (Russell Streiner) and Barbara (Judith O’Dea), laugh in a graveyard looking for their father’s grave. Johnny tries to scare his sister, playing up the joke of getting a case of nerves walking in a graveyard. Two vanilla protagonists, they speak in the capital-letters gee-whiz style of science-fiction movies from the 1950s. The acting was out of a low-budget monster movie, but the camerawork had a grainy documentary feel.

Romero worked in commercials, which is reflected in the quick, clean, accomplished editing of *Night of the Living Dead*. His stark sense of light and shadow was greatly influenced by Orson Welles, and the apocalyptic story of survivors holed up in a house was taken from the Richard Matheson novel *I Am Legend*, about vampires on the prowl. Romero didn’t want to use vampires again, so he made them deceased cannibals, like the lurching undead from the EC Comics that Romero grew up loving.

Romero insisted the movie take place in real time and that it have absolutely no explanation for why the zombies arrived on the scene. He argued that it would be scarier that way, more real. But as the movie shoot came to a conclusion, this became a subject of controversy among the filmmakers. One of the collaborators and stars, Karl Hardman, spoke up, arguing that this would be too unusual: “All horror films have a reason for the thing and that was a necessary element,” he told the entire group. What he was referring to is the standard scene that appears in almost every fantasy film where the scientist explains that he was dreaming of making a spectacular breakthrough that led him to bring in the monster for testing; or when a mystical old woman reveals the legend of a supernatural creature in hushed tones; or when the detective reveals the secret motivation of the killer. This explanatory scene was an essential genre convention. Romero conceded the point, adding a news story about a probe to Venus gone wrong.

Romero did not have the personality of an ego-driven fighter, and he did not want to reinvent the wheel. In fact, he repeatedly looked to the

past for inspiration. Even the fact that the movie popularized zombies was an accident. Romero says he didn't even think the flesh-eating undead were zombies. He just thought of them as cannibals. "I didn't even use the word 'zombie' or hear it used until the reviews came out," he says. There had already been a long history of zombies in film, including the 1932 Bela Lugosi movie *White Zombie*, but these tribal figures usually were the victims of some voodoo or trance and looked threatening in the way that ghosts were. You could tell they were bad news, but exactly how was unclear.

Romero cleared this up. You need to be afraid of his zombies for a very simple reason: they wanted to eat you and chew on your bones. More to the point, they wanted to eat everyone. They were going to take over the world. And when they ate, it was messy. One of the original investors in the movie was a meat packer, and the buckets of animal innards that he donated to the production were put to extensive use. The zombies feasted on human flesh with a passionate abandon. They looked like they were in heat, and Romero was very smart in using the extreme gore to punctuate a scary scene. It was a cheap trick, but it gave audiences something to groan about. "Gore to me was a slap in the face. A wake-up, an alarm clock," Romero says. "You're romping through the film and then—whop!—it stops you."

The image of a child feeding on her father and a mob of undead carries obvious political implications, even if it was not intentional. "We were young bohemians, so in that sense we were automatically against authority," Romero says inside his modest Toronto apartment, while flashing a childlike grin that seems at odds with his severe black glasses and intimidating height (almost six and a half feet). "But I didn't think it was that political." John Russo, who wrote the script, is blunter about the suggestion that the movie had a point to make about the times: "All that stuff's bullshit."

So why was *Night of the Living Dead* taken so seriously as a social commentary? It helped that it was shot in black and white, which made

it appear arty to certain audiences. Most horror by that time was in color. But the political readings of the movie and its resulting success were mostly due to the fact that it was one of the rare movies of the day with an African American hero. Duane Jones plays the defiant Ben with the dignity of a civil rights leader. Fighting off an army of the recently dead before being gunned down by a white mob, he stands erect and proud in the face of madness. In the original screenplay, the race of the hero was entirely incidental. To the extent that Romero thought about the character in any depth, what was in his mind was a white truck driver, but when Jones auditioned, plans changed. “He simply gave the best performance,” Romero says.

Jones may have distrusted Romero’s motives, suspecting he was exploiting his race. He insisted on playing a proud man who stole a truck to escape as opposed to a crude truck driver. Romero allowed him to change the script, but they did argue over the scene where Ben slaps the blond Barbara to calm her down. “Duane said: ‘You’re asking me to hit a white woman. You know what’s going to happen when I walk out of the theater?’” Romero says. “We kept saying: ‘Come on, it’s a new day.’”

Romero reconsidered this argument while inside a Ford Thunderbird convertible on his way to New York to try and sell his movie. He had planned to start with Columbia Pictures, make a tidy profit, and then concentrate on films that he *really* cared about. But his calculus changed after a bulletin came on the radio that reported that Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated. Immediately Romero thought about the white men who gunned down his black hero as he considered the fallout of this terrible assassination. The newspapers would be full of headlines about racism and apocalypse and random, senseless violence. As a liberal, Romero was devastated. But as an aspiring director, he thought something else: “Man, this is good for us.”

