

A CINEMA OF CONFRONTATION:
USING A MATERIAL-SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO BETTER ACCOUNT FOR THE
HISTORY AND THEORIZATION OF 1970S INDEPENDENT AMERICAN HORROR

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A CINEMA OF CONFRONTATION:

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgments | ii |
| List of Figures | iv |
| I. Introduction | 1 |
| II. Literature Review | 5 |
| III. Method | 16 |
| Close Readings | |
| IV. <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 24 |
| V. <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 61 |
| VI. <i>Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 93 |
| VII. Conclusion | 132 |
| Works Cited | 135 |
| Endnotes | 146 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|--|-----|
| Figure 1: Traditional one-way encoding/decoding of meaning vs. revised model | 4 |
| Figure 2: Traditional and revised historical and theoretical accounts of horror | 12 |
| Figure 3: Marketing gimmicks for <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 30 |
| Figure 4: Racial anxieties promote <i>In the Heat of the Night</i> and <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 30 |
| Figure 5: The title sequence from <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 33 |
| Figure 6: Introducing Ben in <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 35 |
| Figure 7: Symbolic Space in <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 40 |
| Figure 8: “The Last Supper” sequence in <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 47 |
| Figure 9: The Influence of EC Comics on <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 49 |
| Figure 10: Evoking and Inverting the Saturn myth in <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 52 |
| Figure 11: Reissue poster for <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 53 |
| Figure 12: Ben’s Confrontation with the Posse in <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 55 |
| Figure 13: Ben’s Death in <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 57 |
| Figure 14: Final sequence in <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> | 59 |
| Figure 15: Film poster for <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 66 |
| Figure 16: Front page of the <i>Milwaukee Sentinel</i> , October 27, 1972 | 66 |
| Figure 17: <i>Kent State—Girl Screaming over Dead Body</i> | 66 |
| Figure 18: <i>Terror of War</i> | 68 |
| Figure 19: Juxtaposition within the frame in <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 69 |
| Figure 20: Two covers of <i>Time Magazine</i> tell a story | 73 |
| Figure 21: The Stillos butcher Phyllis in <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 81 |
| Figure 22: Krug’s rape of Mari and its aftermath in <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 84 |
| Figure 23: The Stillos follow Mari to the lake in <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 86 |
| Figure 24: Evocations of Vietnam in the execution of Mari in <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 87 |
| Figure 25: Parallels between <i>Hamlet</i> ’s Ophelia and Mari in <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 88 |
| Figure 26: The closing credits sequence and music in <i>Last House on the Left</i> | 92 |
| Figure 27: Film poster for <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 100 |
| Figure 28: Opening sequence in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 103 |
| Figure 29: Grotesque sculpture in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 105 |
| Figure 30: Title sequence and the “terrible place” in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 107 |

| | |
|---|---------|
| Figure 31: Evocations of Vietnam in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 111 |
| Figure 32: “Dead art” in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 115 |
| Figure 33: Sympathizing with the Monstrous in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 117 |
| Figure 34: The “Nightmare” sequence in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 120-127 |
| Figure 35: Evoking the “Mad Tea Party” in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 128 |
| Figure 36: “Murdering time” in <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 128 |
| Figure 37: The final images of <i>The Texas Chain Saw Massacre</i> | 130 |

I. Introduction

In *The Films in My Life*, François Truffaut describes how “cinematic success” is often not the result of the best efforts of the director as *auteur* (“good brain work,” as Truffaut describes it), but rather “a harmony of existing elements in ourselves that we may not have even been conscious of: a fortunate fusion of subject and our deeper feelings, an accidental coincidence of our own preoccupations at a certain moment of life and the public’s” (15). This fragile, temporary confluence of elements—the director, the film itself, and its audience—is joined, Truffaut points out, by others (“Many things”): critical reception as well as “advertising, the general atmosphere, competition, timing” (*ibid.*). “When a film achieves a certain amount of success,” Truffaut continues, “it becomes a sociological event” (*ibid.*). Truffaut’s words have stayed with me for some time; they suggest an approach to cinema studies that I am interested in pursuing, an approach that perhaps can address certain problems that I believe have occasionally pervaded film theory and histories of cinema. For example, regarding the lingering effects of psychoanalytic theory that dominated cinema studies in the 1970s and 1980s, Stephen Prince laments a general lack of social grounding: “In the attempt to grasp the social psychoanalytically,” he observes, “the social has been lost” (120). How might we go about regaining the social? One relatively recent intervention in sociological theory has involved the introduction of material-semiotic methods such as actor-network theory. As sociologist John Law explains, a material-semiotic approach “describes the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors” (2). Actors in this sense include not just human beings, but also objects, machines, and physical spaces (materials), as well as abstract concepts, theories, and ideas (semiotics); material-semiotic methods involve describing (social) networks that arise—that are assembled and continuously reassembled—out of the relations between such actors. In considering the assemblage of elements that Truffaut points to and his description of that assemblage as “sociological,” it occurs to me that a material-semiotic method could be a productive alternative approach for cinema studies.

Material-semiotics are perhaps even especially relevant with regards to film. A central criticism of material-semiotic approaches is that they involve assigning “agency” (*not* intentionality) to non-human actors (materials and ideas) in a given network, but with regards to cinema studies, something very much

like agency for materials and ideas is often already assumed. Consider, for example, how Susan Hayward begins her definition of *apparatus* in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*:

...the apparatus or technology has an ideological *effect upon* the spectator. In the simplest instance the cinematic apparatus *purports to set before* the eye and ear realistic images and sounds. However, the technology *disguises* how that reality is put together frame by frame. It also *provides* the illusion of perspectival space. (15, emphases mine).

We often speak similarly of the camera “loving” an actor and the relative “power” of high angle shots; these examples speak to what “agency” means in material semiotics. Such an approach seemingly could be used successfully to map out the relations between those “many things” Truffaut writes of in order to describe the cinema socially in a way that other methods often neglect. Such an approach could *include* those other methods, in fact, assembling and borrowing concepts from diverse theoretical approaches.

The objective of my research is to formulate a material-semiotic approach that can be used to trace associations between films and to describe the confluence of elements that lead to their cinematic success. To demonstrate this approach, I will examine three horror films that have in recent years received a significant amount of critical attention: George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Wes Craven’s *Last House on the Left* (1972), and Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Horror has long been an established genre, one that has proven dependably lucrative for studios, but these three films were independent productions made with miniscule budgets, largely inexperienced directors, casts, and crews, and without the promotion of the studio system. There was little chance for them to do well at all, yet all three were wildly successful. In fact, all three almost immediately garnered large cult followings, as their received messages about the real-life horrors of the age spoke directly to audiences.

Those messages have resonated through the decades, as well. While horror has been one of the most successful genres, it has also been a much-maligned one, long relegated to the margins of respectability by critics and scholars alike. Yet today these three films are all included in what is now regarded by many as a “golden age” of American horror, an era marked by unrivaled innovation, creativity, and—especially given the limitations of independent production—deft technical craftsmanship. While a few key critics such as Robin Wood championed all three films early on, in recent years there has been an explosion of scholarship on modern American horror that has cast a renewed focus on these films and the

larger cultural significance of their success. That scholarship has been matched even more recently by at least a half dozen documentaries that focus exclusively on the era.

While many of these accounts are at first persuasive and remain provocative, I nonetheless have found myself upon reflection identifying conspicuous incongruities and oversights that remain, as none of these approaches account for the assemblage of “many things” that Truffaut identifies. Most of these accounts, in fact, assume a rather romanticized view of these films’ directors as *auteurs*—each director encodes meaning into his respective film which is in turn effortlessly received by the audience—and thus little attention is paid to the directors’ collaborators, audiences, or indeed the films, themselves (fig. 1). It occurs to me, too, that these accounts are often too forceful, too definitive in their declarations about film history and theory. While there has been recognition that the quest for a “total theory” is foolhardy, there is still often a tendency to champion one theoretical approach over others. The kind of method I envision shares with its material-semiotic progenitors a tendency towards description rather than explanation. Truffaut points to the “fortunate fusions,” the “accidental coincidences,” and the ephemeral quality of “certain moment[s]” that lead to cinematic success, and such is the case with the films I want to consider.

In addition to happenstance, these films shared a sociohistorical context and authorial intent that informs their similar ideological categorization, as well as strikingly similar modes of production, distribution, exhibition, and audience reception, common textual elements, and approaches to spectator address that are noteworthy. By tracing points of contact between the shared qualities of these films, one can posit larger speculations about a kind of cinema that they composed: together they formed an “agitprop horror,” a cinema of confrontation, which envisioned the screen not as a “*mise-en-scène* of desire,” but rather a *mise-en-scène* of angst: its system of *suturing* took on the dual meanings that the term implies—a “stitching in,” but also a binding of the spectator to the filmic text by implicating the spectator in the violence onscreen and tying that violence through intertextuality to the real life horrors outside the theater. Audiences responded to this confrontational approach by making these films some of the most successful independent productions of all time.

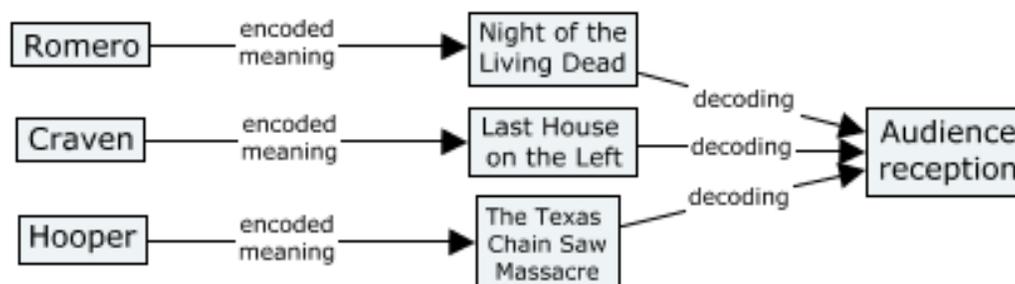
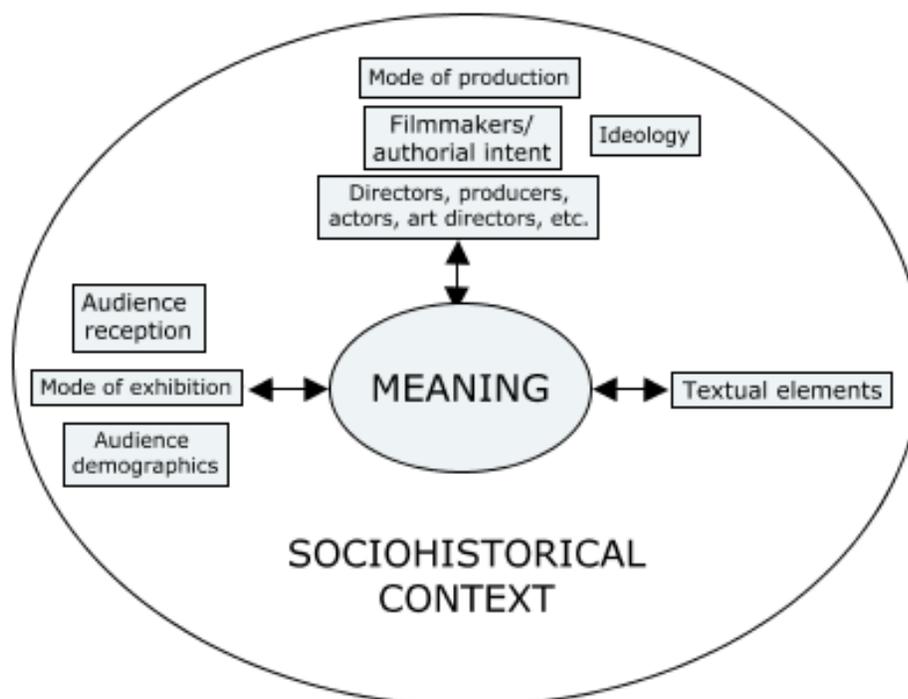


Figure 1. Several documentaries on modern American horror have been made since 2000, including Adam Simon’s *The American Nightmare* (2000), Jeff McQueen’s *Going to Pieces: The Rise and Fall of the Slasher Film* (2006), Andrew Monument’s *Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film* (2009), and Rob Kuhns’s *The Birth of the Living Dead* (2013). The films share a thesis—one echoed in much of the scholarship—that modern American horror films generally reflect contemporary anxieties and real life horrors. These documentaries, however, also share a tendency with recent scholarship to focus on the films’ directors and the ideological categorization they encode almost exclusively. The resulting model is something like the linear, one-way flow of meaning illustrated at top: the director—and the director alone—consciously encodes messages into his film and the audience readily decodes the message in a largely passive process. Such formulations are arguably too reductive. Audiences can play active roles in such decoding—and different audiences can interpret the same text in widely divergent ways, so to presume that audiences broadly interpreted a given text in a certain way should necessitate some evidence. Audience interpretation will be affected, too, by the mode of exhibition. Authorial intent and ideological investments are important, but so, too, is *how* such messages are coded—what textual elements are at work to facilitate them, how the modes of production and distribution play a part, and how collaborators (e.g. producers, actors, art directors) compliment or complicate that process. Finally, all of these elements are necessarily affected by the sociohistorical context in which they come together during the filmmaking process. Taking account of this wider confluence of elements, as the bottom schema begins to do, can render more convincing theoretical and historical accounts.



II. Literature Review

Film has had no dearth of overarching histories, and three scholars who have offered compelling “macro-level” accounts are Tom Gunning, Miriam Hansen, and Timothy J. Corrigan. Beginning with “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde” (1986) and elaborated elsewhere, Gunning contrasts cinema prior to 1906, which he refers to as a “cinema of attractions,” with the cinema of narrative that follows. Rather than an emphasis on storytelling, the cinema of attractions presented disjointed images and spectacle, creating a sense of astonishment, rather than immersion in the cinematic apparatus. The cinema of attractions arose shortly after the advent of cinema, alongside the rise of modernity, only to be subsumed by the dominant narrative cinema of the studio system. For Gunning this distinction reflects differing ideological investments: the cinema of attractions invited the participation of the spectator in meaning-making and is associated more with popular culture, whereas narrative cinema absorbs the spectator into the illusion of the dream factory and, in doing so, reaffirms the dominant ideologies of the bourgeois. Gunning’s account is at once accepted and augmented by Hansen, who starting with *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (1991) extends “the pre-classical period” to the advent of synchronized sound and the corresponding regulation of audience noise—Hansen thus adds an additional concern for the mode of exhibition—versus the cacophony of pre-classical cinema’s audiences. To Gunning’s account Hansen also adds concerns for the intertextuality of pre-classical cinema as an element that facilitated the mode of spectator address; the varying modes of reception that would be associated with different genres; and an account of female spectatorship, which in pre-classical cinema, Hansen argues, is still limited by the commodification of desire.

Both Gunning and Hansen contend that many of the elements of early modern cinema continued on in certain genres (e.g. the musical, as well as certain blockbusters), and have emerged anew in postmodern cinema, which allows for the potential of an “ideal public”—critically engaged rather than subsumed by the cinematic apparatus. In *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (1991), Timothy Corrigan extends this discussion of postmodern cinema. Corrigan augments Gunning’s and Hansen’s distinction between pre-classical (1895 to 1917 for Corrigan) and classical cinema (1917 to the present) further by also pointing to the rise of a modernist cinema (1950 to the present) during the classical period, as well as the emergence of a postmodern cinema that is altogether distinct, marked by a

return to the “glance cinema” of the pre-classical cinema, characterized by sporadic attention to the performance onscreen—versus the fixed subjectivity and attention to reading and interpretation of the “gaze cinema” of classical (and for Corrigan, modernist) cinema, as developed by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975).

All three of these macro-approaches are provocative and convincing in their own way. At the same time, however, the level of magnification that they require invites accompanying macro-problems. For example, all three limit their discussion principally to the modes of exhibition and spectator address, with only broad considerations for the modes of production and distribution or the formal and stylistic features of individual films, all of which often complicate matters. Even with regards to the focus of these accounts alone—the modes of exhibition and spectator address—there are potential complications. In *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (2000), Janet Staiger points to how each of these macro-approaches posits binary divisions, which reflect “...the tendency to create two large categories of texts or exhibition situations, to pit those against each other, and then to make vast claims about spectator effect from that binary opposition” (43). Such claims are often untenable, Staiger argues, because these binaries actually “cannot be parsed out by historical period”; rather, examples of each of these binaries can “exist continually throughout the history of cinema,” with “apparent opposites, and the experiences they might provoke” both existing at any given point in time (12). Staiger also points to how all three assume a mode of reception in which spectators will behave normatively, given the context of the period, but spectators often do *not* behave normatively but rather behave, as she describes, perversely. While these macro-histories are productive for identifying large-scale cinematic trends—their purpose, in fact—their level of magnification is too wide to account for these kinds of important details that exist.

Conversely, using a level of magnification that focuses too narrowly can help one examine fine details, but one cannot trace the contours of the whole. Micro-historical problems can be illustrated by one notable case, in particular: Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). Histories of American horror (e.g. Wood, Sconce, Maddrey) often cite *Psycho* as making a distinct break from what came before: the classical horror of 1930s (e.g. Universal’s gothic monster films and RKO’s *King Kong*, 1933), the low-budget but innovative horror of the 1940s (e.g. films by Val Lewton and Jacques Turner), and the exploitive horror

and science fiction (horror's generic cousin) of the 1950s. With its new realist aesthetic, *Psycho* moved the genre's locus from the gothic castles of Europe to the American home.¹

Unlike the gothic monsters of classical horror that had lost their relevance in the wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, *Psycho*'s monster is human: Norman Bates even looks like—as Hitchcock intended him to—“the boy next door.”² The viewer sympathizes with Norman; part of us *wants* him to succeed in hiding Miriam's car to protect what we think are his mother's crimes, and it makes for a banal kind of evil. Our sympathies are also tied to a broader sociohistorical context: Norman's motel is failing because a new highway directs traffic elsewhere, a bit of exposition that relays contemporary anxieties about modernization. Those anxieties, in turn, reflect a coded rural/urban divide that has hidden away Norman's “monstrous family” and, contra the narrative closure of classical horror, that monstrosity endures within Norman at film's end. *Psycho* is thus credited with inaugurating modern American horror.

