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### Self Reflexive Postmodern Horror Cinema:

Examining *Scream 1 and 2*, *Popcorn*, and *Demons* as the Ultimate in Meta Movies

In the 1996 movie, *Scream*, main character and bad guy Billy Loomis tells his girlfriend, played by Neve Campbell, “Life’s all one big movie. Only, you can’t pick your genre.” It is no accident that Billy shares the last name of the well known Dr. Loomis, played so brilliantly by Donald Pleasance in the *Halloween* franchise. In fact, the movie is filled with references to earlier horror icons. Billy did, of course, err in one manner, because as audiences have seen with these post-modern horror films, one can, indeed, pick his own genre. These characters know they are stuck in horror films, and they know the rules they must follow in which to survive. We find the same sort of commentary in 1991’s *Popcorn*, when the movie ends with our final girl, Maggie, declaring, “Everything is a movie to me.” Like Billy and the others from *Scream*, Maggie realizes that life often imitates art, and very often horror movies are directly patterned on our perception of what a horror movie should be, what it should include, rather than what one might experience in a real life horrific situation. These films are inherently self-reflexive and highly self-referential. They are meta in its purest form. In viewing four distinct horror films, *Scream 1*, *Scream 2*, *Popcorn*, and the 1985 Lamberto Bava classic, *Demons*, one can see the evolution of horror cinema on a broad scale. These films, especially the *Scream* series, mark a turning point in the genre of horror cinema, and they exist to remind all of us that the tried and true formula sometimes needs to be mixed up, and in some cases flipped completely on its head for a genre to survive.

### **PLOT POINTS**

The starting point in examining the self-reflexivity in this group of films, especially in the *Scream* series is to reveal their basic plot structures, and to work out from there. I will start with the earliest film and work my way forward. In the 1985 film, *Demons*, Italian horror master Lamberto Bava (son of Mario Bava) directs a script co-written by giallo director, Dario Argento. In the film, a group of strangers attends a free screening of a mysterious horror movie. The movie our characters are watching is that of a zombie film, where the original zombie is created by being scratched by a mask found in what is supposedly the tomb of Nostradamus. The same replica mask is found in the theater's lobby, and after trying it on, one of the moviegoers is scratched, and eventually transforms into a zombie in the same way as onscreen. The rest of the movie consists of numerous action sequences, many scenes where our heroes battle the zombies, and the eventual realization that the city has become a home for hundreds of zombies as one after another escapes the confines of the theater to infect the rest of the city's denizens. The action on the screen in the movie is so closely related to what actually happens to the characters in *Demons* that one could be forgiven for confusing what is real and what is fiction. Consistently throughout, each character seems to realize they have become trapped in their own version of a horror movie, eventually deciding that the only way to stop the actual horror is to stop the movie itself by destroying the theater's projector.

In the 1991 film, *Popcorn* a group of film students at a college in southern California are trying to raise money for their new and fledgling cinema program. These characters want to make movies for a living, and at the behest of Toby, one of their classmates, they decide to hold an all night horrorthon in an old abandoned theater. The movie's plot, like *Demons*, is almost completely contained within the confines of the theater itself, the terrifying acts of an unknown killer exist entirely within this space filled with hundreds of moviegoers wearing Halloween

costumes, allowing the masked villain free reign to wreak havoc on the cast of twenty-somethings. Within the film are three films shown on the screen, and all three of them pay homage to actual genre stereotypes from horror history, including a 1950's era movie called *The Amazing Electrified Man* about a man on death row who gains the electrical powers of the electric chair, a period piece about an infestation of radioactive mutant mosquitoes aptly titled, *The Mosquito*, and finally a 1970's era Japanese film named, *The Stench*. Each movie is played out with a promotional gimmick, like the massive flying mosquito or the chairs that shock the audience members, and that is part of *Popcorn*'s plot as well. There is a general celebration of cinema all around, from the love of being at the theater to the silly gimmicks only found in the movie going experiences in the past. Again, like with *Demons*, so much of the film's plotline is tied into the actions onscreen, many of the characters face their demise in the cinematic goofs carried out as part of the trilogy of films being shown.