PETER BOGDANOVICH, the critic, cinephile, and aspiring auteur, was sitting at home in Los Angeles watching television when the news broke

that Martin Luther King Jr. was dead. Staring at the screen dumbfounded, he figured this was the end of his movie. He had recently finished his debut, *Targets*, which juxtaposes the story of the retirement of a fading horror movie star with that of a Vietnam veteran who randomly guns down audiences at a drive-in. American International Pictures turned it down because the idea of a movie about a sniper at a drive-in seemed like a preposterous thing to screen at drive-in theaters. Bogdanovich sent the reel to Robert Evans, who picked up the movie for Paramount. “[After the assassination] half the studio wanted to kill it,” Bogdanovich says, “and the other half wanted to release it immediately.”

Paramount ended up releasing it but on only a few screens, adding a self-serious disclaimer about the importance of gun control. After the murders of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the country was traumatized by the prospect of mysterious killers in the crowd. *Targets*, an almost clinical portrait of a killer that anticipated movies like *Taxi Driver*, did nothing to help people looking for answers. With a chillingly matter-of-fact style, the movie followed the sniper as he bought his bullets, practiced his shot, kissed his mother, cheerily chatted at the dinner table, and went about the mundane task of preparing to commit his heinous crimes. It was not a hit, but *Targets* was a fresh, incisive horror movie that anticipated the future of the genre in some ways even more than *Rosemary's Baby* and *Night of the Living Dead*.

Unlike Romero, Bogdanovich refused to obey the convention to explain the monster. The reason, again, had to do with *Psycho*. Bogdanovich, an admirer of Hitchcock, disliked the end of *Psycho* so much that he revolted against it.

Bogdanovich was one of the great talkers of the movie generation. To him, you were defined not by what you said but by what movies you liked. Or more specifically, which directors you worshipped. He wrote long essays on their work for the Museum of Modern Art and film magazines. “All the great movies have been made,” he was fond of saying, a line that found its way into his first movie. As for horror movies, well, they were a way to get into the business, nothing more.

As a child, Bogdanovich was bored by *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. After attending the first press screening of *Psycho* in 1960, Bogdanovich stumbled out of the midtown theater near noon thoroughly rattled. “I felt raped,” he says. Half a year later, he bumped into Alfred Hitchcock and told him that the movie was one of his worst. The master told him that he didn’t get the joke. Bogdanovich not only thought horror movies were dumb, but the way they glamorized violence bothered him. “I was convinced that violent movies do have an impact on people,” Bogdanovich says. That didn’t stop him from doing what so many hungry young exploitable men in a hurry did: he moved to Los Angeles and made a violent horror movie for Roger Corman.

Corman, a trim, perpetually youthful optimist in a business full of dour shysters, may not have been the best moviemaker of the fifties and sixties, but he was almost certainly the fastest. Along with William Castle, a frequent tennis partner, he flooded the American horror market with cheap, quick shockers that exploited the rich vein of anxiety surrounding the teenage years. Castle specialized in a camp sense of humor, and Herschell Gordon Lewis relied on a willingness to show everything. Corman, by contrast, had artistic pretensions, but he usually kept them to himself. His directors were not auteurs. They were hired help, working on a budget. So even though Bogdanovich had made no films, he let him work on a biker picture and then gave him the chance to work on his own movie—as long as he lived up to a few conditions.

First: He needed to use twenty minutes of film left over from a previous shoot of a mostly ignored Boris Karloff movie called *The Terror* (this was eventually trimmed down considerably). Second: Karloff must star, but he could shoot him for only two days. As for the rest of the movie, he had ten days. Bogdanovich gasped. “I’ve shot whole pictures in two days!” Corman countered. “Are you interested?”

Of course he was. Still, this was a puzzle with major obstacles. *The Terror*, for starters, was one of the most laughable films of all time, mostly

notable for its incoherence and the most terrible performance of Jack Nicholson's career. "I remember thinking that Nicholson was a bad actor because of that movie," Bogdanovich says. Mostly, though, there was the problem of the star. Corman underpaid Karloff on *The Terror*, and when his agent complained, he renegotiated, on the condition that he would get two more days of work from the star. Karloff was the most famous horror actor working. But for Bogdanovich, that was a mark against him. Karloff represented the cobwebs of a spooky castle, cheap advertising campaigns, the lurching monster—in other words, the Old Horror. He was reaching the end of a long career with two bad knees and a long, wrinkly face far too familiar to shock anyone.

Although best known as the wordless monster in *Frankenstein*, Karloff's greatest gift as a performer was his baritone, refined after years in radio and on Broadway. As his body deteriorated, he was introduced to young fans in the sixties as the voice of the title character in the cartoon of Dr. Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* and the host for the television series *Thriller*. This voice work kept him employed, but it also emphasized how dated his brand of scares was. He sounded spooky, but when the camera pointed toward Karloff, he looked like a dignified, elderly gentleman who had begun to waste away. How would that scare anyone?