Micro-problems arise, however, in how such accounts tend to miss associations that exist between what came before the release of *Psycho* and what comes after. We can start with the monster's humanity: Norman Bates has predecessors in cinema, going all the way back to the somnambulist Cesare (Conrad Veidt) in the film often described as the “granddaddy of horror,” *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Weine, 1920).³ *Psycho* also shares ideological concerns with its predecessors: 1950s low-budget horror, for example, often substituted in a psychiatrist for earlier horror films' mad scientist. In *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (1996), Mark Jancovich describes how in the horror genre psychiatry emerged as a central concern during the 1950s and manifested itself in films' narratives and modes of exhibition.⁴ Jancovich concludes that a crucial component of 1950s horror was actually the anxiety induced by emerging top-down hierarchal structures—economic, political, medical—in postwar America. He includes among his examples *Psycho*'s final scene, in which a psychiatrist gives a detailed account of Norman's pathology to other characters, an ending that has embarrassed some critics who otherwise love the film.⁵ Jancovich argues, however, that Richmond's lecture, in fact, makes sense: it situates *Psycho* firmly among a number of discourses on psychiatry circulating within 1950s horror and science fiction, rendering it as much a coda to 1950s horror as a beginning of the genre's modern era.

This ancestry between *Psycho* and preceding horror extends forward, as well, as many of the thematic and ideological concerns of 1970s horror can be found in the earlier era. For example, David Cook

posits that horror and science fiction underwent a widespread thematic shift during the 1950s from individual conflict to global catastrophe, which reflected the new threat of nuclear holocaust, effectively blurring the line between the two genres (415-6). Those anxieties create a lineage between 1950s horror and the progressive horror of the 1970s, as Romero, Craven, and Hooper have all cited the Cold War discourse of “mutually assured destruction” (MAD) as a key influence on their approach to horror (*American*). Such a reappraisal of shared discourses between 1950s and 1970s American horror can work both ways. The widely received history of 1950s horror is that films such as Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) are part and parcel of a reactionary horror evoking the Red Scare and reflecting conservative anxieties about the Cold War with aliens standing in for Communists set to invade. Wood, for example, finds “The political (McCarthyite) level of 50s science fiction films—the myth of Communism as total dehumanization—accounts for the prevalence of this kind of monster in that period” (“Introduction” 135). In *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Film and the American Movie Business, 1953-1968* (2003), Kevin Heffernan offers an alternate account, situating the film in the context of contemporary anxieties arising from efforts to promote consumerism and conformity. Those same anxieties help explain the recurring theme of mind control in 1950s horror and independent producers’ use of hypnosis-themed publicity stunts like “Psycho-Rama,” which “claimed to feature ‘hidden’ images such as skulls, knives, and spelled words like ‘death’ designed to trigger the audience’s emotional responses” (72). Those exhibition gimmicks resonated with the public in large part due to the social panic caused by the publication of journalist Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), an exposé of the advertising industry’s use of subliminal messages and other techniques.⁶ Heffernan is thus able to connect *Invasion* to contemporary modes of exhibition to illustrate its potentially *progressive* ideology.

Historical accounts also tend to neglect the continuity in new modes of production, distribution, and exhibition of horror before and after *Psycho*’s release. Numerous post-war challenges that threatened the studio system (e.g. the Paramount Decree, the HUAC hearings, labor disputes, new competition from television) led to new modes of production, distribution, and exhibition, including drastically cutting the number of films produced. This shortage of new films led to opportunities for independent producers such as William Castle, Roger Corman, and American International Pictures (AIP) to create genre pictures such as science fiction and horror quickly and cheaply.⁷ The result was the emergence of exploitation films and

“splatter pictures”—direct ancestors of the independent films of the 1970s golden age of horror. Hitchcock emulated those films in many ways with *Psycho*, right down to the shared exhibition gimmicks (e.g. offering life insurance policies for audience members who die of fright and not letting anyone into the film after it began). In fact, according to star Janet Leigh, Hitchcock was not trying to be revolutionary at all, but rather was very consciously trying to duplicate the success of the low budget (“bargain basement Hitchcock”) 1950s horror films of Castle and Corman in an attempt to—as Leigh put it—“beat his cheapskate imitators at their own game” (qtd. in Hendershot 34).⁸ All things considered, then, I would posit that *Psycho* is indeed an epochal film in many ways, but it stands Janus-faced, looking backwards as much as forwards, helping to create a shared lineage of American horror.

Problems can actually compound when one adjusts the lens to focus even more narrowly. For example, if one considers the relatively straightforward matter of genre inception with regards to when the “slasher” subgenre was inaugurated, it is remarkable how various accounts (e.g. Armstrong, Harper, Rockoff) conflict. Dates range from 1960 with *Psycho* in the U.S. and Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom* in Britain, to 1974 with either *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or the Canadian film *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark), to 1978 with John Carpenter’s *Halloween*. The question is largely one of definition; single out certain qualities and marginalize others and you come up with different answers. These various accounts, however, each champion the one film under consideration—its release was singular and marked a breaking away from everything that had come before. Still other accounts push the other way. Sharrett, for example, contends that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* “represents a crucial moment in the history of the horror genre” (256). He goes on to argue, however, that *Texas* has been *incorrectly* categorized as a “slasher” film, that it has larger implications than that of “a low-budget exploitation film” (ibid). In order to valorize *Texas*, Sharrett feels the need to elevate it above other contemporary horror films. While I do not think that he is wrong about the qualities he finds in *Texas*, I think the level of magnification Sharrett has chosen is so narrow that he misses how other films share those qualities, as well.

Tracing associations between these films invites another set of problems. Frederic Jameson’s directive to “Always historicize!” often becomes *only* historicize as the films themselves take a backseat to cinematic history—or just history. As Flannery O’Connor observed of “The Teaching of Literature,” there are “a number of way in which the industrious teacher of English could ignore the nature of literature, but

continue to teach the subject,” from focusing on literary history to generative criticism (“the author and his psychology”) to sociohistorical concerns (125-6). The same is true of the cinema. I am amazed at how in many critical accounts of these films the films themselves are largely absent; not only are there no close readings, there is scant discussion of the films’ formal elements or even specific examples to illustrate the broad strokes made in the analysis.

Alongside macro-problems and micro-problems of accounting for cinematic history are associated problems with theorization and practice. The sweeping approaches of auteur theory in the 1950s and structuralism in the 1960s illustrate the problems inherent in taking up a “total theory” lens. Both were too limiting: auteur theory neglected the other elements that go into filmmaking, the role of the spectator, and a film’s relationship to other texts and discourses, while structuralism was too formalistic, focusing on structures and codes in the text (most notably, perhaps, Christian Metz’s semiotic paradigm that posited a grammar of film) and how it came to be at the expense of other elements. Both gave way to a pluralism of post-structural approaches in the 1970, including post-structural psychoanalysis and deconstruction, but also cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and feminist theory—which re-opened up film to questions of class and gender—as well as the New Historicism of the 1980s.

These reassertions of the importance of identity politics and history are crucial, as theory divorced from such concerns can reveal presumptions and biases in even the most seemingly intuitive of interpretations. For example, in *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll asserts that for audiences screening *Night of the Living Dead*, the “macro-question” is “simply... whether or not the small company of the living, who are sequestered in the house, can survive and avoid zombification.... The film, of course, is narrated from the point of view of humanity and, therefore, it is to be presumed that human survival is unarguably the morally correct outcome” (140-1). Carroll’s model mirrors typical accounts of classical Hollywood cinema that posit that spectator address is fixed and unified, with the presumption that the spectator will identify with the protagonist(s).⁹ Carroll, incidentally, is a staunch opponent of psychoanalytic theory, generally, and points out that he “studiously avoid[s] any reference to the concept of identification,” as such an “elaborate piece of psychological machinery” is unnecessary when “moral allegiance” suffices (116). It is unfortunate, however, that Carroll does not consider how *Night* sutures in the spectator to align identification with multiple points-of-view—both among the living (who are actually

often divided in their “allegiances,”) and the living *dead*. Carroll’s observations, in fact, prove to be upon further inspection the judgment made by a cool observer who is taking an ahistorical, apolitical approach to a film that was very much invested in history and ideology for its contemporary audiences. They often, in fact, exhibited identification with the zombies explicitly: viewers shouted out “Eat ‘em!” when zombies attacked, and “Barbeque!” when two of the living die in a truck explosion (Samuels 66).

Carroll also ignores what Romero himself has to say about *Night*, thus limiting his theorization further: of the contrasting identifications (or “allegiances”) with the survivors, Romero points out that most audiences at the time would be aligned with Ben, a young, intellectual African American, over Harry, who is middle-aged, white, and coded as being part of the establishment, as *Night*’s audiences typically would have had an anti-establishment sensibility. Harry, Romero notes, is “coming from a different place, so we are all rooting for Ben because he seems more like us” (qtd. in Jones 243). Furthermore, while Carroll presumes that the zombies are something to be avoided, Romero’s vision of the zombies is that they actually represent revolution—a new society emerging from the counterculture to devour the old (discussed below). Wimsatt and Beardsley’s warning about the “intentional fallacy” is worth keeping in mind, lest we value authorial intent *at the expense of* the text itself, but we do not need to ignore what authors have to say about their intent altogether. Nor should we discount the texts’ effects: in accounting for the “sociological event” that Truffaut ascribes to cinematic success, we must consider the audience’s role. When historical data are available regarding how a film was received, surely they provide relevant context. From psychoanalytic theory, we can also begin to account for the intersection between text and spectator—that is *how* the text affects the spectator, specifically. Carroll’s “macro-question,” in fact, has multiple answers, and the lens he uses to account for the entire horror genre is too wide to account for *Night*’s specific modes of address and reception. Theorizations that are too broad or too narrow in scope, in general, will potentially have such macro- and micro-problems (fig. 2).

Perhaps the most influential theorization of the horror genre comes from the pioneering work of Robin Wood—first in a series of articles for *Film Comment* in the late 1970s and early 1980s and then later in a compendium volume, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan... and Beyond* (1986, revised 2003). In the latter, Wood argues that modern American horror should be viewed symptomatically: “the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-

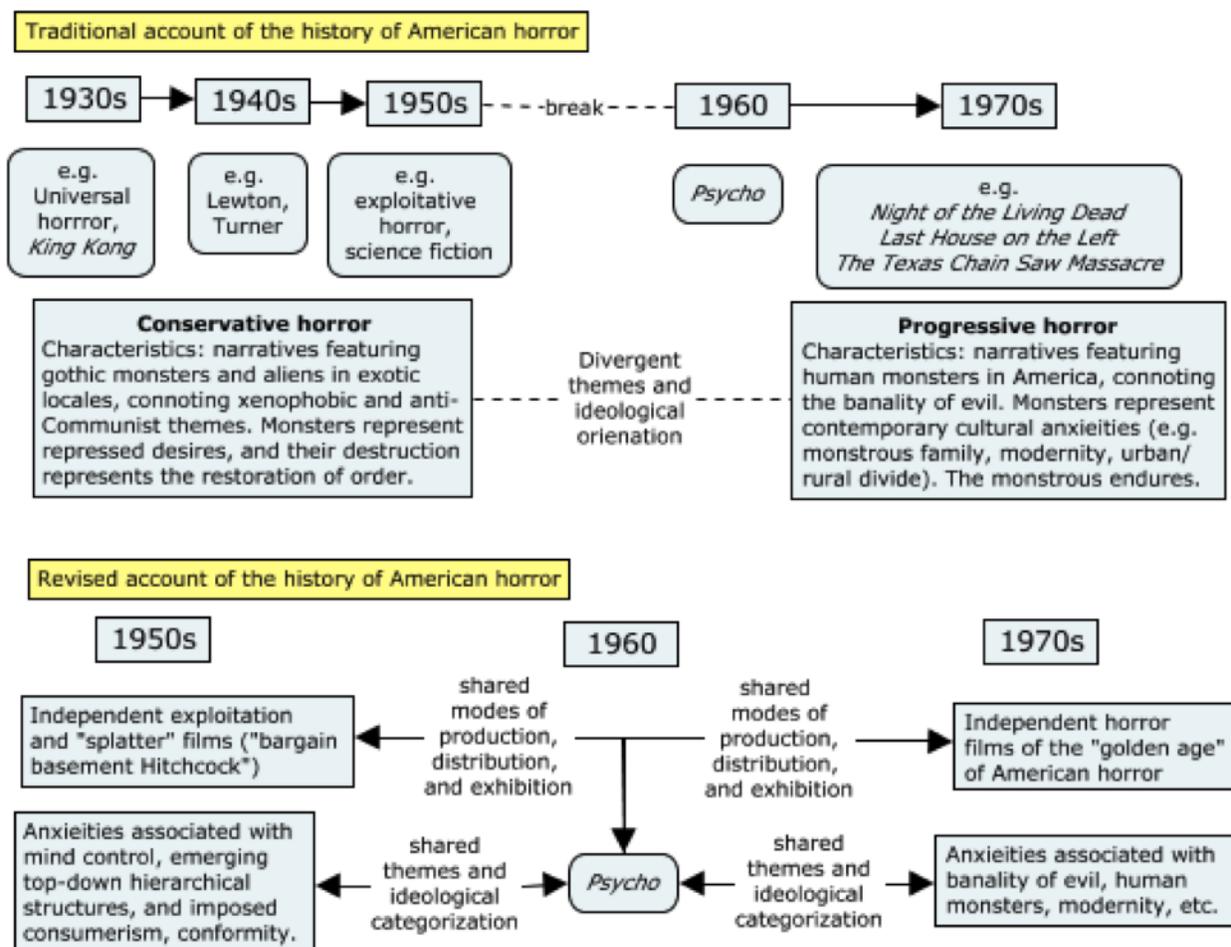
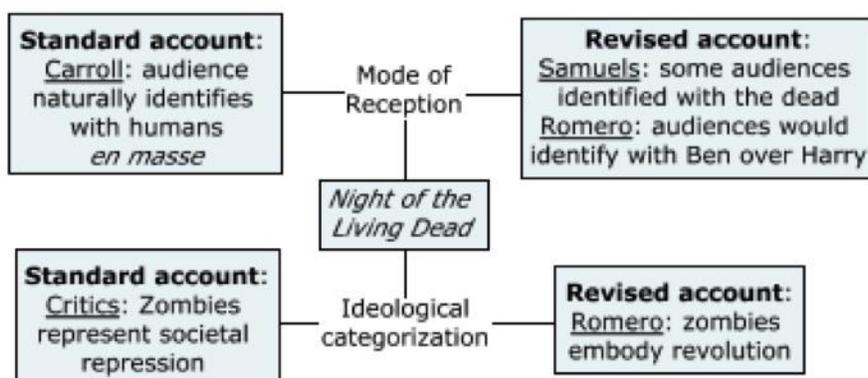


Figure 2. Both historical accounts and theoretical accounts can suffer from macro- and micro-problems. Several traditional accounts of *Psycho*'s place in the history of American horror, for example, contend that it was so revolutionary that it effectively serves to break the lineage of American horror to what came before and what came after it (above). One can create a revised history of American horror, however, in which the lineage is continuous, one in which *Psycho* remains epochal but is Janus-faced, with connections to what came before and what came after flowing through *Psycho*. Similar revisions can be made to help address macro- and micro-problems in theoretical accounts, such as with *Night of the Living Dead* (below). Theorists such as Noël Carroll assume that audiences would naturally identify with the human protagonists, but historical accounts such as the one offered by Samuels include instances where the audience identifies vociferously with the zombies. While critics typically assume that the zombies represent societal repression, director George Romero in fact contends that he thought of them as embodying the revolution of the counterculture.



emergence dramatized” (68). Wood proposes a model derived from Herbert Marcuse and elaborated by Gad Horowitz that distinguishes between basic repression and surplus repression. Basic repression is universal and necessary for civilization: it involves the individual’s postponement of gratification, capacity for self-control, and the consideration of others. Surplus repression is culturally specific and projected *on* individuals from infancy by their culture to condition them for predetermined societal roles. In our own culture, “surplus repression makes us into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists” (64). What society cannot repress “has to be dealt with by oppression” (65). All that reproduces these same structures is normative; all that challenge them is monstrous. The horror genre’s monsters, then, represent for Wood the “return of the repressed,” projected anxieties about threats to patriarchal capitalism that must either be destroyed or assimilated for order to be restored. Horror so directly links to the unconscious that it can express what other genres repress.¹⁰

Wood finds that most horror films structure themselves so that order is restored and desire is repressed once again within the self or projected onto a monstrous Other, thus they are “recuperable” by the dominant ideology which, Wood contends, makes them reactionary. Horror films reveal, in fact, their ideological categorization by what is coded as the potentially monstrous Other: other cultures and ethnic groups, the proletariat, alternative ideologies or political systems, women, children, and non-normative sexuality (68). Wood regards the 1970s as the golden age of horror because of a progressive wave of films, including those by Romero, Craven, and Hooper. Wood, himself, in fact, champions the very same three films that I will be discussing at length, and he echoes the words of Truffaut that motivate my endeavors here: “Popular films,” Wood posits, “respond to interpretation as at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audiences, the fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology.” Wood thus signals the importance of authorial intent, audience reception, and ideological categorization. Wood goes on to observe that if his formulation is granted, it “becomes easy... to offer a simple definition of horror films: they are our nightmares” (70).

While the level of abstraction in Wood’s approach is perhaps necessary for generalizing a theory of horror, it also contains lacunae that are worth pursuing. For example, Wood includes very little sociohistorical specificity even when discussing ideology, and he says even less about modes of production and distribution or the formal and stylistic features of the films that he discusses. He also assumes an

idealized spectator as subject of the apparatus, a view that has subsequently been challenged as theorizations of spectator-positioning and identification have shifted away from solely regarding the spectator as a psychic phenomenon to a more heterogeneous account that includes social and historical considerations, such as shifting demographics of audiences, intertextuality, and varying modes of exhibition. Those revisions, in turn, point to how narrower theoretical concerns can be problematic, as well. Wood deliberately grounds his psychoanalytic model in a Marxist revision of Sigmund Freud rather than Jacques Lacan's, of which Wood is skeptical. Writing regularly in *Screen*, Wood was no doubt familiar with the journal's concern for addressing the spectator's relationship to the cinematic apparatus by way of Lacan and Louis Althusser, a concern taken up by the *Cahiers* group, as well. Althusser's decree was that, as he states, "ideology interpolates individuals as subjects" (44). In cinema the spectator is thus positioned, according to this formulation, as the constituted subject that receives meaning, rather than a *constituting* subject that *produces* meaning. Wood's misgivings regarding this formulation mirror those of other scholars who, as Hayward describes, found it to be "a profoundly anti-humanist analysis of spectator positioning" (25). Perhaps in order to avoid that trap, Wood simply disregarded the mode of address. He himself acknowledges that what he outlines "offers us no more than a beginning from which one might proceed to interpret specific horror films in detail as well as to explore further the genre's social significance..." (*Hollywood* 69). The "social significance," is, in fact, what interests me.