In a display of sheer self-reflexivity, the 1996 horror title, *Scream* and its 1997 sequel *Scream 2* marked a true evolution in the horror genre. After a considerable span of mostly uninspired and unoriginal horror films, *Scream* told a horror-literate audience that the genre was back, and the people that came in droves to see the December release film were in on the jokes. They were, for the most part, an audience that knew the rules of a horror movie, knew what to expect at each and every turn, and knew that part of viewing cinema and the pleasure of horror was the tongue and cheek dark humor that came from knowing that what they saw on the screen was just a façade, but a well made façade that was part of a long tradition of horror extending back to the origins of cinema itself. *Scream* spends much of its 111 minute run time playing back to earlier horror movies and the conventions that were created in those films, constantly referencing titles and characters of past horror. The movie and its quick sequel are both prime

examples of horror movies that, despite being filled with blood and violence, are, for most part, not to be taken seriously. When Billy repeatedly stabs Stu at the end of part one, and the blood spurts come in larger portions, one knows that he is supposed to laugh it off, even if Stu is surely doomed to a painful death. The pleasure in *Scream*, and the films it spawned, are knowing the genre, knowing the tropes, and playing along act by act, as if each new scene is a puzzle and the job of each person in the darkened theater is to figure out how this plot piece fits into the mythos of horror cinema as audiences have come to know it. One plays along with the action on screen, following the advice of nerdy character, Randy who works in a video store, who tells all of the partygoers about the rules of surviving a horror movie. It is hardly an accident that Randy makes it out alive in the end. In fact, Randy's first rule is "you can never have sex." He is taking a page straight from Carol Clover's seminal horror book, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. In that tome, Clover notes, "killing those who seek or engage in unauthorized sex amounts to a generic imperative in the slasher film" (34). The screenwriter of *Scream 1 and 2*, Kevin Williamson, clearly researched horror movie elements and the rules that these films have played by for decades. By knowing the genre inside out, he finds it much easier to twist each and every element for his own purposes. The question being asked throughout *Scream* is why we love horror movies and why we find pleasure in the pain on the screen before us. Senior film lecturer Carolyn Jess-Cooke argues that "sequelisation," as she calls it, "is a form of repetition-compulsion...evidenced by the way sequels are designed to keep audiences coming back to theatres, to re-experience the [original] film across a host of tie-ins, and generally make cinema-going a habit" (9). Based on the box office numbers alone for both *Scream* and *Scream 2*, one would suspect that this formula worked, and that many of those seeing either film were doing so

for a second, third, and fourth time (Box Office Mojo). Both films grossed in excess of \$100 million domestically, a feat nearly unheard of at the time for a horror movie.

In the first movie, high school senior, Sidney Prescott, whose mother was killed precisely one year earlier, is the focus of a probable serial killer who threatens her and others over the phone, a madman who has already dispatched two of her classmates, and hopes to make her the next victim. The first half of the movie is a series of red herrings, where we are lead to believe that her boyfriend, Billy Loomis is the bad guy, only realizing he is innocent after spending a night in jail and the actual killer calls Sidney again to rub her face in pinning the blame on the wrong man. The film introduces the character of Gale Weathers, a tabloid journalist who has made it her campaign to free the man accused of killing Sidney's mother. The second half of the film consists of a house party in a remote location filled with, what seems like, most of the student body. As it turns out, Billy is the killer of all the teens as well as Sidney's mother a year earlier, but he is working with a partner in Stu, the boyfriend of Sidney's best gal pal, Tatum. In the movie's final scene, the duo cryptically explains that their motive for the killings is nonexistent. "I don't really believe in motives," Billy tells her. "It's a lot scarier when there's no motive."

*Scream 2* opens with a black couple seeing the movie version of Gale Weathers' bestselling book on the murders called *Stab*. The fans are in a frenzy, dozens of them wearing the infamous mask and outfit the killers wore in part one. The couple is quickly dispatched, but not before noting that horror movies are made for white audiences and that black characters are always killed off too quickly. This short preface ends, and the audience is reintroduced to Sidney, who has built a new life in college, away from the murders, but still feeling the tension of the past. Nerdy Randy, now a film student, is present on the same campus, and Gale Weathers

and Deputy Dewey, the officer who saved the day in the first film, soon show up as well. Sidney is a prime target again, when a copycat killer starts to off victims in similar fashion, in time for the release of the film version of the events in her past. Where *Scream 1* was concerned with the history of horror and the conventions these films closely follow, the sequel is concerned with an almost tearing down of the fourth wall, a not so subtle nod to the audience that this movie is, in fact, poking fun not only at itself but at the very notion of sequels. Randy, in a film class, discussing sequels in general, tells his classmates that, “The horror genre has been destroyed by sequels.” The meta nature of *Scream 2* is in the notion that we are all in on the joke. In part 1, when discussing what a film version of her life would be like, Sidney states she would hope to be played by Jennifer Aniston, but would likely get stuck being played by Tori Spelling. In a nod to its predecessor, Tori Spelling, in fact, plays Sidney in *Stab*.