"Corman kept focusing on Karloff being a horror character, a scary figure," Bogdanovich says, sitting in a hotel in Los Angeles. "But he was just an old man, and he didn't seem very scary to me." No horror star did. Most of them were either dying (Lon Chaney, Boris Karloff) or fading in popularity (Vincent Price, Peter Cushing). Their day had passed. New Horror would belong to the director, and his challenge, as Bogdanovich saw it, was to figure out how to make an obsolete genre, one that no self-respecting cineaste had any interest in, relevant. Bogdanovich asked himself: "What is *modern* horror?"

Targets begins with a self-conscious joke, a long clip of *The Terror* that showcases the trappings of Victorian horror: a bat, a castle, and a

spooky knock at the door. After over three minutes of this film playing during the credit sequence, the screen goes black, and the camera pans to the grim, beaten-down face of a bespectacled Boris Karloff, neatly attired in a formal suit. As Byron Orlok—named for the vampire in *Nosferatu*, the kind of film reference that pleased Bogdanovich—he flashed a look of someone with too much dignity for this job. An aging stage actor, he sighs. Orlok has become the scariest thing possible in Hollywood—out of date.

With this clever opening scene, Bogdanovich, who plays a young director trying to break into the business, found the solution to the problem of how to use Karloff without making a cheesy B-picture. Bogdanovich made a horror movie about the death of horror movies. He took all the elements of the Corman horror movies and reversed them. Corman told his actors and crew that he never wanted to see “reality.” The acting should be larger than life and the design always out of the ordinary. Bogdanovich made a rigorously naturalistic horror movie. Corman’s Edgar Allan Poe adaptations (usually starring Vincent Price) used pop psychology. Bogdanovich wanted to make a movie about a killer with no inner life. And he would do it by making Karloff, the greatest monster in Old Horror, the hero.

Orlok retires, leaving the young director without a star (he threatens to replace him with Vincent Price). “I feel like a dinosaur,” Karloff’s character says at one point. “I know how people think of me these days. Old-fashioned, outmoded.” This is good dialogue, but it’s also fine film criticism. Karloff was troubled by his role, worried that he would be seen as a joke, even asking Bogdanovich if he could tone down some of the character’s self-loathing. The director resisted, assuring him that this speech would get the audience on his side. Karloff was worried that the film was making fun of him, but it actually was flattering him with a kind of role that he hadn’t pulled off since *Frankenstein*: the misunderstood monster.

Bogdanovich paralleled this fake horror with the real kind: a blond, blue-eyed sniper who kills for no reason. His murders are random and

passionless. He buys bullets like other people buy socks. And when he guns down his victims, he doesn't even smile. He goes through the process of his terrible murders, but while the movie closely tracks this character, he remains oddly remote. The narratives of the young killer and the old actor alternate for most of the movie before they intersect at a drive-in theater where Orlok has come to introduce one of his movies. The sniper fires from behind the screen, and Bogdanovich puts the camera in the perspective of the killer. The audience sees the victims through the target. By having them in the crosshairs, the movie puts us in the position of the gun.

The shooter picks off one audience member after another, sitting in their cars, ignorant of the horror surrounding them. It was a metaphor of alienation and the ways that moviegoing can dull the senses. Stuck in their own cars, separated from one another, the audience is the ultimate monster. They cheer the violence on-screen, overlooking what is going on right next to them. And the beauty of this killing, the ping of the gun and the pop of the windows breaking, makes it even more palatable. The gore is kept minimal. *Targets* was an attack on horror as harsh as anything from Fredric Wertham, suggesting that horror movies disentangle moral questions from acts of violence. In an insightful essay in *The New York Times*, Renata Adler called the movie "perhaps the most film-critical film ever made."

Each of the major horror movies of the summer of 1968 was a response to the Old Horror. *Rosemary's Baby* rejected it; *Night of the Living Dead* paid homage. But *Targets* did something that seemed a little rarefied: it provided a eulogy. It had an artificial quality that bothered critics who seemed to judge the film by the standards of a piece of realism. "Why?" Howard Thompson began his mostly favorable review in *The New York Times*. "The invariable question of today's headlines about the random sniper-murder of innocent people is never answered in 'Targets.' This is the only flaw, and a serious one." But why does it need to be answered? The movie wasn't attempting to explain the killer. The horror of the murders was, in part, their randomness.

Penelope Gilliatt was even tougher in *The New Yorker*, arguing that by keeping the character oblique, the movie encouraged a kind of sadism. “It seems to me a fantastically foolish picture,” she writes. “How intellectually chaotic to make a gun-control parable that is so empty of any sense of the people in it that the only response left to an audience is to recline with a bag of popcorn and lust after a manly score of assassinations.” Neither of these reviews considered the lack of motivation as an intentional choice. They missed what became one of the most important philosophical ideas of the decade in horror film. Being in the dark about evil: that is the real horror.