Social elements exist, of course, in various theoretical and historical approaches. I am intrigued, however, by Hayward's assertion that the perseverance of *auteur* theory well into the 1980s was due, in part, to how the *politique des auteurs* "helped shift the notion of film theory, which until the 1950s had been based primarily in sociological analysis" (22). What if we return to an example of such analysis from that era, one that might give us a blueprint for how to proceed? In *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), Siegfried Kracauer anticipates Truffaut in positing that films are popular with a public because they "satisfy existing mass desires": find what common elements exist in a culture's popular films, and you gain insight into that culture (5). Kracauer uses that lens to examine Weimar Cinema and finds that it reflected a conflict in the collective psyche of the German people, one marked by a turn away from cinematic realism towards the abstraction of German Expressionism. That turn is typified by *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), with its distorted point-of-view, its depictions of the

bleakness of the world through textual elements, and its themes of chaos and destruction. These elements arose in the Weimar Cinema, Kracauer contends, because of an underlying yearning by Germans to submit to a tyrant that will restore order; in the cinema's formal and thematic tendencies, he claims, there emerge a "procession of tyrants" that mirrors onscreen the Nazis' real world rise to power. Widely lauded in the post-war era, Kracauer's tome was criticized as too deterministic and reductive by the next generation of film scholars, only to find renewed appreciation among subsequent generations of scholars who share Kracauer's historical-materialist approach while still acknowledging its methodological errors.¹¹ What is still compelling about his work for me is its theoretical eclecticism, its accounting for multiple cinematic modes, and the detailed attention it pays to films, themselves. Adjusting the level of magnification to a narrow time period mitigates some of the issues with macro-level histories while still making connections between periods in a productive way. Likewise, adopting a protean methodology and being open to more than one theoretical approach can help one avoid the procrustean dogma of "total theory."

III. Method

My aim is not to discount other approaches to cinematic history or theory, but rather to first underline potential problems with any single historical or theoretical approach in order to rationalize my desire to speculate on a method for putting various historical and theoretical approaches in conversation with one another. I am searching for a “Goldilocks”-like approach, one that includes both diachronic concerns (i.e. the cinema as a whole—its history, grammar, material practices) and synchronic concerns (i.e. individual elements, such as the internal relations of individual films and their contemporary cultural contexts), one that accounts for both text and context. Such an approach could prove useful both for synchronic readings of particular films as well as diachronic accounts of a given historical period, and for answering heretofore unasked or unconnected questions: questions of authorial intent (was a given meaning coded consciously, subconsciously, or accidentally?); audience reception (how do heterogeneous audiences respond differently with regards to gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, etc.? Can we assume a normatively-constructed spectator in a non-normative audience?); questions of ideology and intertextuality (what discourses and texts surrounding the actual filmic text inform the filmmakers’ intent and what is their impact upon the viewer as reader and producer of meaning?); questions of exhibition (what effect might different venues have on audiences?); and questions of spectator identification (what elements help align identification? How singular or fluid is identification?). Taken together these concerns would seemingly begin to compose the “social event” to which Truffaut refers.

The word *social* itself can be quite slippery, however. Echoing Truffaut, Prince calls for a sociological understanding of film: “What is needed,” he proposes, “is a method for dealing with horror films which is not constrained through primary reliance on the ideas of repression or projection... Such a method should contribute to an understanding of these films as truly social manifestations” (120). What does Prince mean by *social* in this context, however? He never addresses it, and here Prince himself inadvertently points to how the term itself is often taken for granted.¹² As Bruno Latour observes, “social” is typically used to “designate a stabilized set of affairs, a bundle of ties that, later, may be mobilized to account for some other phenomenon” (1). “There is nothing wrong with this use of the word,” Latour continues, “as long as it designates what is already assembled together, without making any superfluous assumptions about the nature of what is assembled” (ibid). Unfortunately, Latour argues, that is usually not

the case: “social” is used to mean something like “a type of material,” and it is readily applied in the same way other adjectives (e.g. “wooden,” “biological,” “economical”) are applied without, in fact, an accounting of what has been assembled together having taken place. Latour, an exponent of a material-semiotic approach, calls for the “tracing of associations” of the various materials and ideas assembled.

What would tracing associations look like with regards to film? We could begin by accounting for cinematic modes such as production, distribution, and exhibition to situate a given film materially. To these modes we can add sociohistorical context and intertextuality to situate it semiotically. To these materials and ideas we can add, of course, individuals to the network: directors, producers, casts and crews, marketers, critics, exhibitors, and audiences (and *multiple* audiences, composed of potentially very different interpretative communities¹³). We can then speculate about the film’s ideological categorization—which is in turn tied to both authorial intent and audience reception, thus giving us these additional considerations. In considering the filmmakers’ role in coding meaning and audiences’ role in decoding meaning, we would want to account for that intersection—the textual, formal and stylistic features of the films themselves. Considering the audience’s agency in meaning production calls to mind, too, the modes of spectator address and reception (I would add both critical reception and audience reception, as the former can influence the latter), and films’ effects on audience (e.g. pleasure, agitation). Having assembled these various concerns, we can peruse theoretical concepts and methods, decide which we find to be the most useful, and then apply them to close readings of individual films.

How does one account for those shifting dynamics that we have identified, such as multiple interpretative communities or shifting spectator identification? Or what of different modes of exhibition for each film, as the case will be with those that I will be describing? I think a possible starting point could be to consider a film as a specific type of material-semiotic network: the rhizome, as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). *Rhizome* is a botanical term for a root system, such as bamboo, which grows from many different nodes and spreads along the ground horizontally, in contrast to a taproot that centralizes the root system and grows vertically downward. Deleuze and Guattari are interested in accounting for decentralized systems in order to describe the inherent complexity and multiplicities most have but for which few models account. A rhizomatic account contrasts with the monolithic: the rhizome is non-hierarchical and allows for multiple entry- and exit-points when tracing

associations. In terms of sociohistorical concerns, a rhizomatic account does not include attempts at linear causality, but instead traces associations between nodes; it *describes*, rather than explains. Following Michel Foucault (who shared a mutual admiration with Deleuze), a rhizomatic system is discursive: the rhizome accounts for “connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (Deleuze and Guattari 7). Conceptualizing the network that surrounds a given film and the networks that connect that film to others as rhizomes—sembling and then reassembling—could mitigate problems of shifting dynamics.

How, at last, do we proceed with such an account of these films? We could begin by tracing associations between this “cinema of confrontation” and mainstream cinema. Wood’s “golden age” of progressive American horror was roughly coterminous with the “New Hollywood,” the latter emerging around 1967 with the success of Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, roughly the same time that *Night of the Living Dead* was released. New Hollywood was characterized in part by a demographic shift in 1960s audiences—with older viewers increasingly staying home to watch television and a youth audience increasingly seeking its own refuge. This shift left studios collectively turning to younger, largely progressive filmmakers who better understood what these younger audiences increasingly wanted from the cinema. In an interview for Demme and LaGravenese’s documentary *A Decade Under the Influence*, the late Sydney Pollack eloquently summarizes the shift:

Hollywood films hadn’t changed for a long time. You measured, in many ways, your pleasure at movies from the *distance* they lived from your own life. You’d watch Ingrid Bergman walking up a fog-enshrouded ramp to a plane with Bogart waving goodbye. You knew this was never going to happen to you—ever. That started to change, again, with these revolutions that happened in the sixties. People wanted something that they recognized, that was a part of them, and it wasn’t the *distance* from your life that was the appealing thing; in many ways it was the *recognition* that that was a part of your life.

That desired recognition applied to “New Horror,” as well. Later in *Decade*, screenwriter Polly Platt recalls working with her then-husband Peter Bogdanovich on a script for what eventually became *Targets* (1968). The two had been hired by Roger Corman to write and direct a film using aging horror icon Boris Karloff and that incorporated unused footage from an earlier Karloff film, *The Terror* (1963). Platt and

Bogdanovich soon realized that they could not make the kind of classical horror for which Karloff was known, as it was no longer frightening. Inspired by the real life case of Charles Whitman, they realized, Platt recalls, that “what was modern horror was someone shooting at you for no reason.”¹⁴

We can also contrast the cinema of confrontation with mainstream cinema, as well—classical Hollywood cinema, as David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson have described the term in their tome by the same name (1985). Classical Hollywood cinema, they explain, combines the studio system of production with the dominant narrative triad of order/disorder/order-restored, in which the disorder sets off a series of events that unfold in a causal relationship that ends in closure. It is a *narrative* cinema—character-driven, with the spectator sutured into the filmic text in identification with a heroic figure or figures (as Noël Carroll, in fact, assumes). It is an “excessively obvious cinema” as Bordwell et al. refer to it (1), one in which the form is used to explain the story, not obscure it. The cinematic apparatus sets before the spectator realistic images and sounds through both the *mise-en-scène* and seamless continuity editing, neither of which call attention to themselves. The story “naturally” unfolds, the text makes sense of itself so that the constituting subject-spectator, because she or he has little role to play, is virtually the same as the constituted spectator-subject, sutured in effortlessly. Classical Hollywood cinema is able to achieve this effect, Hayward asserts, because “first, it constructs the spectator as subject and second, it establishes the desire to look with all that that connotes in terms of visual pleasure for the spectator” (385). Classical Hollywood cinema thus involves a “*mise-en-scène* of desire”: “The film industry *is* the industry of desire,” Hayward declares, “Hollywood *is* the dream factory” (109). Such is the case even in horror films, in which fear is just “another form of pleasure” (16).

The nature of such seamless suturing has ideological implications. The spectator-as-constituted-subject formulation has been problematized by revisions to spectator theory that grant the spectator agency in being the active producer or at least negotiator of meaning, both as the spectator-as-constituting subject (a psychic phenomenon) and the spectator-as-viewer (a historically-situated phenomenon). The latter invites, too, considerations of audience demographics, intertextuality, and viewer-reception. With regards to classical Hollywood cinema, however, theorists typically have posited that the spectator is still *encouraged* to identify with the dominant ideology as it is represented through the “reality” effect: what is presented onscreen usually, in this view, reinforces dominant ideology, and the paradigmatic plot of

order/disorder/restoration of order will typically “reign in” any challenges to it. Classical Hollywood cinema thus presents to the spectator as *natural* (no “fault-lines” can be perceived) what is in fact *idealized* and escapist (most theorists would contend that this idealized reality reinforces ideologies of heteronormative patriarchal capitalism). The spectator, of course, can be skeptical of this re/constructed idealized reality and reject its artifice—or accept it, but only conditionally (for, say, entertainment).

What about cinemas that do not encourage collusion in re/constructing dominant ideologies? Counter-cinemas or oppositional cinemas have continually arisen throughout history, and what I am calling the cinema of confrontation would qualify as such. These films have several shared characteristics that set them apart from dominant cinema. Rather than providing a strictly narrative cinema, these films are designed to agitate. Rather than suturing the spectator into an idealized filmic text that reflects dominant ideology, these films evoke primal fears to heighten spectator response and then confront the spectator with intertextual references to specific sociohistorical horrors and anxieties that highlight how *imperfect* the real world is. Rather than the a “*mise-en-scène* of desire,” these films employ a *mise-en-scène* of angst as the spectator is implicated in the horrors depicted onscreen by shifting identifications between the normative, the monstrous, and a liminal space in between. These are just the broad contours of this cinema. For the sake of aiding the reader in tracing the associations between these films in the ensuing close readings of each, here are the broadly shared characteristics that I will ascribe:

Sociohistorical context

Each film includes elicitation of sociohistorical-specific anxieties and real life horrors, and thus it first must be situated in its larger sociohistorical context.

Ideological categorization

Politically progressive, these filmmakers all had identified with the counterculture, yet grew disillusioned at what they felt was its failure and at the subsequent rise of reactionary politics. Their films are coded as anti-establishment, interrogating patriarchal capitalism, bourgeois culture, and state-sponsored violence.

Collaborative Efforts

While both scholarly work and popular commentary largely discuss them as “signature films” of *auteurs*, the directors of these films enlisted the creative power of their collaborators, from which some of the films’ key ideas and creative solutions came.

Modes of production and distribution

Each of the three films I have included here were independent productions made and marketed with small budgets and distributed initially only regionally.

Mode of exhibition

That these films were first exhibited at small venue matinees, drive-ins, and midnight art house screenings speaks to varying cinematic experiences and heterogeneous audiences.

Mode of reception

The limited modes of production, distribution and exhibition of these films point to how incredibly unlikely it was for them to have succeeded; their *enormous* financial success is a testament to the confluence of interests between filmmakers and audiences.

Effect on audience

Confrontation: To the extent that the “seamless style” of continuity editing works to suture the viewer as a *constituted* spectator-subject at all, that process is interrupted in these films. While the story “naturally” unfolds in the *histoire* register, these films disrupt that passive production of meaning by confronting the *constituting* subject-spectator in the *discours* register with violence¹⁵.

Participation: Through the mode of address, the spectator participates in the violence onscreen; through the decoding of intertextual elements and allusions to sociohistorical horrors/anxieties, the spectator participates in the enunciation of real world violence outside of the theater.

Implication: Because the spectator identifies with both the monstrous and its victims in a cinematic space in which historically specific horrors/anxieties are elicited, the spectator is implicated in the violence that exists in both realms.

Spectator address

Through formal, textual, and paratextual elements, these films facilitate a shifting identification within the spectator, occupying positions associated with normality, the monstrous, and a liminal space between them that further enunciates the constituting-spectator, as the spectator must negotiate that liminal space as part of meaning production.

Formal and stylistic features

Paratexts: From literary theorist Gérard Genette’s discussion of book publishing, what I refer to as filmic paratexts (e.g. film reviews, promotional materials, credits sequences) have often been glossed over or ignored altogether in discussions of these films.¹⁶ Here, however, their status as paratexts is precisely what interests me. Opening credits sequences function epigraphically, setting each film’s tone and how the spectator will begin to participate in decoding its meaning. Closing credits sequences function as codas and epilogues. Film reviews and promotional materials “make present” for the spectator the film and frame its reception before the spectator even sets foot in the theater. The paratext serves as a “zone of transaction,” as Genette describes, that works to ensure a closer overlap between authorial intent and the audience’s understanding.¹⁷

Negotiation of documentary vs. fiction: Each of the three filmmakers have a background in documentary filmmaking and consciously chose to adopt methods associated with *cinéma vérité* in order to facilitate an association between horrors onscreen and off.

“Heightened” violence: These films engage in a hyperreal aesthetic—“hotter” in Marshall McLuhan’s terms, *dialogic* in the terms that, for example, André Bazin articulated in his reading of *Citizen Kane*. The spectator is confronted with graphic depictions of violence—often tied to real life horrors—and is shocked out of any passive role as the constituted spectator.

Confrontational editing: Each director spent several months editing his respective film, and those efforts are readily on display. The heightened violence in each film is complimented by a heavy use of montage that bombards the spectator’s senses in order to facilitate desired effects.

Evocation of primal fears: Each film works to elicit primal fears within the spectator (e.g. bodily integrity, familial relationships, loss of safety) and tie them to sociohistorical-specific concerns.

Intertextuality: These films actively engage the spectator in intertextuality, evoking discourses (e.g. political, historic, economic, psychological), texts (e.g. other cinema, art, literature) and media (photography, music, television) surrounding the film itself, all which work to call forth sociohistorical-specific horrors and anxieties from the world outside the theater.

The banality of evil is assumed: Each film confronts the spectator with the banality of evil, as Hannah Arendt introduced the term, by evoking how human “monsters” are responsible for horrors outside of the theater, horrors that remain ever-present and that permeate society.

Coded characters Additionally, both monsters and victims are largely coded in sociohistorical terms as members of a reactionary establishment, the counter-culture, or the marginalized Other.

Coded space: These films feature a symbolic coding of space. Such coding is common in horror films, especially, with their frequent use of the “terrible place” trope as formulated by scholar and theorist Carol Clover and others. Conversely, *Slate* contributor Bryan Curtis contends that “Most horror films place a demon in an idyllic world; order is restored simply by throwing the demon out.” These films, however, disrupt both of sets of binaries: the “terrible place” is tied to specific sociohistorical conditions that complicate its reception as such, and the monstrous is shown to exist not in the terrible place alone, but also within those spaces coded as safe.¹⁸

Structuring absences: As the *Cahiers* group described, what filmmakers “have to say *within* what they leave unsaid” (447) is often key: it is typically within structuring absences that these films confront the political left as much as they do the right, implicating and indicting the counterculture for their failures to effect lasting social change.

No closure: Each film upends dominant cinema’s paradigmatic plot of order/disorder/order-restored. There is no true narrative closure. In classical horror, the production code had decreed that the monstrous must be destroyed by film’s end (*Nightmares*). Here the monstrous endures, and that refusal to restore order reflects the ideological commitments of the filmmakers.

These characteristics feature prominently in all three films, and tracing their presence will help illustrate the contours of the cinema of confrontation, overall.

IV. 1968: *A Night of the Living Dead* Marks an *Annus horribilis*

Sociohistorical Context

Night of the Living Dead was released in 1968, “the most violent year in American history since the Civil War,” as critic J. Hoberman describes it (*Midnight*). The nation had already been rocked by a series of traumatic events throughout the decade, and the news media brought these horrors into American living rooms. *Life* magazine published stills from the Zapruder film just days after John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963. Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald during a live television broadcast. Other assassinations followed: Medgar Evers in 1963 and Malcolm X in 1965. Director George Romero and producer Russ Streiner were driving to New York to meet potential distributors for *Night* when they heard a news bulletin about the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the car radio (*ibid*). Robert F. Kennedy was killed two months later. Footage of police beating and siccing dogs on Civil Rights Movement protestors had been an all too common sight on the evening news just a few years before *Night*’s release, as had cities burning in race riots throughout the nation. The Vietnam War continued to escalate with the Tet offensive, and increasingly graphic footage brought the violence home.