In a sequel the rules still exist, but, according to Randy in a conversation with Dewey as to who could be the killer, a sequel has to contain more blood and the body count has to be higher. *Scream 2* does not necessarily follow these rules perfectly, but this clever nod tells us once again that we are stuck in a horror movie, but it is okay, because no one wants to get out. This is a ride for the pure pleasure of experiencing these characters again, the main reason that sequels exist to begin with. In part 2, Sidney is a theater student starring in the department’s next big play, a Greek tragedy based on fate. She is in a movie containing a movie in a theater department where she is polishing her acting chops, while fellow victim Randy learns more about cinema than he already knew before. All the while, she is doing her best to avoid dozens of ravenous reporters hell bent on getting her to talk to them about the murders, including her part time nemesis, Gale Weathers. By the end of the film, Randy follows the horror movie rules from part one but still falls victim to the killer, and nearly everyone in Sidney’s life is taken out in

similar fashion, only Dewey and Gale joining her alive in the end. In the movie's final segment, we learn that weird film student Derek is the killer, and he did it because he wanted his fifteen minutes of fame, which matches the movie's overarching theme perfectly. He was joined in his killing spree by Billy Loomis' mother, posing as a reporter covering the events on and around campus.

## **POST-MODERN HORROR**

The plots and thematic devices in these films set the tone for the study of self-reflexivity in horror cinema. In all four of these films, the participants on screen are knowingly part of the tropes of horror films. They are either mimicking actions they have seen in previous horror movies in order to stay alive, or they are playing along tongue in cheek to what is happening on screen directly in front of them. When Billy Loomis in *Scream* notes that he was at home watching *The Exorcist*, he is reaffirming the movie's love of horror cinema history already put firmly in place in the prologue scene where young victim Casey is tormented on the phone by a voice demanding she play a game of horror movie trivia or die. In *Popcorn*, our characters are dispatched always near the screen, one character taken out right behind the screen, almost able to reach to the audience for help. That movie ends with a scene of true life horror that the audience confuses with a movie prank, nearly allowing the real killer to get away with a ghastly crime in the process. These films, too, fit all the hallmarks of what we can label "postmodern horror cinema." In his book, *The Horror Film*, researcher Stephen Prince notes that postmodern horror requires at least one of the following characteristics: "1. Horror constitutes a violence disruption of the everyday world. 2. Horror transgresses and violates boundaries. 3. Horror throws into question the validity of rationality. 4. Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure. 5. Horror produced a bounded experience of fear" (90-91). The films in our study clearly fit many of the

points in this rubric. *Scream*, used mostly here because it is the purest example of self-reflexivity in horror, definitely repudiates narrative closure, as even though our original killers are dead, one knows that the terror will go on even before any announcement of a sequel. *Scream* represents a small peaceful town whose very identity is thrown into chaos by sudden violence. Professor Valerie Wee argues that *Scream* and its sequels represent an even further evolved form of postmodernism by noting the following:

I have labeled this more advanced form of post-modernism “hyperpostmodernism” and in the *Scream* trilogy it can be identified in two ways: (1) a heightened degree of intertextual referencing and self-reflexivity that ceases to function at the traditional level of tongue-in-cheek subtext, and emerges instead as the actual text of the films; and (2) a propensity for ignoring film specific boundaries by actively referencing, “borrowing,” and influencing the styles and formats of other media forms. (44)

The earlier two films in this study exist quite separately from the film world. Their characters know they are in a horror movie, but that is never made too clear to the audience. *Scream* and its sequels relish on the fact that, despite never turning to the camera and posing a question or making a statement of fact, it is speaking directly to the mostly teen audiences in the seats in the darkened theater. Part of the pleasure in viewing these films is that one knows going in that there will almost surely be a slate of sequels in coming years, and if this movie was beloved, it will be experienced again and again, until audiences tire of this new formula. *Scream* played that out over a period of fifteen years, the fourth sequel being released in 2011.

