

The Politics of Horror

Abstract

The horror genre is home to very opinionated directors and writers with their ideologies often leaking into their work. For the most part, horror films and television shows tend to be liberal in terms of characters and social commentary, but the majority of the slasher sub-genre's clichés and conventions mimic extremely conservative narratives. This dilemma highlights the internal conflict within the genre as it continues to focus on retaining its liberal audience by making highly-aware films that try to avoid any conservative pitfalls.

The Politics of Horror

Horror movies, while often overlooked at award ceremonies and by critics alike for being deemed too lowbrow of a form of entertainment, often have intricate social criticisms to offer. Below the shocking gore, gracious nudity, or silent and eerie shocks, the horror genre is home to many outspoken writers and directors that aim to showcase their political observations through the visual medium of film and television.

Within the genre there is a political clash, however. For the most part, horror films and horror-themed television shows tend to be liberal in terms of characters and overall social commentary, but the majority of the genre's clichés and conventions mimic extremely conservative narratives. This dilemma highlights the internal conflict within the genre as it continues to focus on retaining its liberal audience.

Perhaps the most highly politicized sub-genre of horror is the zombie sub-genre, mostly thanks to famed director George A. Romero. Romero is the inventor of the modern concept that a zombie is nothing more than reanimated flesh with “an uncontrollable desire to consume”. Prior to his classic, *Night of the Living Dead*, zombies in film were portrayed as “laboring subjects” who found themselves in such a state due to hypnosis brought on by voodoo-laced practices (Gunn & Treat, 2005). *Night of the Living Dead*, featured “a black man and white woman together in a domestic setting” battling their way through the apocalyptic implications of a zombie uprising. Romero stated this plot device was “his way of commenting on racism and the fear of miscegenation in the 1960’s” (Gunn & Treat, 2005). Interestingly, Ben, the black man, is shot to death at the end of the film by rattled police as he leaves the farmhouse in search of help unarmed. Romero continued his political agenda with other sequels battling consumerism, class warfare, and such. His films have been able to maintain a one-sided liberal outlook without the addition of accidental conservative narratives, which is more than can be said about others’ films.

John Carpenter created *They Live* because “Reaganism pissed [him] off”. *They Live*, in which a drifter is equipped with a pair of sunglasses that allow him to see the subliminal messaging bombarding people, has been hailed as an “assault-rifle-ready aim at the decade’s materialism, excess, and conservative dominance” and is usually the go-to film for explaining the success of the genre’s focus on being counterculture (Suebsaeng, 14). While the film has

The Politics of Horror

clearly allow Carpenter to immortalize his political views on film, what about his most famous film *Halloween*: the film that single-handedly launched the slasher genre? Here, we have the mudding of the waters in the politics of horror that Romero had evaded.

The *Halloween* series, along with its blatant copy and often cited rival series of *Friday the 13th*, dominated the late 70's and 80's. These films set forth to entertain, but ended up changing the landscape of the genre with their violent and, at times, sexual mentality and imagery. While John Carpenter as a person may have been a very outspoken liberal whose many films carried those antiauthority themes mentioned in *They Live*, his most famous film is tentatively considered conservative in nature.

Post-motive slasher films, like *Scream*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The House on Sorority Row*, *My Bloody Valentine*, and *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, find their niche as one of the only conservative outlets in the horror genre, whether they like it or not. This political labeling stems from their formulaic plot devices. "If you're a kid who has premarital sex, does drugs, binge-drinks, and parties like a fool, you will be severely punished" in the form of being murdered or being left traumatized by having those around you slaughtered (Cavanaugh, 2014). The serial killers in these films, whether supernatural or not, often target teenagers who partake in the previously mentioned activities, thus the films become pseudo-morality tales for those within the age group, much in the same way old campfire tales and urban legends functioned.

The concept of the final girl doesn't help matters, either. The final girl, "almost always white, young and straight(ish)," is set up to be the only survivor of any massacre or bloodbath that befalls her group of friends. While some praise the character archetype as being a "feminist renegade," in the male dominated world, others note she is usually "a sexless 'good' girl" that only furthers the underpinning conservative narrative of restraining from premarital sex (Pipenburg, 2015). Her survival is nothing short of a reward for her purity.