Meanwhile, perceptions of social breakdown permeated American culture. In 1963 Stanley Milgram’s study of blind obedience to authority—itsself prompted by Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—was widely reported, suggesting that the term “banality of evil” could apply to the United States just as readily as it had to Germany. In 1964 the nation read horrific accounts of how thirty-eight neighbors watched Kitty Genovese be murdered and did nothing—not even call the police. The illusion that Genovese’s death was the result of urban decay and it would not have happened in safe, rural America was disrupted in 1966 when Truman Capote published *In Cold Blood*. Ten years later, Tom Wolfe would include the novel as an example—alongside *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*—of what he called “pornoviolence” in his essay by the same name: “The book is neither a who-done-it nor a will-they-be-caught, since the answers to both questions are known from the outset.... Instead, the book’s suspense is based largely on... the promise of gory details” (163-4). The influential Harris poll—syndicated in hundreds of newspapers—reflected the nation’s growing unease: in 1963 just two-percent of Americans were seriously concerned with crime and violence, but by 1968 that number had jumped to two-thirds.¹⁹

Violence increasingly became a central national discourse as the 1960s ended and it continued to bleed into the 1970s. Art came to imitate life: a “new realism” emerged that included images and depictions of graphic violence in the mainstream filmmaking of the New Hollywood, from the final montage of *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) to the heavy machine guns of *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) to the footage of Chicago police beating protestors during the 1968 Democratic convention in Haskell Wexler’s *Medium Cool* (1969). These are just some of the key sociohistorical associations that informed the making of *Night of the Living Dead*.

Ideological Categorization

The aforementioned discussion of Carroll’s idealized account of spectator identification in *Night* versus actual audience cries of “Barbecue!” and “Eat ‘em” speaks to how the film’s mode of address facilitates spectator identification with the zombie as well as the living. The zombie’s continuing popularity is a testament to how it is open to rich interpretation, and contemporaneous critiques of *Night* immediately began positing that the living dead were coded ideologically. Several critics found them to be a reactionary force. In his influential piece for *Sight and Sound*, Elliott Stein found in them Richard Nixon’s “Silent Majority,” an older generation back from the dead to destroy the youthful counterculture.²⁰ Subsequent scholarship has followed Stein’s lead. Wood codes them as part of patriarchal capitalism’s “legacy of the past” (*Hollywood* 103). The zombie’s cannibalism, Wood argues, is a function of “the present and future (the younger generation) being devoured by the past” (ibid 91). Tony Williams proclaims that the zombies “logically represent the implications of America’s culture of consumption, a culture highly dependent on Third World and Vietnam exploitation” (136).

George Romero, who is almost invariably described as an *auteur* with *Night* his signature film, offers a very different reading of his version of the zombie, which itself was a radical reinterpretation of a figure which had only relatively recently been introduced into Western culture. Victor Halperin’s *White Zombie* (1932) is typically credited as being the first zombie film, and in it the zombies are enslaved by a witch doctor to work on a plantation.²¹ Romero found in such films not capitalists, but the proletariat: “The zombie for me was always the blue collar kind of monster—he was *us*” (*American*).²² In reinterpreting the zombie, he made it a cannibal and added the contagion element of the vampires from Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*, as well as the novel’s apocalyptic tone. Romero recalls thinking that the novel was “about

revolution” (*Birth*). By extension, the zombies of *Night*, Romero proclaims, are “a revolutionary or a new society devouring the old... and just changing everything completely” (*American*). Romero was engaged with the idea of revolution and the counterculture, as he and his fellow filmmakers were, in his words, “part of that liberal gang—hippies who didn’t want to grow up” (qtd. in McIntyre 16). Romero’s explanation of his authorial intent thus stands diametrically opposed to critical assessments.

It is key, too, that the revolution *fails*—a posse, itself coded as reactionary, eradicates the zombies, just as the counterculture had failed in Romero’s eyes. Contra critics’ readings of the zombie, Nixon’s silent majority was in fact on the *other side*, and it won. Romero recalls how EC comic books had been an influence on him; they gave him “the idea that horror movies should have a little moral... you could get your political opinions in. You could express some anger” (*Midnight*). In *Night*, Romero explains, “We were angry because the ‘60s had failed. We thought we had changed the world... [but] it didn’t work. We were going to smack this in the face and make this movie really about revolution” (ibid). Romero contends his fellow filmmakers shared his *ethos*, and these subtexts were deliberate.

Romero, in fact, often describes *Night* as being a collaborative effort.²³ He shares a co-writing credit for the film with John Russo, who has pointedly denied that the film has such political subtexts. Jason Zinoman, for example, includes Russo’s “blunt” response to “the suggestion that the movie had a point to make about the times: ‘All that stuff’s bullshit’” (41). It is a charge that Russo has long made.²⁴ He instead attributes *Night*’s success to its elicitation of primal fears.²⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly then, recent scholarship, which all but uniformly assumes that *Night* indeed “had a point to make about the times,” ignores Russo’s role. Romero’s own statements, however, have actually varied.²⁶ He echoes Russo, for example, in telling Zinoman, “We were young bohemians... automatically against authority. But I didn’t think it was that political” (41). Elsewhere Romero asserts that the subtexts are indeed there, but that they were added subconsciously.²⁷ More often than not, however, Romero has embraced the film’s received subtexts.²⁸ Why the varying responses? In his excellent BFI Classics companion volume to *Night*, film historian Ben Hervey expresses doubt that Romero “merely play[s] along with critics” who find such subtexts. Rather, Hervey contends, “It’s likelier that Romero simply saw more in *Night* than Russo did, and that his understanding grew in retrospect...” (24-5). I would add that Romero is also often described as modest, and he frequently downplays his own contributions to *Night*, overall.²⁹ It is not surprising, then, for

him to at times discount that *Night* is his signature film with his own politics written in. However, while it is certainly true that *Night* was (like virtually all films) a collaborative effort, there is a case to be made that Romero was in fact the central intelligence assembling its various elements.³⁰ His remarks about the film's subtexts, inconsistent though they may be, are thus worth noting.³¹

Modes of Production and Distribution

Romero and Russo helped cofound the Latent Image, a Pittsburgh-based commercial/industrial film firm, in 1963. By 1967 they were looking to venture into feature filmmaking.³² A group of ten investors formed the Image Ten in order to finance a low-budget exploitation film. The group included fellow Latent image partners Streiner and Vince Survinski, as well as Karl Hardman and Marilyn Eastman, who together ran Hardman Associates, an advertising company. Budgetary constraints limited what kind of film they could produce; they decided on horror. (Gagne 23) While accounts differ as to who had the initial idea for the *Night*, most agree that Romero wrote its basic story.³³ Critic Joe Kane credits Russo with "the actual scripting tasks," including revising Romero's treatment and finishing the story as, according to Russo, Romero had written only the film's first half (23).³⁴ Kane also, however, points to how the script itself was a collaborative effort: most of the key members of the Image Ten "brainstormed the second half" (ibid). The effort was perhaps even more collaborative still, as actor Judith O'Dea does not recall there *being* an actual shooting script and states that the film was largely improvised (Collum 4).

As filming began the group realized that they needed additional funds. Finding new investors eventually helped them raise a budget of \$114,000 (half deferred), still a fraction of what a studio film would have cost. They did have some advantages, however: the Latent Image had all of the basic equipment needed to produce a low-budget film already (Kane 20). They also had no real deadline. Necessity bred invention, and the production proceeded with a resourceful vigor. Filming was done on location. Cast members assisted with the film's makeup and special effects, which were typically low-budget improvisations.³⁵ The cast and crew also assisted in developing the film's prints, creating a small makeshift assembly line to do so. The cast was composed of an eclectic mix with regards to experience. Two local stage actors, O'Dea and Duane Jones, were casts as the film's leads, Barbara and Ben, respectively. The rest of the cast was composed largely of Image Ten members, themselves. Virtually everyone involved in making the film appears onscreen. Streiner plays (uncredited) Judy's brother, Johnny;

Hardman and Eastman play Harry and Helen Cooper, respectively, and Hardman's real-life daughter Kyra Schon plays the Coopers' daughter, Karen. Local musician Keith Wayne and Hardman Associates receptionist Judith Ridley rounded out the main cast as the young couple Tom and Judy. The film's investors and locals from the nearby community were cast as extras, often on a volunteer basis.

Columbia Pictures was the sole major studio to show interest in distributing *Night*, but eventually passed because the film was in black and white and by 1968 color was standard, even for horror (Kane 75). AIP also expressed interest, but stipulated that any deal would have to include a happier ending. Representatives from Continental Releasing, a subdivision of the Walter Reade Organization, watched *Night* for the first time the day after Robert Kennedy died (Gagne 34). Romero and company thought that the film would be considered too shocking, given both Kennedy's and King's recent deaths. On the contrary, Continental actually wanted *more* gore—and more cannibalism scenes, specifically (Scott 11).

Modes of Exhibition and Reception

The film's violence did not go unnoticed. *Night* premiered in downtown Pittsburgh at the Fulton Theater on October 1, 1968, and screenings at fourteen area drive-ins and small theaters followed as the film did well, (Kane 77-8). A subsequent broader release included the film's New York City premier; it did *not* go well. Lee Beaupre denounced the film in *Variety*: “until the Supreme Court establishes clear-cut guidelines for the pornography of violence, *Night of the Living Dead* will serve nicely as an outer-limit definition by example” (6). Vincent Canby's review in *The New York Times* was only slightly kinder; he panned *Night* as a “grainy little movie” with “nonprofessional actors and limited production values” (59). These were typical early reviews; Romero recalls *Night* was “torn to shreds” (*American*).

Poor initial reception, however, soon proved fortuitous. Standard exhibition practices for horror at the time included bookings at Saturday matinees for audiences composed mostly of young children and adolescents. Continental therefore released *Night* as a matinee, and Roger Ebert wrote about what largely happened as a result in a soon-to-be infamous piece about the film. Half-review, half-condemnation, the prose was forceful³⁶: “The kids in the audience were stunned.... They were used to going to movies, sure... but this was something else. This was ghouls eating people up—and you could actually see what they were eating. This was little girls killing their mothers. This was being set on fire. Worst of all, even the hero got killed.” Ebert goes on to observe that the MPAA film rating system was not yet in place when *Night* was

released—it would be implemented the very next month—so theaters “technically” could sell tickets to even very young children. He wonders aloud if Continental and theater managers had not taken advantage of that fact “to make a fast buck before movies like this are off-limits to children.” In any event, Ebert laments, “I don’t know how I could explain it to the kids who left the theater with tears in their eyes.” Ebert’s piece was soon reprinted in *Reader’s Digest*, and it helped draw attention to *Night* that it perhaps would not have been given otherwise. Rex Reed would go on to call *Night* “a classic” in his own review. Richard McGuiness of the *Village Voice* asserted that *Night* scared “the pants off the audience” as it rediscovered “the silent art of story-telling” (54). With several subsequent critical voices endorsing the film, Ebert had helped make *Night* a *succès de scandale*.

Ebert also noted that he watched *Night* because the National Association of Theater Owners had selected it as the “exploitation picture of the month,” and Continental soon furthered *Night*’s reputation in that regard, first by harkening back to the gimmicks of 1950s horror and sci-fi screenings (fig. 3)—adverts claimed that audience members for *Night* were insured for \$50,000 each if they were frightened to death. Subsequent publicity included “death certificates” for audience members to sign and “distress bags” for audience members to vomit into if need be (Kane 80). The distributor also took advantage of the fact that Jones was African American by reissuing *Night* on a double bill with the pre-Blaxploitation film *Slaves* (1969). Lobby cards for *Night* foregrounded the film’s racial subtexts by including a posed still in which Ben punches the white, middle-aged Harry. *Night* had been released just a year after *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison) which included “the slap heard around the world,” a groundbreaking scene in which the racist white aristocrat Endicott (Larry Gates) slaps Sidney Poitier’s Virgil Tibbs, and Tibbs slaps him right back (fig 4).³⁷ Kane notes that *Night* would later “split bills with outright ‘blaxploitation’ films,” as African Americans “...reportedly comprised a disproportionately large (some 30 percent) portion of moviegoers, particularly for horror films” (81). *Night* had found a new audience.

Several critics took note of the political subtexts, as well. In his widely-cited review Stein not only identifies the rise of the silent majority as a subtext, he also nods to racial violence, the Vietnam War, and the erosion of the nuclear family, in what he describes as “[maybe] the most horrifying film ever made” (105). Critics Jonathan Rosenbaum and J. Hoberman agree, asserting that *Night* was immediately received as social commentary (*Midnight*).³⁸ Hervey adds, “*Night* was perceived to demand analysis, to work

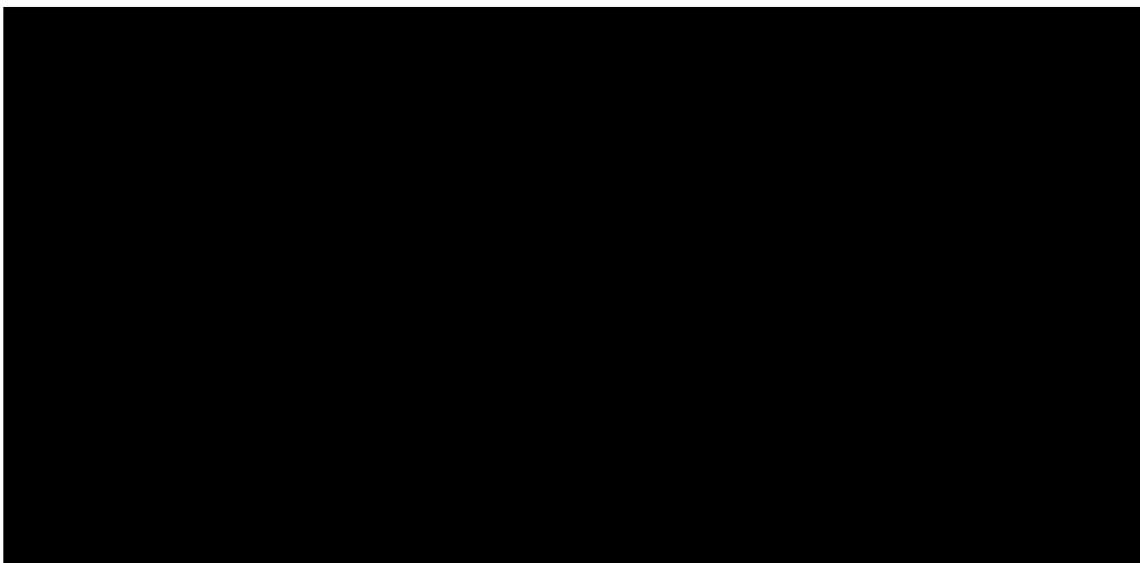


Figure 3. The modes of exhibition for *Night of the Living Dead* were similar in many ways to the horror and science fiction films of the 1950s that had influenced Romero, with matinee screenings early on in its initial distribution and publicity gimmicks, such as “death certificates” (above left) and vomit bags (above right) issued at later midnight screenings (Kane 80).

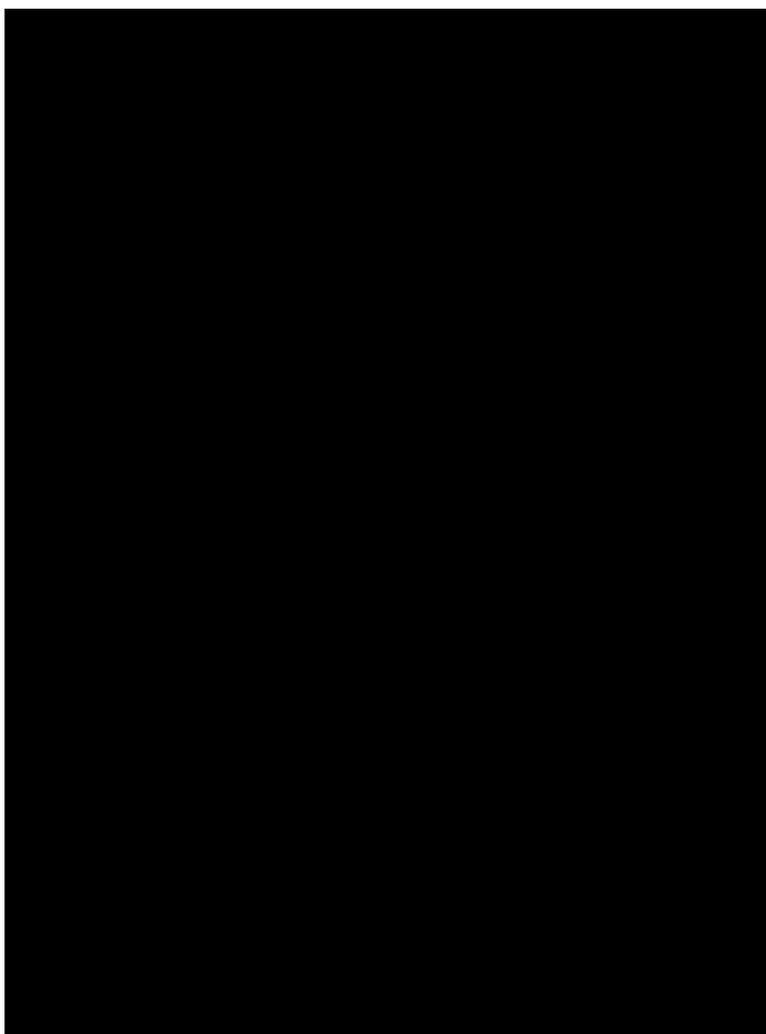


Figure 4. The year before *Night's* release, Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night* included the groundbreaking “slap heard around the world,” in which the white racist aristocrat Endicott (Larry Gates) slaps Sidney Poitier's Virgil Tibbs, and Tibbs slaps him right back (above). When *Night* was included on a double bill with a pre-Blaxploitation film, *Slaves* (1969)—a double-bill with largely African American audiences—the distributor included lobby cards featuring a reenactment of a scene in which Ben (Duane Jones), who is black, repeatedly hits Harry (Karl Hardman), a middle-aged white man. Tibbs slapping Endicott was shocking in 1967; Ben repeatedly slugging Harry was no less shocking in 1969.

beneath the surface. Word had spread that it was an important, meaningful film, an urgent coded message on the state of America” (9). Hervey notes how Stein even “dragged” Museum of Modern Art curators to a see it; *Night* had its own Cineprobe at MOMA soon thereafter (17).