## **USE OF TECHNOLOGY**



*Scream* is built on the premise that the audience is comprised mostly of technologically savvy teens. In 1996, cell phones were not nearly as common as they are in 2014, but the internet was thriving, and most teens were adept at using and latching onto new technologies, even more quickly than their parents. According to popular trivia, found in nearly every review of *Scream*, it is noted that the use of caller ID more than tripled after the film's 1996 release (Jason and Metz 126). The film is filled with new technology, including the fairly new innovation of caller ID as well as the clever use of the cell phones in order for the killers to be everywhere at the same time, able to dispatch as many teen victims as quickly as possible. All of this drives the narrative, but it also speaks to the teen audience members. This movie is for you and your generation, your parents would have no idea how to even use a cell phone let alone plan such intricate killings.

Both films use the cellular phone as a way to work out various social and sexual fears of the late 1990's. It is vital that most Americans, when the film was released, had little experience with cell phones. Cell phones, being wireless, seem to feel less safe and secure than our familiar landlines used for so many years. The deaths of every male character in *Scream* involve only a cell phone (a more open space), while the female victims use a combination of cell phone and landline (stuck in a house, tethered to a line). The females seem to be attached more closely to the home in general, and the open space that usually offers protection is, in fact, a death trap, as we see Randy being killed in part two while speaking to the killer via a cell phone, in view of the entire college quad, yet still dispatched quite easily. The closeness of the cell phone to the body and its mobile aspect means that it acts as a symbol of the broken distinction between public and private. In *The Cell Phone Reader*, Allison Whitney notes this phenomenon. "It is significant that the killers' capacity to trap and overpower their victims is contingent on conversations between a

cell phone and a land line, in what is literally a dialogue between two technologies and the identity formations that accompany them” (131). She continues noting that “the land line physically traps the woman inside the home, while also penetrating the home’s protective boundaries” (Whitney 131-132). *Scream* works to take the technology and the evolution in communication and uses it to feminize the male characters while empowering the female characters. The fears of the past used to be that the phone itself acted as a public intrusion into the private (and safe) sphere. The home was a place for woman, and though the female characters in both film find themselves using landlines, tethered to the home, they often get away in the process. Sidney, for example, is consistently answering a landline, talking to the killer on what we assume is always a cell phone, but she is one of the few to survive the entire series, through all three sequels. Ultimately, it plays on our notion of technology and our close association with this new technology. We are evolving in our use of new technology at the same time as the characters on the screen.

*Popcorn* uses technology to show the transformation in the way we view horror itself. In the movie's final scenes, the masked killer plays out part of an old short film made in the 1970's, and he plans to act out the final sequence on stage, a sequence in which he murders Maggie, our heroine, possibly taking the chance to then burn down the theater with hundreds of helpless victims inside. The juxtaposition between stage play and movie plays on our fears of change and of new technologies.

## **ISSUES OF RACE**

In *Demons*, race, like in many giallo-era films, is fairly troublesome issue. It does not exist as a major plot point for the most part, but one of the early heroes of the movie is a very stereotypical black man called Tony the Pimp, complete with ridiculous outfit and a woman on each arm. His

voice is a stereotype of the worst kind, his mannerisms of incivility and outright hostility toward the female gender are even worse. He is demonized and cast out from the rest of the group until his demise halfway through the film. Even when being attacked by the demon zombies, the others spend no time on thinking of saving him. Then again, race has often been an issue in European horror as well as the American variety. European cinema, according to Ian Olney, has a long history of racism by constantly demonizing non-white characters. This can be directly seen in *Demons 3*, notably subtitled *Black Demons* where a group of black zombies attack and cannibalize a group of all white adventurers in South America (36). *Demons* seems to find itself in the same racially troubling territory, but mostly it seems to be following the tropes and thematic demands of the European horror films that came before it.

In *Scream*, any racial issues seem to be much less tame. No doubt, one would be hard pressed to even find a character of color, but in *Scream 2* screenwriter, Kevin Williamson pokes fun at the race issue in horror on numerous occasions. The two first victims are a black couple, but the female, played here by Jada Pinkett, spends much of her time bemoaning the fact that horror has a problem with black people. Later, we discover that Sidney's roommate is black, and she survives longer than most of the other, mostly white male, characters. Gale Weathers' cameraman in this outing is a black guy named, Joel, and he, too, makes note of horror movie rules and the fact that a black man never makes it long, which is the main reason he eventually ditches her for the safety of anywhere but near the trio that make it out in the end. *Popcorn's* main cast of film students includes black female, Tina, but outside of that issues of race are almost nonexistent.