With all these complications set in place, why don't the films cater to conservative audiences directly then? To find that answer, one does not have to look very far. *American Horror Story*, the FX anthology horror show, has been the target of many conservative groups with nothing better to do than to complain about how horrific a horror show can be. Some critics boil the show down to nothing more than a collection of scenes depicting "voyeurism, dual masturbation, graphic sex, and an unhealthy dose of murder, blood, and gore" (Thompson, 2012). Conservative critics unleash the same harsh assessment on other outlets of the horror genre. Thus concluding: the horror genre is not exactly welcomed with open arms by conservative mentalities even though many of the films, at times, highlight their own narrative in an extreme manner.

This leaves the horror genre in a less-than-favorable situation that forces filmmakers to be extremely aware of their messages, whether intentional or not. The summer of 2016 saw the release of the third entry of *The Purge* series: a trilogy taking place in America's supposedly near future. Subtitled *Election Year*, the film took advantage of the then-current political climate to help promote their movie. Through their tagline of "Keep America Great," an obvious mockery

The Politics of Horror

of Trump's campaign slogan, they were able to imply the legalization of murder would be the eventual outcome of the Trump administration (Chichizola, 2016). Some critics even went as far to warn the films serve as "cautionary tales about unchecked privilege and the extreme perils of living in a civilization whose culture is built on divisive lines of wealth, faith, and ethnicity" (Horton, 2016). Regardless if the films are prophetic or not, they are able to maintain their outwardly liberal vein throughout, without the conservative pitfalls that hampers the slasher genre.

The previously mention, *American Horror Story*, is also a frontrunner in this overhaul of horror. "In mainstream horror, queer or LGBTQ characters have been relegated to sub-plot status, the culturally-loaded perspective, trash-talking best friend or the monster-as-metaphor concept," but Ryan Murphy's television show has been able to set lesbian and transgender characters as the protagonists of entire seasons, the voices of reason, and even being seen as "the most natural" in terms of their characterization (Kelly, 2016).

Candyman, when released in the 1990's, was the cause for much debate regarding its racial tones. Some argued it condensed the black characters that were "susceptible to superstition and urban myth" into one large "ghetto filled with poverty, despair and violence". The main plot line featuring the villain as a "hulking, bloodthirsty" black man lusting over an angelic, white educated woman didn't help matters at all and echoed the racist idea of a black man's insatiable sexual appetite for white women seen in D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (Lovell, 1992). In 2017, Jordan Peele offered *Get Out*, his *Stepford Wives*-esque film that concerned itself with race as oppose to gender. While many thought it would be in the same vein as the current flow of horror films that tended to solely be focused on liberal ideals by catering to liberal audiences, Peele made a point to make "the crazies [within in the film]...the liberal white elite" living in "post-Obama America" (Debruge, 2017). While Peele is able to reprimand and reverse many of the racist undertones *Candyman* offered in the 90's, his focus on showing the racist tendencies of colorblind liberals offer us a new and enticingly muddled angle on the politics of horror.

The horror genre, like any market, is home to many different demographics it wishes to appease. In the past and as we are seeing currently, the genre is concerned with appealing to those on the left side of the spectrum through their commentary and metaphors. And although horror films tend to be liberal in nature due to their themes, the popular sub-genre of slasher films is often riddled with conservative values, albeit a bit severe in their manifestation. When it boils down to it, the main reason the horror genre is more left than right in mentality, or at least tries its hardest to be, could be highlighted in the treatments and criticisms horror films have received at the hands of conservatives. As we are in this new era of self-awareness, it will be interesting to see if upcoming horror films and television shows continue on with the trend of presenting liberal bias without any room for accidental conservative slip-ins, or if Jordan Peele's very successful *Get Out* will cause other films to blur the strict divides of the opposing ideologies.

The Politics of Horror

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The Politics of Horror

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