Such decoding was not limited to professional critics and scholars. Fanzine pieces from the era reveal that “metaphor-hunting was very much part of the experience” for audiences, as well (ibid 21). That metaphor-hunting—that search for meaning—became part and parcel of *Night*’s second life as a midnight movie. The first such midnight screening for *Night* was in Washington, D.C. in early 1971 (Kane 81). By then *Night* had taken on a “cult” status with renewed interest leading to bookings for midnight showings in New York City; Stuart Samuels’s documentary *Midnight Movies: From the Margin to Mainstream* (2005) explores this crucial component of *Night*’s reception. In it theater owner Larry Jackson explains how midnight screenings had “a certain mystique” about them, as “a different world of movie-going took place.” That alternate cinematic space was often politicized: as the counterculture waned and midnight audiences “felt increasingly politically impotent,” Jackson observes, they “took their energies for change and internalized them... the midnight hour [was] a time to congregate.”

Night thus enjoyed widespread popularity with drive-in, midnight movie, and art house audiences. Whether or not the entire Image Ten intentionally included subtexts that reflected an ideological investment on their part, contemporary audiences found subtexts there. The success generated by that confluence was considerable: *Night* has went on to earn \$30 million as of 2013 (Hughes). The Image Ten would reap little of the rewards, unfortunately, due to a protracted legal battle with Continental over revenue sharing and an oversight that led to a loss of copyright protection for several years.³⁹ Nonetheless, they could take heart that a film made for \$104,000 by amateurs in Pittsburgh created a template for success enjoyed by countless independent films since; director Quentin Tarantino goes so far to assert that “without *Night*, you probably wouldn’t have Steven Soderbergh” (qtd. in Marriott 110).

Textual Elements

One element of *Night* that audiences responded to right away was its “honest brutality,” as the *Village Voice* described it—a documentary-like quality in the film’s depictions of horror (“Night”). While happenstance played a part—the limitations of production dictated that the film take place in one location and in the course of one night—the unity of time and place also heightens the sense that the spectator is

viewing a documentary. So too did the use of real place names from around Pittsburgh. First and foremost, however, *vérité* was evoked by Romero's use of an Arriflex 35 mm camera and Tri X black-and-white film stock, which contributed to, as Romero describes, "that flat kind of graininess" (qtd. in Block 22). Hollywood had already largely made the transition to widescreen color, and those films that were filmed in black and white shared with *Night* its appeal to a sense of *vérité*.⁴⁰ The use of black and white and the antiquated Academy aspect ratio were also key in terms of the genre: both Hammer Films and AIP had been filming almost exclusively in Technicolor and widescreen for the better part of a decade. In fact, by the end of 1960s color television broadcasts had become standard and color television set ownership had skyrocketed.⁴¹ Crucially, the networks' nightly news broadcasts remained in-black-and-white, and Romero capitalized on the association (*American*). The sense that what the spectator was being sutured into could be real was achieved, too, by the use of handheld cameras, which Romero asserts he used "intentionally to make that look like the news that we were seeing—from Watts, from 'Nam" (*Midnight*). Here other members of the Image Ten share Romero's recollection of a conscious ideological commitment: given that they had to, as Streiner put it, "resort to horror," the group all agreed that they wanted to make the horror "real" (Surmacz 16). Unlike in most classical horror, the camera doesn't cut away when the monster attacks in *Night*. As Romero goes on to declare, he consciously sought to elicit such real life horror in order to confront the viewer: "The one thing [*Night*] has is an absolute goal.... It doesn't lie to you. Everybody's pushing that... gun right into your face" (*Midnight*).

Romero combines the documentary-like *mise-en-scène* with frequent montages that bombard the spectator's senses, and the same handheld camera that helps convey the former also facilitates the latter. Romero notes that being able to "make so many shots" gave him endless possibilities to achieve desired effects (Kane 54).⁴² Romero shot from several different angles and as many points-of-view as possible so that in post-production he could assemble the "jigsaw puzzle," as he puts it, describing his method as being "almost cubist" (qtd. in Block 22). The number of shots available allowed Romero to also use rapid-fire cuts and long montage sequences. Dwarfing the pace of a typical studio production of the time, *Night* has close to 1,100 cuts total (Kane 72). In a single three-minute sequence involving Barbara fleeing the first zombie she encounters to reach the farmhouse, there are fifty-five cuts alone. Romero's "cubist style" dovetails with other editing idiosyncrasies: he occasionally neglects the 30-degree rule, with rapid-fire

sequences of the same subject disrupting spectator identification; he frequently violates the 180-degree rule, as well, disrupting the spectator's sense of cinematic space; and he even sometimes foregoes establishing shots, disrupting the sense of time and space further from the beginning of a given sequence.

Such disruption can be found in the composition of individual shots, as well: Romero employs oblique angles ("Dutch tilts") that disrupt the spectator's orientation with the screen to convey a filmic world that is out of balance. His study of Spanish painting at Carnegie Mellon University inspired him to use his eye for chiaroscuro extensively (Scott 10); and for interior shots Romero was inspired by Val Lewton's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) to use gobos for the lighting (Kane 55). The angularity and lighting work together to frequently break up the visual field and obscure space, disrupting the camera's subject-effect on the spectator yet still, rendering a kind of anti-establishing shot, as the bearings of conventional cinematography are lost and identification is fragmented. Combined with the violations of cinematic grammar and "cubist editing," the anti-establishing shot has an agitating effect on the spectator, working together with the violence of the documentary-like *mise-en-scène* to work towards Romero's ideological intent; as he describes it, "You're meant to be uncomfortable... [it] puts you into a kind of mindset to accept the other ideas that are in the film" (*American*).

Close Reading

The film's opening credit sequence works paratextually to establish *Night's* tone and themes (fig. 5). A lone car makes its way along an isolated country road, establishing a sense of isolation.

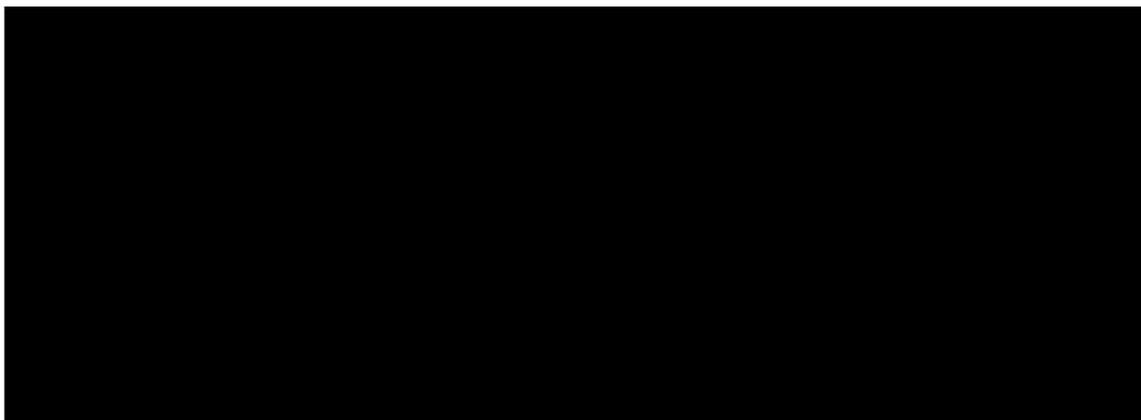


Figure 5. The title sequence for *Night of the Living Dead* includes a lone car on a long, winding, desolate country road, which begins to suggest the film's isolated tone (above left). The director's credit wraps director George Romero's name around the American flag (above right). The title sequence serves as the film's preface in the terms that Genette uses in discussing paratexts: the world of the film is made "present" and its meaning is encoded for the spectator's "better reception" and "more pertinent reading" (2).

Romero's director's credit wraps around an American flag foregrounded in a long shot of a cemetery the car has entered, suggesting the bleakness and real life horrors of contemporary America. Contra dominant cinema, *Night* has very little exposition.⁴³ The film opens with bickering siblings Johnny and Barbara visiting their father's grave and, along with the setting, their dialogue alludes to the film's concerns.⁴⁴ Barbara is committed to paying her respects. Johnny, in sharp contrast, resents having to make the trip and mocks the message of the memorial wreath that they have brought. He twice interrupts Barbara's prayer, scoffing that "praying is for church." When Barbara retorts, "I haven't seen you in church lately," Johnny laughs and replies, "Well, there's not much sense in my going to church." While Johnny can be regarded here as simply unsympathetic and irreverent, he also arguably embodies—here and later in the film—restless youth, rebellion and, ultimately, revolution.⁴⁵ Barbara, meanwhile, is the dutiful offspring, respectful of the past and the existing social order. When Johnny recalls how Barbara had been scared of the cemetery as a child, he begins teasing her by imitating Boris Karloff, much to her embarrassment. The siblings' clashes set the film's tone and foreshadow its confrontations with real life horrors, including the Vietnam War and racial injustice, both of which have received critical attention, but typically with regards to the film's final sequences. The mode of address and textual elements, however, begin to foreground these concerns early in the film, framing reception for many interpretive communities as the first zombie attacks Barbara within the film's first seven minutes. Johnny rushes to save Barbara but is knocked unconscious, and she has to abandon him, fleeing to a nearby farmhouse.

Once inside Barbara frantically searches for a phone, only to find it is dead. Rushing through the house, she stumbles upon a partially devoured corpse upstairs. Mortified, Barbara runs out the house's front door (fig. 6, shot 1a), and is confronted by a light that blinds her as it floods the frame (shot 1b). A kind of primal fear is then potentially elicited by cross-cutting that begins with Barbara confronting yet another potential danger. A cut to a point-of-view shot reveals the light source: headlights of an unknown vehicle break the otherwise black visual field and register as menacing, lifeless eyes, staring back at Barbara and spectator alike (shot 2). There is then a cut to a reaction shot of Barbara: she throws her arms up in front of her eyes, as if she is shielding herself (shot 3). A cut back to a shot of headlights mimics the kind of shot/reverse-shot pattern frequently used when shooting conversations between characters, reinforcing that the headlights take on an anthropomorphic quality, rendering them uncanny (shot 4).

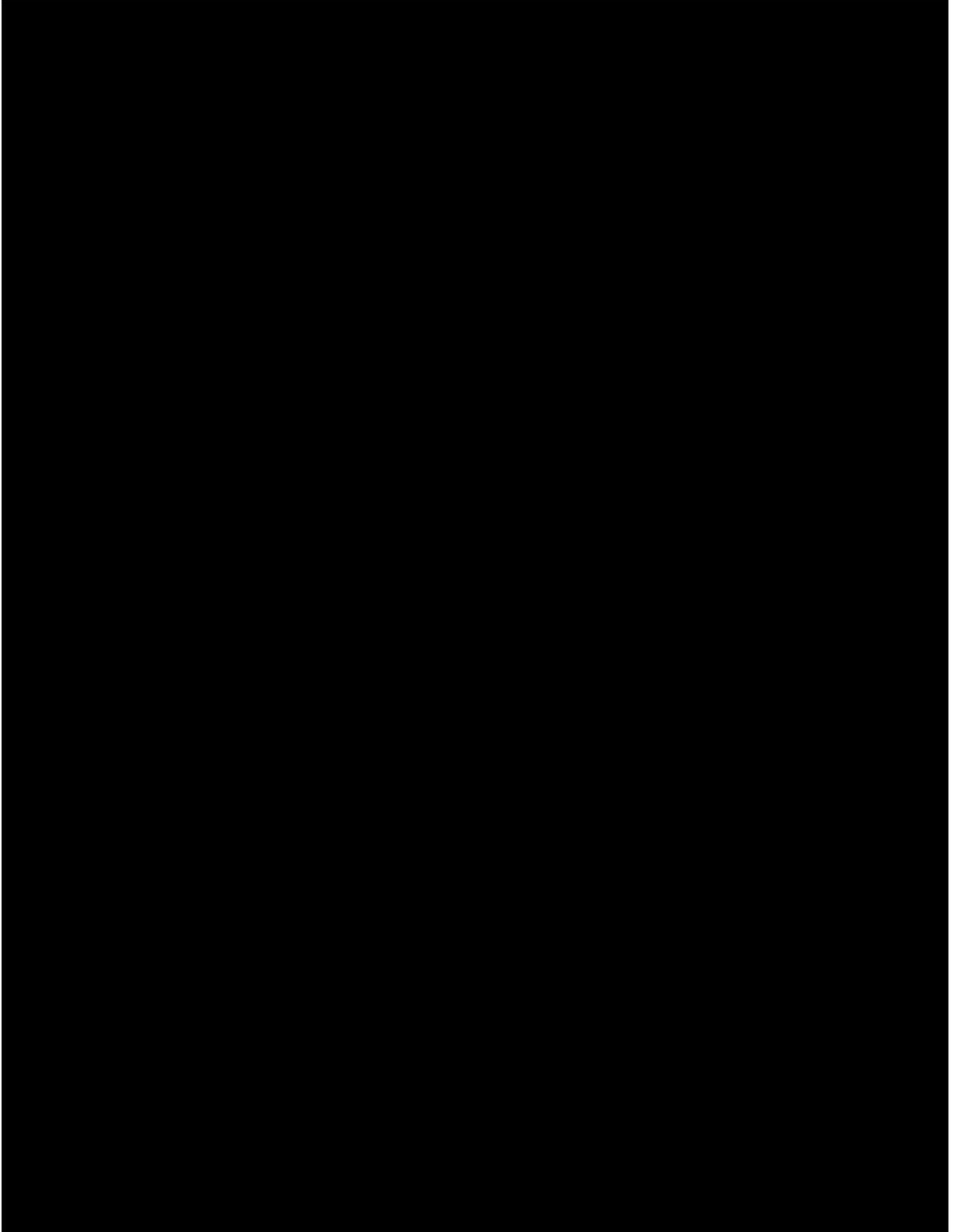


Figure 6. Barbara—and the spectator—first encounter Ben in what can register as a confrontation with real-life horror. Romero uses both composition of the frame—the close-up coupled with chiaroscuro lighting and near-oblique angles—with a lack of dialogue and actor Duane Jones' blank expression to suggest confrontation between Barbara and Ben, an effect heightened by the use of rapid shot/reverse-shot between the two.

The sense of dread that the uncanny can evoke is compounded further: to the naked eye it can appear that the shot continues on, though there is disorienting effect: there is actually a jump cut between shots 4 and 5a; the distance from the camera to the truck increases significantly and the headlights move from the foreground to the middle ground. The move is a practical one, allowing for a bit of dramatic staging: a human figure jumps into the frame's now-vacant foreground from the right top corner at an oblique angle (shot 5a). The handheld camera already creates an unsteady frame, and as the figure jumps the frame shakes rather violently, as if the figure has disturbed the division between the film and the real world of the spectator. The figure also appears first in a blurry close-up, with chiaroscuro lighting obscuring much of the face (5b), creating a sense of disorientation. In a reaction shot Barbara first is startled by the figure (shot 6a); then she slinks back, eyes straight ahead, as if confronted with a threat (shot 6b). What confronts her? A reverse-shot reveals, in sharp contrast to the shot before, a distinct human face (shot 7). The respective *mise-en-scène* of each shot reinforces the effect. An unsteady frame and dynamic movement of the actor within combine with the use of chiaroscuro lighting to create a blurring effect in the earlier shot, whereas this one is relatively static. Also, while the proportions of light and shadow work to obscure the face in the earlier shot, here the light works to partially illuminate the face in the dark. Whereas the previous shot evokes an instinctual fear of the unknown, for audiences in 1968 this shot would have alluded to real life racial anxieties. What confronts Barbara—and the spectator—is a face that is young, male, and black; this is how Ben is introduced.

Much has been made about the implications of the casting of Duane Jones as Ben. The filmmakers have always insisted that Jones was cast not because he was black, but because he gave the best performance (*Midnight*). Romero has noted that after casting Jones and considering the implications, the filmmakers purposefully did not rewrite the part to foreground Ben's race; in fact the part was originally written to be a truck driver with a "rough accent" and a limited education, and Jones himself rewrote his dialogue to avoid the character potentially being read as a black stereotype and to reflect how he thought the character should be portrayed.⁴⁶ The result was, as Hervey puts it succinctly, that "Jones's version, like Jones himself, was softer-spoken, more cerebral and sensitive" (43).⁴⁷ While Jones himself knew that his race had not been a factor in his casting, he realized, too, that it nevertheless added a subtext to the film and he championed adding elements and reworking scenes to make the subtext more pronounced.⁴⁸

Considering the actor's role in the development of a key character, then, is important, yet it is overlooked in most critical accounts.

Many critics, in fact, have pointed to how Ben's race is never mentioned or even alluded to by other characters, and some found it to be implausible. That Ben's race is *not* foregrounded at all until the very end, however, speaks to a structuring absence in the film. When both Barbara and the spectator first encounter Ben, there is literally *nothing* spoken at all—no dialogue spoken by either character—no reassurances from him, for example, that he is not a threat, and no questions from Barbara to try and determine the same. There is more revealed, perhaps, in leaving such things unspoken. Returning to Barbara's reaction shot, in fact, one finds evidence that such is the case. When the film first cuts back to her (shot 6a), she is in the foreground, her hands still partially up. She fills the frame. As the shot continues, however, she lowers her arms to her sides as she steps back closer to the middle ground, and when the film cuts back from Ben (shot 7) to Barbara (shot 8a), it is an over-the-shoulder shot that places her even further back, suggesting psychological as well as physical distance between the two. Finally Romero's use of oblique angles and rapid cutting work here to further suggest tension and confrontation. That tension is heightened to frenzy after Ben turns (shot 8b) to see the zombie that attacked Barbara and Johnny approaching (shot 9) and abruptly starts toward Barbara and begins to grab her (shot 10). He has a tire iron in one hand, and Barbara struggles with him as he pulls her into the farmhouse (shot 11).