## **A LINK TO THE PAST**

*Scream* is basically a compilation of past horrors. The entire opening sequence, where who we think will be our lead heroine is killed off, a called on the phone torments high schooler Casey Becker. Immediately, he asks her about horror movies and which is her favorite scary movie. In the end of the call, before taking her out, the unseen caller promises to let her go if only she can answer correctly in a game of horror movie trivia. When asked the name of the killer in Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, the audience, who we assume are big horror buffs already, know that she is wrong when she states that Jason is, in fact, the killer. We all know that Jason's mother was the killer. *Scream* goes on to mention several horror movies, including *The Exorcist*, *Terror Train*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and the final party scene culminates with a viewing of the original *Halloween*, the movie playing in the background as Billy and Stu pick off victims one by one. *Scream* acts as an homage to these earlier films and the traditions they put in place. *Scream 2* makes use of this same theme by reminding viewers of the events in *Scream 1*, as if the events in the film were merely film plot points to be rehashed later on. Sure, these characters actually lived out these events, but we are so disconnected from their reality as true events as viewers that we are consistently put in a place to disassociate the reality from the fiction. The events, though true to the characters, are merely setup for the events in part two.

*Popcorn* works in much the same way by playing back to the golden age of cinema, the 1950's style goofs and gimmicks, the protective nature of the theater as a safe place, and allowing the viewers inside the horrorthon to feel safe even while being picked off.

### **SELF-REFLEXIVITY**

*Scream* blurs the boundaries between what is real and what is fiction both within the confines of the movie and the theater experience itself. The trilogy, according to Jess-Cooke, "self consciously generates discursive practices which situate all texts, dialogues, genre

conventions, and spectatorship within the film's diegetic boundaries" (58). *Scream 2*, with its focus on sequels, the changing rules of horror franchises, and the nature of self-referential film itself also notes the real-life rise of shows like *Inside Edition* and the media's obsession with not only reporting the news but becoming part of the news, creating the news if at all possible. The 1990's saw a sudden change in the average American's relationship to the media, as well as how real-life events connected to fictional events on screen. Kimberly Jackson, in examining technology and modern horror notes this change and how it plays out in *Scream 2*. "Like the first film, in all three successive *Scream* films, the media contributes to the confusion between reality and representation" (42). When Randy states that reporters, in this new era, will often create the news themselves, he is exactly right. The killer, Billy Loomis' mother, spends the entire film masquerading as a local reporter, committing the murders while simultaneously reporting on them.

In *Popcorn*, many horror movies are mentioned, and the longest portion of the film is dominated by a series of horror films that mock older subgenres of horror cinema, while praising them as part of the canon of beloved pictures. The film students take these films seriously only when coupled with 1950's William Castle-style effects added into the mix. There are consistently nods to the audience. The characters in the cheesy movies on the screen within the screen of *Popcorn* spend part of their time looking directly into the camera, looking at us through that screen, telling us that we are all part of the inside jokes, because we know horror movies, and we know that this is a study of horror and of cinema itself.

## **CONCLUSION**

The four films examined here use different routes to the same ultimate goal. There is a knowledge of the genre and of horror cinematic history at play here. A love of the genre and the

elements that have been put in place, audience members waiting to see each one, allowing each movie in the list here to transform and evolve the genre in order to satisfy viewer desires. *Scream* is clearly the pinnacle of these self-reflexive, self-referential movies. After a decade of decline, teen viewers, usually more savvy than those who came before them, wanted something different, and Wes Craven gave that to them with his 1996 masterpiece. The two films that came before played on some of the same themes and used a knowing nod to the genre history to help create the environment where a film like *Scream* and its sequel could not only survive but flourish. These films represent the purest in cinematic reflexivity, a self-knowing, self-congratulatory take in the excess of film, the process of filmmaking, and the joy and pleasure of experiencing these events in a darkened theater with hundreds of other people. These films remind viewer what it is to be part of the spectacle of horror, recalling what makes horror a genre that is so attached to the participation of those watching. These films want you to scream “don’t go there!” along with the opening couple in *Scream 2*. The writers and directors of these four films want you to be a part of the spectacle, and in the end these movies know that they are, in fact, not to be taken completely seriously, as it is no secret that they are merely movies.

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