While Jones might have given the best audition, it was not lost on Romero and company that casting an African American as Ben would prove to be the source of controversy and commentary, and it begins with this sequence.⁴⁹ Various elements work together to tie primal fear of the unknown to real life anxieties and call attention to Barbara's reaction vis-à-vis a deliberate ambiguity invested in Ben. While nothing is said explicitly, together the sequence works to register that Barbara, herself, may not simply be startled, which is an initial reaction that arises from a quick shock to the system, an encounter with the unexpected that would register in *histoire*. Her expression as she begins to step away from what she sees is instead something closer to fear, and her reaction to Ben approaching her is nothing short of panic, both of which requires the perception of a potential threat, an *understanding* that activates fight-or-flight, escape or confrontation. Thus far the film has worked to position the spectator largely alongside her. She is the first character to appear onscreen, the first to speak, and the first to smile and exhibit any range of emotions. She

is also much more sympathetic than Johnny, and while Johnny is left behind, the camera rarely has left Barbara. If the spectator has identified with Barbara thus far, then her experience when she first steps out of the farmhouse—looking out into those blinding headlights, alone in the dark—would complement the spectator’s own experience with the cinematic apparatus. Her fear of Ben becomes the spectator’s, as well, registering as real life anxieties about race relations in *discours*. Here then we reach a crucial point. This sequence reflects, I believe, the ethos of these films. Like New Hollywood, they are antithetical to the dream factory of classical cinema in their relentless rejection of escapism, and here that refusal is played out in conjunction with a renewed suturing that insists on confrontation, not escape.

From the first moment Ben appears on screen, in fact, one finds support for Wood’s insistence that Ben’s race is *always* significant, it is always used “to signify his difference from the other characters, to set him apart from their norms” (*Hollywood* 116). This signifying of difference would have been readily conspicuous. As scholar Richard Dyer argues, whiteness as an ethnic category lacks specificity, coming into focus only as emptiness, absence, denial, or death, as in the case of *Night*. This resistance to specification, Dyer contends, is an effect of the construction of whiteness as the unmarked category in American racial discourse, a construction maintained, in fact, by calling attention to any others (48). While no characters mention Ben’s race, his simple presence calls attention to a structuring absence.

The ambiguity constructed around Ben proves to be a commanding use of misdirection, as after he pulls Barbara into the farmhouse he immediately releases her as he pushes shut the door and focuses on ensuring that it is secure, his single motivation thus revealed to be finding shelter against the menace outside. He assures Barbara, in fact, that “Everything’s okay. You’re safe now.” Ben is in fact a commanding presence and often exhibits the qualities of a heroic figure. He soon stands in sharp contrast to Barbara, who has been traumatized by what she has witnessed. She eventually deteriorates into a fugue-like state while Ben is determined to fortify their defenses. He finds a working radio and rifle and, after boarding up the windows and doors of the lower level, proceeds to do the same upstairs. From this moment on various cinematic elements work to contradict the positioning of whiteness as the privileged category in cinematic space, eliciting from the spectator instead a shifting identification that includes Ben.

A symbolic division of space is foregrounded fairly early on in the film. Once inside the farmhouse, first Barbara and then Ben frantically move throughout it, mapping out its interiors for the

spectator rather quickly. Unbeknownst to them both, the house has a cellar; its door has been obscured, but suddenly it bursts open and Barbara screams as two figures emerge. The spectator only gets a moment's glance at them when the camera cuts to Ben on the second floor. Barbara's screaming creates a sound match between the two shots as Ben, rifle in hand, runs downstairs to her aid, ready to shoot what he naturally suspects are zombies that have broken in. Instead he finds Harry and Tom, who have been hiding in the cellar with Tom's girlfriend, Judy, and Harry's wife, Helen, and their daughter, Karen, who has been injured in a zombie attack. Not knowing if they are a threat, Ben has pointed the rifle at them. From their very first encounter, then, a tension is established between Ben and Harry. That tension is coded with racial anxieties, and it also begins to symbolically divide the spaces that the two characters will occupy.

That division is further foregrounded in the first exchange of dialogue between Ben and Harry.⁵⁰ Ben angrily demands, "How long have you guys been down there? I could have used some help up here." Harry replies, "That's the cellar. It's the safest place." As their conversation continues, the contrasts are striking. Ben questions why Harry and Tom would not have come up from the cellar earlier when they heard Barbara screaming in order to help her. Harry defensively responds, "We lock into a safe place, and you're telling us we got to risk our lives just because somebody might need help, huh?" Ben, disgusted, simply replies, "Yeah, something like that." Harry insists that the entire group should return to the cellar, but Ben objects: "the cellar is a deathtrap" and they should stay upstairs and confront the danger head-on. When Harry insists he is taking a now despondent Barbara downstairs, Ben declares, "Keep your hands off *her* and everything else that's up here, too. Because if I stay up here, I'm fighting for *everything* up here." Neither relents initially: Ben continues to secure the upstairs while Harry retreats to the cellar.

This internal division—both figurative with regards to the protagonists' attitudes and literal with regards to the spaces they will occupy—is the first example of how these films disrupt the "terrible place" trope, a disruption that arguably has great symbolic significance. I am reminded of how critic Pauline Kael once observed that director Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (1939) was the forerunner for a series of European "house party" films released in the early 1960s (for example, Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura*, both 1960, as well as Alain Resnais's *L'année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961) in which the "house" (e.g. a beach house, a chateau, a resort hotel⁵¹) symbolizes the remains of post-war Europe. In a masterful sequence, Renoir uses the divided space of a country estate to

reinforce parallels between two social classes, crosscutting between shots of upper class party guests conversing upstairs and the servants sharing a meal together in the kitchen located downstairs, with shots of two clocks providing an initial match cut. The house in *Night of the Living Dead* is similarly divided in terms of space and meaning, only instead of class differences alone, its politics are multifaceted (fig. 7). The house's ground floor becomes the coded space of a younger, progressive generation engaged with revolution, epitomized by Ben—young, black, assertive, intellectual—and Barbara, traumatized by the horrors that she has witnessed. The house's cellar, associated with Harry—middle-aged, soft-bodied and balding, wearing a button up shirt and tie (the uniform of “the man”)—becomes the coded space of an older, conservative generation that is determined to “keep safe” and cling to the past; the cellar even evokes the bomb shelters that figured so prominently for the 1950s nuclear family. Extending Romero's description of the zombie as a metaphor for revolution, the besieged farmhouse in *Night* is symbolically coded: the living dead represent the countercultural revolution that is—literally—beating down the door of American society, and the conflict also comes, crucially, from within.

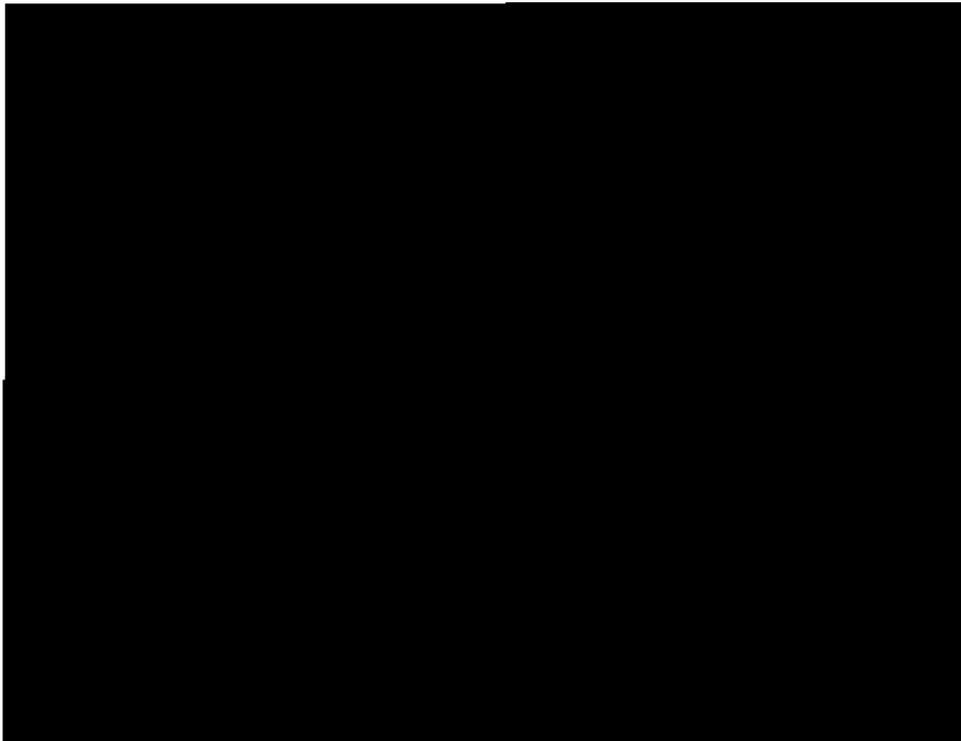


Figure 7. A graphic match in Jean Renoir's *Règle du jeu* (1939) connects two shots—one of a relatively inexpensive clock radio that servants listen to while dining in the kitchen, located downstairs (lower left), the next of a ringing artisan clock located upstairs where the upper class are conversing (top left), just one of many parallels Renoir draws between the two classes. A similar parallel arguably exists in *Night of the Living Dead*: the ground floor (upstairs) is the symbolic space of those who are confronting revolution (top right), whereas the cellar (downstairs) is the space of a 1950s generation wanting to shut out the revolution (bottom right).

The division between Ben and Harry splits both the group and the space that has been designated as safe/normal, as the others have to choose sides, either actively or by default. In between Ben and Harry—figuratively and, often literally—is Tom. He is young, clean-cut, wears a t-shirt and blue jeans, and has an earnest quality about him, almost as if he has been intentionally written to look, act, and sound as if he just emerged from 1950s television.⁵² Tom often sides with Ben, and he arguably is coded as the generation of white youths that were increasingly embracing an engagement with the counterculture and questioning the wisdom of the 1950s patriarch that Harry embodies. Tom is also, however, trying to reconcile the past with the coming future. Later, when Harry retreats to the cellar, Tom voices a final plea: “If we stick together, man, we can fix it up real good. We’d all be better off if all three of us were working together.” Tom’s words reflect Romero’s own ethos, as he has said that all of his films have at their heart the theme that people have to cooperate (Yakir 43). “The most frightening thing,” Romero observes, “is that nobody communicates. Everybody is isolated and alone with their version of the world” (Wells 82). The symbolic division of space speaks to that theme, as well: the protagonists could probably escape if only they would work together. Instead, Ben conveys a sense that he’s seen Harry’s kind before, telling Tom that he’s wasting his time in appealing to Harry: “Let him go, man—his mind is made up. Just let him go.” Given that this reading is valid and Harry and Tom are constructed to reflect a 1950s white patriarch and a 1950s progressive youth, respectively, Ben’s dismissal carries greater weight.

Evocations of the 1950s inform reception of the remaining principal characters, all of whom are female. Hervey echoes a common criticism made of *Night* in noting that “the three of us” to whom Tom refers are Ben, Harry and himself. For Hervey those words are emblematic: “the women don’t count... [they] mostly just sit around, a fact that has sometimes embarrassed those who have argued for the film’s progressiveness” (63-64). As feminist critical theory has continued to rightly influence film studies and scholarship regarding horror, specifically (e.g. Kristeva 1982, Clover 1992, Berenstein 1996, Freeland 1996), some scholars have, in fact, pointed to *Night*’s problematic portrayals of women, regarding them as stereotypes and holdovers of 1950s patriarchy. Waller sums up the critical opinion of Barbara, for example, when he observes that she embodies “certain sexist assumptions about female passivity, irrationality and emotional vulnerability” (283).⁵³ Barbara’s near-catatonic state is typically described as extreme, one that

renders her both stereotypically passive and irrational, placing her in a long tradition of “hysterical” female characters in both literature and cinema.

Two responses come to mind. First, in the *histoire* register, Barbara’s “irrationality” and “emotional vulnerability” seem understandable, given that she witnessed her brother’s murder and only nearly survived an attack, herself. As O’Dea describes, gender aside, her character’s response makes complete sense: “I believe Barbara exemplifies honesty. How she got through her ordeal is probably the way many real people would” (qtd. in Kane 40). This is a strong point. Barbara is a likely source for spectator identification early on, and when the film works to transfer that identification over to Ben, Barbara’s traumatized state reflects what many audience members would have experienced themselves if placed in a similar situation. I am reminded here, too, of how O’Dea has said that she and the other actors improvised many of their lines and, as typical of Romero’s productions, their collaboration was welcome. It seems prudent to consider O’Dea’s own reading of her character, especially given her agency in the film’s production. In the *discours* register, the film’s opening scene already contrasted Barbara with her brother Johnny in terms of patriarchal repression: he is coded as rebellious youth, and she is, as Waller himself observes, “the character who most fully believes in church and tradition” (283). If the zombie embodies revolution, then Barbara’s reaction to it makes sense in the *discours* register, as well: the existing social order of the 1950s with which she is aligned is being upended as the new society devours the old. Also, Barbara *does* awaken when the revolution comes: as O’Dea points out, “[Barbara] snapped back into reality. It was time to fight back. And she did, until her death” (qtd. in Kane 40).

Critics have likewise largely read Helen as a stereotypical holdover. Hervey’s assessment is typical: “If Harry aspires to the role of 1950s patriarch, Helen embodies an archetype that 1960s progressives hoped to leave behind: the resentful but passive, pre-feminist housewife described by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* (1963)” (64). The reference to Friedan is interesting, as it brings to mind additional historical context that would actually situate *Night*’s release *alongside* key developments for feminism.⁵⁴ However, I want to question such assessments on narrower grounds. The most realized scene between Helen and Harry occurs when they are alone with their daughter Karen, immediately after Harry’s first clash with Ben. When Harry begins musing, “We’ll see who’s right. We’ll see when they come begging me to let them in down here,” Helen responds, “That’s important, isn’t it? To be right, everybody

else to be wrong?” Hervey states that here Helen “digs into her husband’s cowardice, self-justifications and insecurities,” an example of her “resentfulness” (ibid). Helen’s dynamic with Harry is certainly heated throughout the film; here, however, she is pointing to a key theme: the need to cooperate.

Helen returns to the theme later in the same conversation. First she emphasizes the need for the two of them to work together (“We may not enjoy living together, but dying together isn’t going to solve anything”) and the need to work with the others (“Those people upstairs aren’t our enemies!”). Those lines belie for me, too, the notion that Helen is “passive”; she does not dutifully accept whatever Harry says. She certainly is not passive when Harry mentions the radio upstairs: she forcefully declares, “Take those boards off that door.” Going forward, Helen tries to reason with Harry, noting that the radio could provide vital information, and she objects to hiding away in the cellar (“How are we going to know what’s going on if we lock ourselves in this dungeon?”). When Tom yells down to them that Ben has found a television upstairs, Helen is the one that replies back, saying that she and Harry can come upstairs if Judy were to come stay with Karen. Far from being solely a holdover of 1950s patriarchy, Helen initiates cooperation and engages with the coded space upstairs (notice, too, that Helen is assertive in choosing to go upstairs, herself). Helen, in fact, stays engaged with that coded space: when the house is besieged later in the film, she stays and fights despite Harry insisting she return to the cellar. As with O’Dea, the mode of production also plays a role here, one overlooked by critics ascribing responsibility to Romero as *auteur*: it was Eastman who actually wrote the cellar sequences, and she modified the dialogue during shooting (Hardman and Eastman). As the vice-president and creative director of Hardman Associates, Eastman produced commercial films, and she had a great deal of experience in putting together the kind of complex character dynamics that one can find in these sequences if one looks. It has been critics who have defined Helen through her husband Harry, dismissing her as a stereotype.⁵⁵

Judy fares no better. Hervey’s reduction of her (she “look[s] pretty... vacantly preening her hair” 63) is typical, as critics tend to regard Judy as little more than another passive stereotype. As Hervey himself concedes, however, her limited role is largely the result of her character being added after production started (ibid).⁵⁶ Judy is simply given little to do. Her first significant action comes when Helen asks for her to watch Karen, and critics typically read this as yet another stereotype—Judy is aiding Helen in “mothering” Karen. However, when Tom asks if Judy will do it (and notice that she *is* asked), she balks

at the request. Tom emphasizes the same theme of cooperation: “Nothing is going to get done with them down there and us up here.” He then adds, “Do this, for me,” to which Judy, resigned that it is the right thing to do, agrees. Neither their exchange nor Judy’s agreeing to watch over Karen elicits for me a straightforwardly stereotypical portrayal of gender. While it is Judy who is asked to watch over Karen, she does so only begrudgingly; she is not coded as a maternal figure. Instead both she and Tom are more explicitly coded as 1950s youths: they cooperate with one another and share a liminal space, bridging the gap between the cellar and upstairs, between the coded spaces of the past and the revolution at hand.

Generally speaking, critics who otherwise find *Night* to be progressive often minimize or even neglect altogether the film’s implicit critique of patriarchal structures. The radio and television reports that the group listens to, for example, often include allusions to the perceived ineffectualness of state power. Ben listens to radio report that attributes the attacks to “a virtual army of unidentified assassins,” an odd word choice, one that elicits associations with the assassinations and conspiracy theories that had shaken the nation’s faith in government.⁵⁷ The impotence of authorities is further elicited: “Reaction of law enforcement officials is one of complete bewilderment,” a reporter intones, wondering aloud if an investigation has even begun. A later broadcast explains that the dead are returning to life and “devouring” their victims, but experts cannot explain why. As he listens, Ben hurriedly fashions defenses on his own. Right after a report that officials recommend “For private citizens to stay inside their homes and not go outside for any reason,” Ben immediately goes outside to scare off zombies approaching the truck; his pragmatic approach is juxtaposed with ineffectual state power, made all the more salient still later when another report concedes that the earlier instructions had been wrong-minded, and that the “situation has now changed. We’re able to now report a definite course of action for you,” which, in fact, is not to stay indoors but to instead head towards the nearest “safety zone” that has been established.

Deliberate obfuscation on the part of government is also evoked. A later broadcast from Washington, D.C. features two scientists and a military general hurrying past reporters.⁵⁸ The scientists try telling a reporter that they know that the zombie epidemic is the result of radiation emanating from a Venus space probe that exploded in the atmosphere. The general interjects, reminding the scientists that they had agreed to not yet discuss it. Romero has said that he regrets the explanation and that there were, in fact, two alternate explanations that were cut (Kane 65). The Venus probe, however, evokes associations with the

film's larger ideological investment. The confluence of science and the military would recall for many viewers the public's increasing mistrust of both, particularly the "credibility gap"⁵⁹ with regards to the Vietnam War. The scientists evoke the "action-intellectuals" of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations such as Robert McNamara who, as Secretary of State, approached the Vietnam War as he had as one of the "Whiz Kids" at Ford Motor Company—applying modern factory planning to war in order to make killing as efficient as possible. These action-intellectuals also engaged in "social management" at home, briefing the media with a "policy of minimum candor," and the media, in turn, had increasingly begun to convey uncertainty about the war's progress.⁶⁰

Another news reports urges survivors to head to the nearest established safety zone, and here the spectator's expectations of the *histoire* register begin to be subverted, facilitating further confrontations in *discours*. The group feels emboldened to escape, but to do so they will need to refuel the truck. The farm has a gas tank, but it is far away from the house. Ben orchestrates a plan with most of the group contributing ideas, as well: he and Tom will drive the truck to the pump while Harry throws Molotov cocktails from the second floor to stave off the zombies.⁶¹ The group finally is cooperating, setting up the expectation that they will succeed. At the last minute, Judy rushes out to join Tom, and the two of them toward the pump with Ben. While fueling, Tom accidentally spills gasoline too close to a torch and a fire quickly engulfs the truck. Judy tries to escape but is stuck; while Tom tries to help, the truck explodes, killing them both. (Critics typically blame Judy for the couple's demise, but it is Tom who accidentally ignites the gasoline too close to the truck in the first place). The couple coded as the embodiment of 1950s optimism is destroyed halfway through the film, and Ebert's review suggests the implied symbolic weight that would have resulted from spectator identification: "This was being set on fire." On the one occasion that the group had finally cooperated they failed, and with the symbolic bridge that Tom and Judy provided between Ben and Harry gone, they engage in open confrontation. When Ben retreats back to the house, he finds that Harry has locked the door and will not open it. Ben breaks it down and, once inside, casts a knowing stare at Harry, who is standing in the doorway to the cellar. Ben begins to secure the front door and Harry at first hesitates but then goes to help him. It is not enough, however: Ben punches Harry repeatedly, becoming the revolutionary proto-blaxploitation hero of the film's lobby cards (figure 5). Ben concludes by telling Harry, "I ought to drag you out there and feed you to those things."

A reaction shot of Harry (fig. 8, shot 1) acts as a visual bridge: it could be either in response to the violence he has just experienced at the hands of Ben, coded in terms of racial anxieties, or to the primal fear Ben's words evoke, actualized in the next sequence to which Harry himself points to as he gazes beyond the frame. The camera cuts to an establishing shot of zombies descending on the still-smoldering truck in the foreground (shot 2). A cut to inside the truck (shot 3) allows the spectator to witness the zombies reaching inside to pull out Tom and Judy's remains. It is a point-of-view shot from where Judy was sitting inside, and Romero's handheld camera here makes for a constantly mobile frame, conveying a sense of agitation, as if Judy is still there, struggling to get away. It is also a low angle shot, as well, conveying a sense of relative powerlessness. The chiaroscuro lighting generated by the flames obscures the zombies, further creating a sense of dread, as the shadows themselves appear to move. The camera slowly pans left to allow more ambient light to illuminate the frame as they continue to reach into the truck and take away remains of the victims with which the spectator has identified.

That identification shifts as the camera cuts to a shot just outside the burned out frame of the truck's passenger door (shot 4a) and the camera moves slightly to the left (shot 4b) to reveal the zombies biting into remains as they turn and walk away. As if to reinforce the shifting identification, Romero cuts to a similar low angle point-of-view shot inside the truck (shot 5a) as a single zombie pulls out one last piece of flesh and then turns and walks into the background (shot 5b) before cutting to an establishing shot (shot 6) of zombies feasting on Tom's and Judy's remains in graphic detail. Here the "Last Supper" sequence begins in earnest; here is where transgressive audience members would cheer on the dead. Romero's quick cutting adds to the shock of the sequence's remaining shots: two zombies fight over what appears to be intestines before one wrestles it away (shot 7); an extreme close-up (shot 8) of a zombie's hands, fondling what appears to be a whole liver before biting into it; a close-up (shot 9) of a zombie sitting down to eat from part of a limb, followed by another close-up (shot 10) of another zombie gratuitously biting away flesh from a bone; and still another biting flesh off of what the spectator recognizes is still an intact hand (shot 11). A final close-up (shot 12) begins with a zombie looking down at what he is eating; then, as if something has caught his attention, he looks off in the distance beyond the camera. What effectively works as a match cut brings the spectator full circle back inside the farmhouse to a long shot from behind of Ben looking through cracks in the boarded up window (shot 13), as if he is looking back at the zombie. He then

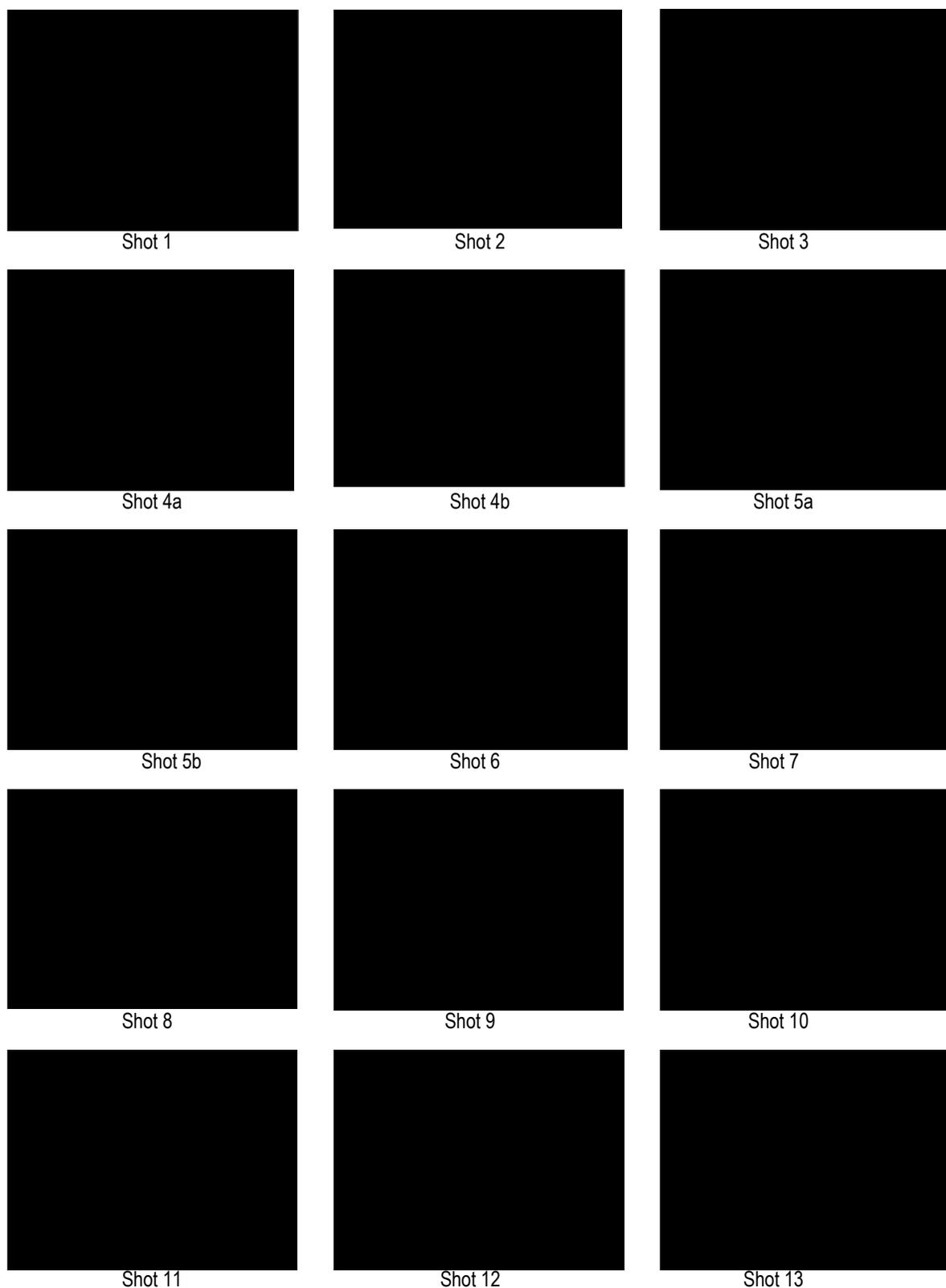


Figure 8. The “Last Supper” sequence, as the Image Ten referred to it. The sequence begins with Harry looking beyond the frame (shot 1), as if off into the distance, then there is a cut to a long sequence of graphic images of the living dead feasting on the remains of Tom and Judy (shots 2-12), including a low angle shot from where Judy was sitting, suggesting the spectator’s identification with her absent presence (shots 5a and 5b). Real animal organs and limbs were used to make the sequence as grisly as possible. As the sequence ends, a zombie looks beyond the frame (shot 12)—much as Harry did at its beginning—and the camera cuts back to inside the farmhouse (shot 13), where Ben is looking out the window at the zombies feasting.

turns and walks towards the camera, a look of disgust on his face as he places his hand on his stomach, as if he is going to be sick.

Some of *Night's* first audiences surely felt similarly. Many were simply stunned. Ebert's review highlights how the film's graphic depictions of cannibalism were nearly revolutionary ("this was something else. This was ghouls eating people up—and you could actually see what they were eating"). Cannibalism's central role in several myths and folktales attests to how it is a primal fear, and depictions of cannibalism made an impression on Romero himself. Along with Matheson's *I Am Legend*, Romero oft-cited influence, EC comic books, also regularly featured scenes of cannibalism and the dead returning to life. The cover of *The Haunt of Fear*, no. #17 (fig. 9), for example, features a grisly image of reanimated corpses confronting the reader. Inside the story "Garden Party" involves a thoughtless oaf named Godfrey who carelessly wrecks the garden of his wife, Louella, with a barbecue pit. When Louella cries out that the garden is "Ruined!", Godfrey obtusely remarks that a garden is for enjoyment, such as barbecuing. Louella becomes enraged and, repeating his words, carves up Godfrey and barbecues him. One recalls how *Night's* midnight audiences shouted "Barbeque" and "Eat 'em!" at the screen during the "Last Supper" sequence, as well as how *Night*-themed barbecue sauces are sold even today.

The remaining survivors regroup and discuss their options. Another news report describes how law enforcement and the military have finally organized to destroy the zombies. An interview with Chief McClelland (played by production manager George Kosana) is telling: contra the experiences of the survivors in the farmhouse, he discounts the zombies. When the reporter asks what to do if surrounded by them, McClelland responds to shoot them in the head or, if one does not have a gun, to use "a club or a torch. Beat 'em or burn 'em. They go up pretty easy." His reassurances prove to be ironic, as the power is cut to the farmhouse and all hell breaks loose. When Ben goes downstairs to check for a blown fuse, Harry insists to Helen that the power lines are down, and that he has to get the gun away from Ben ("two people are dead on account of that guy") to which she coolly replies, "Haven't you had *enough*?" Ben's return cuts short Harry's scheming, and soon the zombies attack. The camera cuts to an exterior shot of the farmhouse; a series of extreme low angle long shots renders the ghouls a largely faceless mob as they descend on the house—several at a time—and begin to beat on the doors and boarded windows in unison. The scene recalls the 1968 Harris poll that revealed the spike in concern about crime and violence; indeed, that same

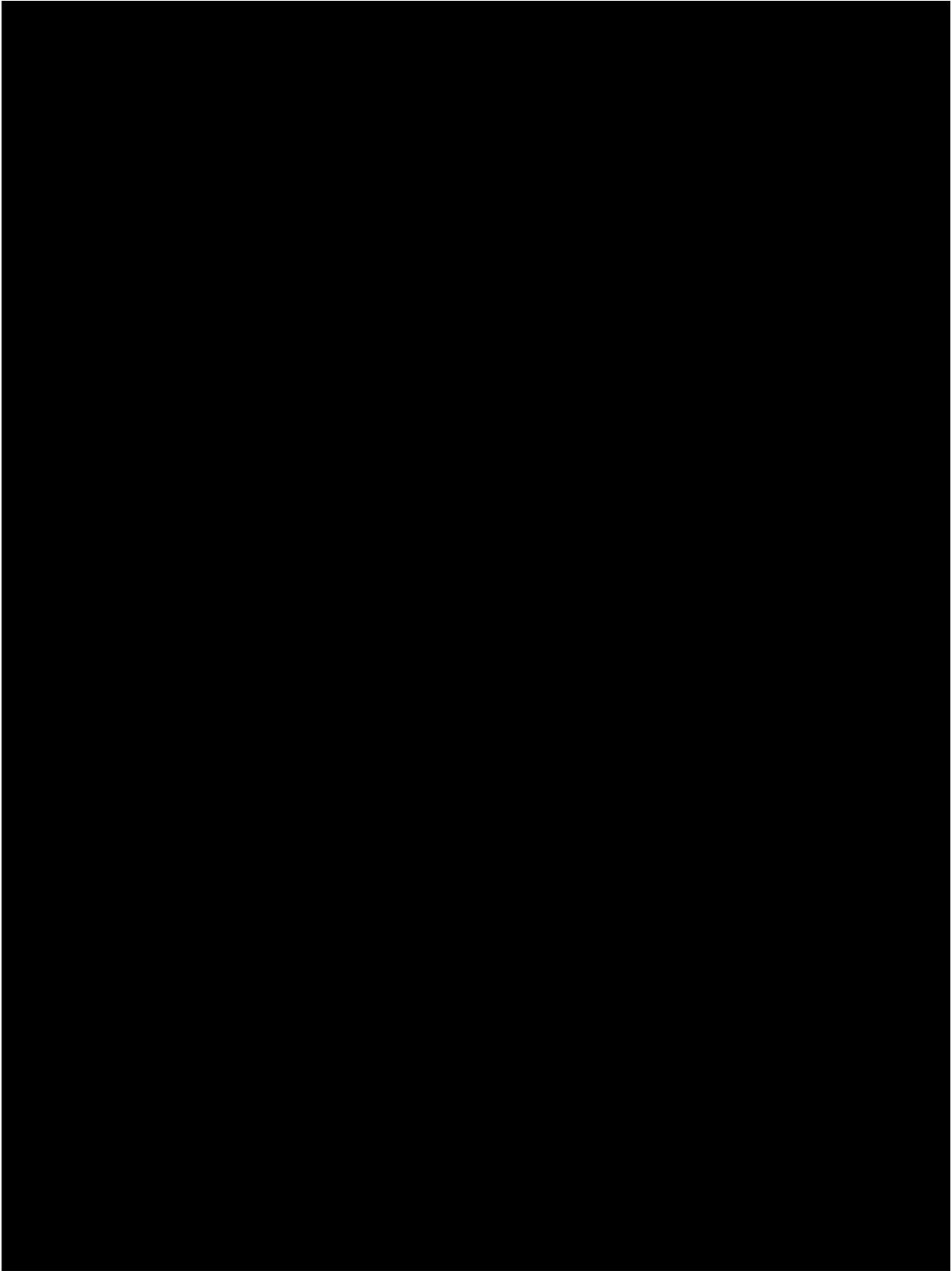


Figure 9. The “living dead” grace the cover of *The Haunt of Fear*, no. #17 (Jan./Feb. 1953), a horror anthology comic book published by EC Comics with artwork by Jack Davis (bottom right). Inside, the story “Garden Party” ends with a husband carelessly wrecking his wife’s garden with a barbecue pit. Her reaction: she carves him up and repeats his words as she barbecues him. Romero has commented that the EC Comics he read as a child were a great influence on him as he conceived *Night of the Living Dead* and its themes; they gave him the “idea that horror movies should have a little moral. You could get your political opinions in; you could use it as a platform to express some anger” (*Midnight*).

poll revealed specific anxieties about looting rioters and home invasions. The camera cuts back to inside the house, with a series of quick close-up reaction shots of each survivor's face. As the scene unfolds, Romero continues to use his "cubist style." Ben drops the rifle as he struggles to keep a window boarded. He shouts for Harry to come help him, but Harry—after hesitating—goes for the gun instead, pointing it at Ben. Reaction shots register Helen's ambivalence as Harry takes charge—she seems more concerned with propping up a barricaded window. Harry taunts Ben for not realizing the cellar was safer before, and when he orders Helen downstairs and she does not move, he directs his attention to her, giving Ben the opportunity to lunge at him and wrest away the gun and shoot Harry. Reaction shots of Helen again register her concern with the dead trying to break in more than Harry being shot; she is not moved to defend him or follow after him as he stumbles down into the cellar. She instead stays alongside Ben in trying to repel the zombies, though soon they begin to break through and grab hold of her. If Barbara is indeed coded as a traumatized and disengaged youth, then what finally moves her to action—the sight of zombies attacking Helen, the 1950s matriarch—is in turn coded. Barbara at long last lunges forward from her stupor on the sofa and is able to help free Helen. It proves to be a sacrifice, as the living dead break through the defenses and Barbara sees her brother, Johnny, now among them. She screams in disbelief, resisting his attempts to pull her through the wall. Then, however, Barbara appears to embrace Johnny, screaming, "Help me! Help me!" pulling herself towards him as he pulls her out. The ambiguity as to whether she lowered her defenses out of shock or something else—and to whom she was screaming for help—is, I believe, deliberate.

Several key elements come together in one pivotal scene, the Coopers' monstrous family reunion (made all the more interesting by the real life family dynamics involved: Schon is Hardman's daughter, and Hardman and Eastman married soon after *Night* was completed). Having retreated to the cellar, Harry stumbles along; the camera cuts to a point-of-view shot—wobbly and blurry—of what Harry sees: Karen, apparently now dead, lying on the table. Harry's first point-of-view shot comes at a crucial time: dying himself, he lumbers towards his daughter as the camera cuts to a long shot behind Karen's body. He collapses on the cellar floor, reaching out to her. Harry's final scene complicates readings which typically code him as a patriarchal villain; seeing through his eyes for the first time, the sequence reminds us that, in arguing so forcefully for the cellar's safety, he was protecting his family as much as himself.

If Harry is in fact the embodiment of 1950s patriarchy, however, what follows is a sequence rich with evocations of both primal fears and historical anxieties. When Barbara frees Helen and the latter flees to the cellar, she discovers that Karen, now a zombie, is consuming her father's corpse. Seeing Helen, Karen drops her father's arm and proceeds to kill her mother with a trowel. It is a powerful image, once again evoking primal fears associated not just with familial relationships, but bodily integrity and cannibalism. Wood's emphasis with regards to the Coopers generally is on how they signify "the patriarchal structuring of relationships" within the traditional family, which represses incestuous desire and the corresponding murderous resentment of the Oedipal trajectory (*Hollywood* 102-4). Wood regards Karen, specifically, as an example of the "monstrous-child," a symptom of patriarchal capitalism.

There is also at least one other way to read the cannibalism in this reunion scene. Recalling that Romero attributes his eye for *chiaroscuro* lighting to his study of Spanish painting, I cannot help but notice that the composition of the point-of-view shot in which Helen discovers Karen cannibalizing her father is strikingly similar to Goya's painting *Saturn Devouring His Son* (c. 1819-23), which depicts the Greek myth of Cronus (Romanized Saturn) who, fearing a prophesy that one of his children will supplant him, devours all of them except Zeus, who has been hidden by his mother Rhea only to return and, in fact, overthrow his father (fig. 10).⁶² Both Karen and Cronus are kneeling and flush right in the frame, and both are eating the flesh of their victims' arms, the wounded bodies bleeding below them. Karen devouring her father is, crucially, an inversion of the myth. In terms of primal fears, that inversion mirrors the inversion of infantile anxiety that Gunning associates with cannibalism. Pointing to how parents are apt to tell children, "You're so cute, I just want to eat you" as they pretend to nibble on an infant's fingers, Gunning suggests that "The child knows that the parents, on some level, really do want to eat them" (*American*). Wood's reading of Karen as example of the "monstrous child" could be correspondingly inverted as well: Cronus was trying to put down a revolution of sorts, whereas Karen becomes a primal force *of* revolution. Wood goes on to say that parents seek "to mold [children] into replicas of [themselves], perpetrators of a discredited tradition" (*Hollywood* 67). Karen represents the rejection of exactly that: she embodies Romero's allegory of "a new society devouring the old" in multiple ways: the child of 1950s patriarchy, she occupies a liminal space in which gender, generation, and revolution intersect.



Figure 10. A potentially deliberate evocation achieved through a similarity in composition. Left: Karen devouring her father in *Night of the Living Dead*. Right: Spanish painter Francisco Goya's depiction of the Cronus myth—Romanized in its title, *Saturn Devouring His Son* (c. 1820). Romero studied Spanish painting as an undergraduate at Carnegie Melon. Karen's devouring of her father inverts the myth: rather than trying to prevent a new generation carrying out a revolution, as Cronus does, she embodies the revolution in which Romero invested the living dead.

Critical readings of *Night* address Karen, however, solely in terms of her age; she signifies only a generational divide and a manifestation of the monstrous family. That Karen is also *female* is typically ignored, and the omission does not seem to stem from a binary distinction between girl/woman.⁶³ Karen's gender arguably *is* significant, however, particularly vis-à-vis the constructions of femininity performed by the other female characters and the sequences that both immediately precede and immediately follow. If Helen is coded, as Hervey and others insist, as the “resentful but passive, pre-feminist housewife,” then Karen's transgression against Helen is coded, as well—an embodiment of second-wave feminism that was only then becoming radicalized.⁶⁴ Alongside both Helen and Barbara staying upstairs and fighting, Karen's coding speaks to how the film's commitment to confrontation and revolution potentially includes gestures toward women's liberation and even a more critical feminism.

In terms of audience reception, Karen's transgressions made a lasting impression on critics and audiences alike. Ebert of course, singled out how "little girls [kill] their mothers," and most reviews include a description of the memorable scene.⁶⁵ For many audiences it was a watershed moment, one that literally made Karen a poster child for the film and arguably for a revolution: the most popular reissue poster for *Night* consists solely of a close-up of Schon as Karen, staring into the camera and appearing slightly older—Schon turned twelve just days after *Night's* premier, but arguably appears to be teenaged in the poster—the "living dead" makeup much heavier than what she wears in the film (fig. 11). Popularly referred to as "the face," the image has gone on to adorn countless t-shirts and

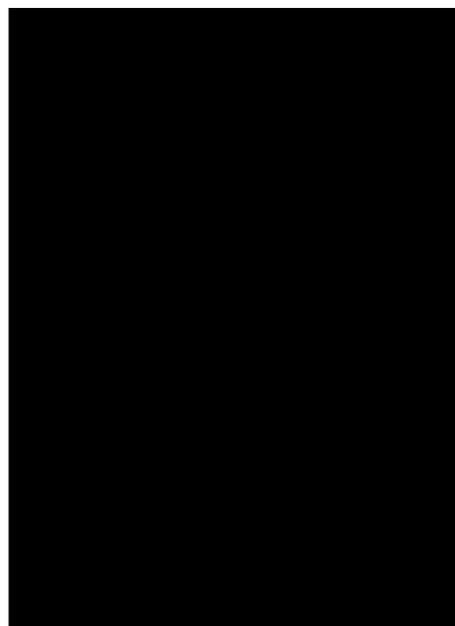


Figure 11. Merchandise and reissue posters for *Night* typically use what has become the quintessential image for the film: a close-up of Kyra Schon as Karen taken as a publicity shot. The image has been a popular one, as Karen has arguably become the synecdoche for the film's theme of revolution.

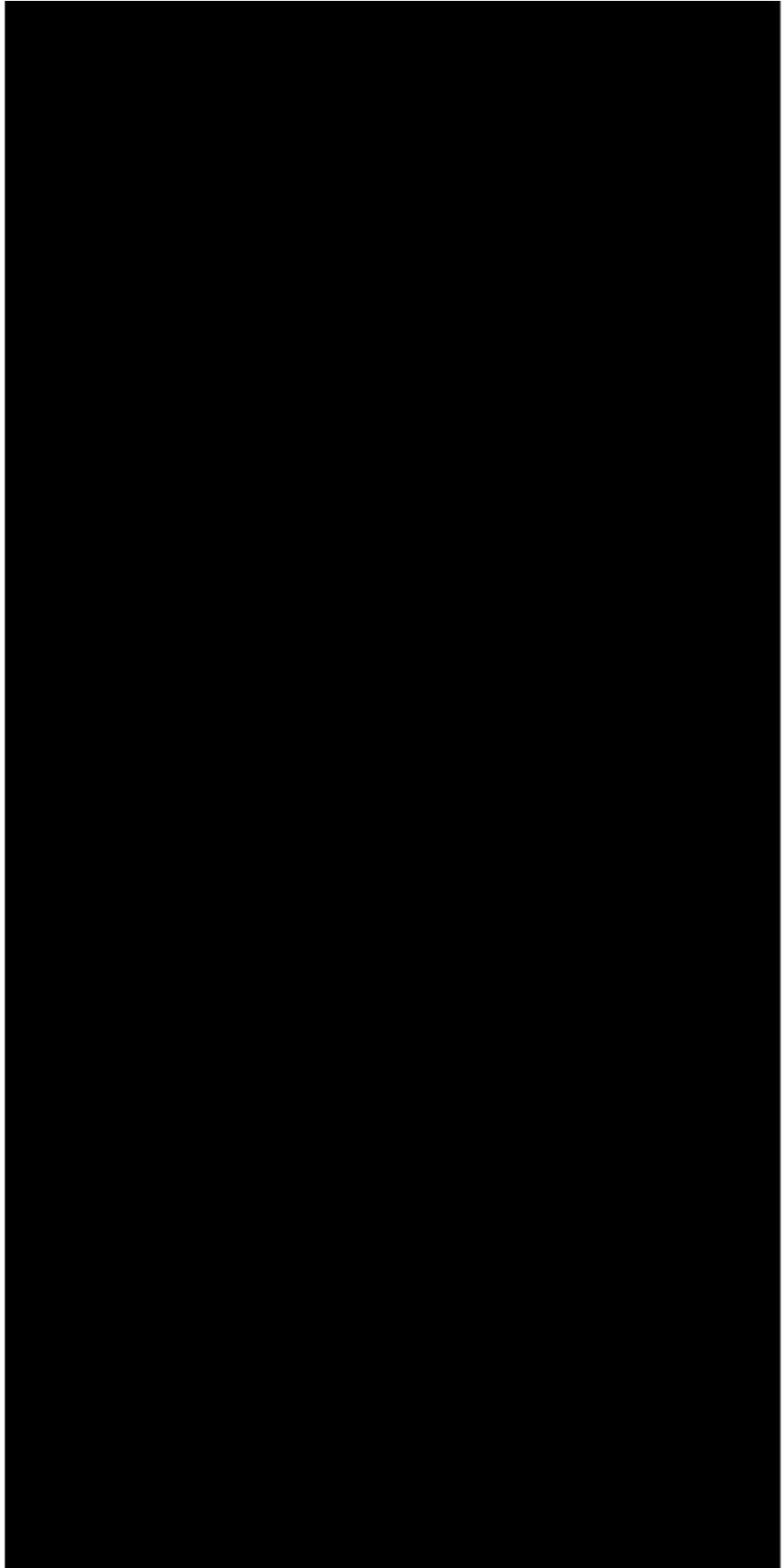
other merchandise for the film, and it has even become a popular tattoo.⁶⁶ It is telling that the quintessential image associated with *Night* is not from the film itself by a publicity shot—and one of such a minor character. Indeed, Schon's screen time is limited to just a few minutes total and her dialogue is limited to a single line ("I hurt"). Given that is the case, it is all the more striking that Karen—appearing as a zombified, rebellious teen—became the synecdoche of Romero's revolution; it speaks once again to a confluence of authorial intent and audience reception.

Romero has been fairly consistent in claiming that he wrote and directed the final sequences to elicit real world anxieties. Ben, now alone, backs away towards the cellar. Out steps Karen behind him, but he is able to evade her (there is no scene in which Karen is done away with; the revolution's synecdoche potentially endures). Fleeing to the cellar, Ben shoots both Helen and Harry as they each rise from the dead before barricading the door and nodding off to sleep. A cut to an idyllic-seeming morning prefaces the posse's approach towards the farmhouse. The earlier news report described how "all law enforcement agencies and the military have been organized to search out and destroy the marauding ghouls." Aligning

the posse with law enforcement and the military encodes them as a force opposed to the counterculture; describing their mission as being to “search out and destroy” evoked for many critics and audiences the real-life evening news coverage of American “search and destroy” missions in Vietnam, pre-recorded and heavily sanitized. Now, with the cameras off, the posse’s methods are more frankly depicted. Once again, the use of 35mm black-and-white film and handheld camera evokes the sense that the spectator is watching a news report about the war, an association facilitated further by the inclusion of a helicopter flying overhead as the scene begins; though its inclusion was another happy accident, the helicopter was the vehicle singularly associated with the Vietnam War.⁶⁷ The sound of the helicopter’s propellers blends with what sounds like official communications via radio. An aerial shot from the helicopter surveys a long line of figures moving below; at first they appear to be zombies, but a match cut to a long frontal shot of the figures reveals they are armed posse members. Several quick shots of posse methodically shooting the outnumbered, slow moving, aimlessly wandering zombies once again facilitates identification with the dead and disrupts spectator identification with the living.

Along with the Vietnam War, the film’s final sequences also strongly imply parallels to the Civil Rights Movement. Hearing the posse outside, Ben emerges from the cellar. Shots of police opening the cages of their police dogs elicited for many critics and audiences footage of police confrontations with Civil Rights Movement protestors in the South, and a shot analysis potentially reveals why. The shots’ individual composition—including the directional positions of figures within each—becomes key (fig. 12). In a medium shot Ben looks towards the bottom right of the frame (shot 1). The camera cuts to a close shot of a police dog facing the bottom *left* of the frame, directing its gaze and, in fact, lunging at, what would be the same space that Ben occupies (shot 2). Shots 3 and 4 work the same way, only with the perspectives reversed, suggesting that Ben—and the spectator—is confronted from all sides. A cut to a long shot (shot 5) of Chief McClellan and several police officers facing and pointing guns toward the top right of the frame is followed by a close-up of Ben, his head tilting up, looking toward the upper left of the frame (shot 6). As more members of the posse amass (shot 7), Ben reacts (shot 8): in the *histoire* register, he is reacting to hearing the posse outside, but his expression can register other ways and it is left ambiguous in the *discours* register. The same pattern of matching pairs of shots with similar compositional remains: one long shot (shot 9) following another (shot 10), each with the figures’ backs to the camera, the posse hunting down

Figure 12. The first section of the film's penultimate sequence. Along with the strong evocations of the Civil Rights Movement (the police dogs and officers drawing their weapons in shots 2 and 5) and the War in Vietnam (the sounds of a helicopter and radio carry over into the sequence), shot compositions and syntax combine to suggest a literal confrontation between Ben and the posse.

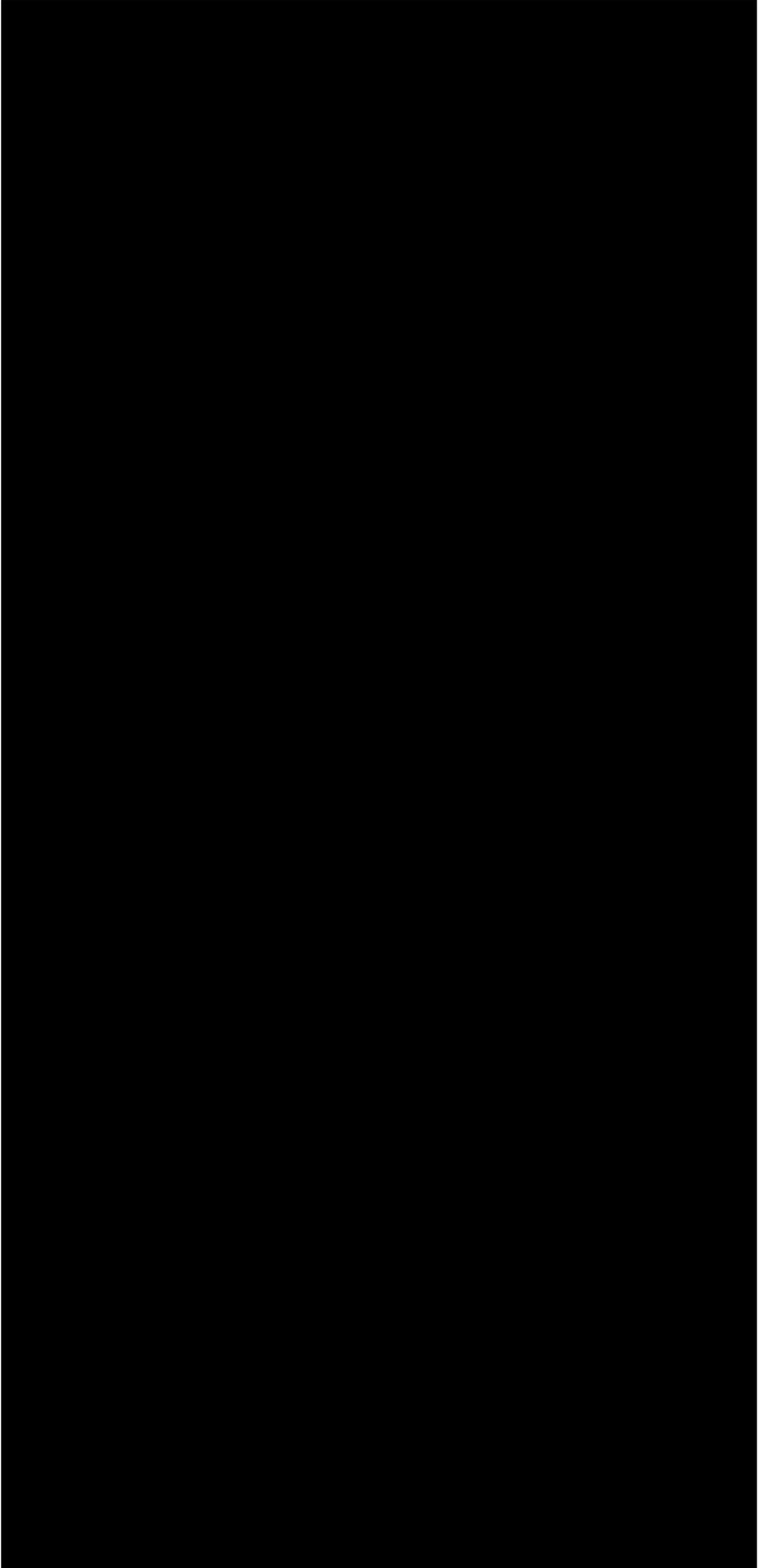


zombies with their search-and-destroy ethos (shot 9) and Ben unbarring the door, heading unwittingly to his demise (shot 10). Throughout the sequence, the spectator's point-of-view is framed—lined up by the rendering of perspective—and then mobilized to create a narrative space and syntax of literal confrontation.

That confrontation continues in the following sequence (fig. 13), with two more long shots of the posse and Ben, both now facing the camera (shots 1 and 2). The posse is heading towards the farmhouse, looking toward the *right* of the frame, and Ben, emerging from the cellar, is heading toward them, looking to the *left* of the frame. A medium to three-quarters shot of the posse (shot 3) and a medium to close-up shot of Ben (shot 4) follows the same logic. Vince (production director Vince Survinski) warns McClellan that he heard a noise coming from the house. The camera then cuts to a shot of the window through which Ben is looking, as if it is a point-of-view shot from the perspective of the posse (shot 5), followed by a much tighter close-up of Ben in profile, suggesting that the posse can see him (shot 6). As Vince aims his rifle, McClellan instructs him to “Hit him in the head, right between the eyes” (shot 7). The camera cuts to a violent reaction shot as the bullet hits Ben in the forehead (shot 8) and he is thrown backwards (shot 9).

The sequence is all the more jarring by just how quickly and unceremoniously Ben falls to the floor, already dead; Romero's rapid fire editing results in Ben's reaction shot barely registering before Romero cuts again to Ben's limp body. His death is not romanticized as it would have been in dominant cinema—no slow motion replay, no final words. McClellan congratulates Vince and then points the spectator to the next, final sequence and its confrontational allusions to real horror, saying of Ben: “Okay, he's dead. Let's go get 'im. That's another one for the fire.” The death registers in *discours* as real, calling forth evocations of assassinations and racial violence. Romero goes so far as to say that “to some extent, people latched on to the film” because Ben's death immediately recalled for audiences Dr. King's recent assassination (qtd. in Axmaker). While the casting of Jones was due to his talent, he and the filmmakers saw the potential for creating a powerful commentary and collaborated to confront the spectator with these images. It was Jones, actually, who convinced Romero that Ben should be shot by the posse, rather than rescued: “I convinced George that the black community would rather see me dead than saved, after all that had gone wrong...” (qtd. in Ferrante 16). Jones was right: Russ Streiner watched the film opening night with a predominantly black audience and when the film ended he heard such comments as, “Well, you know, they had to kill him off!” and “Whitey had to get him anyway” (qtd. in Surmacz 18).

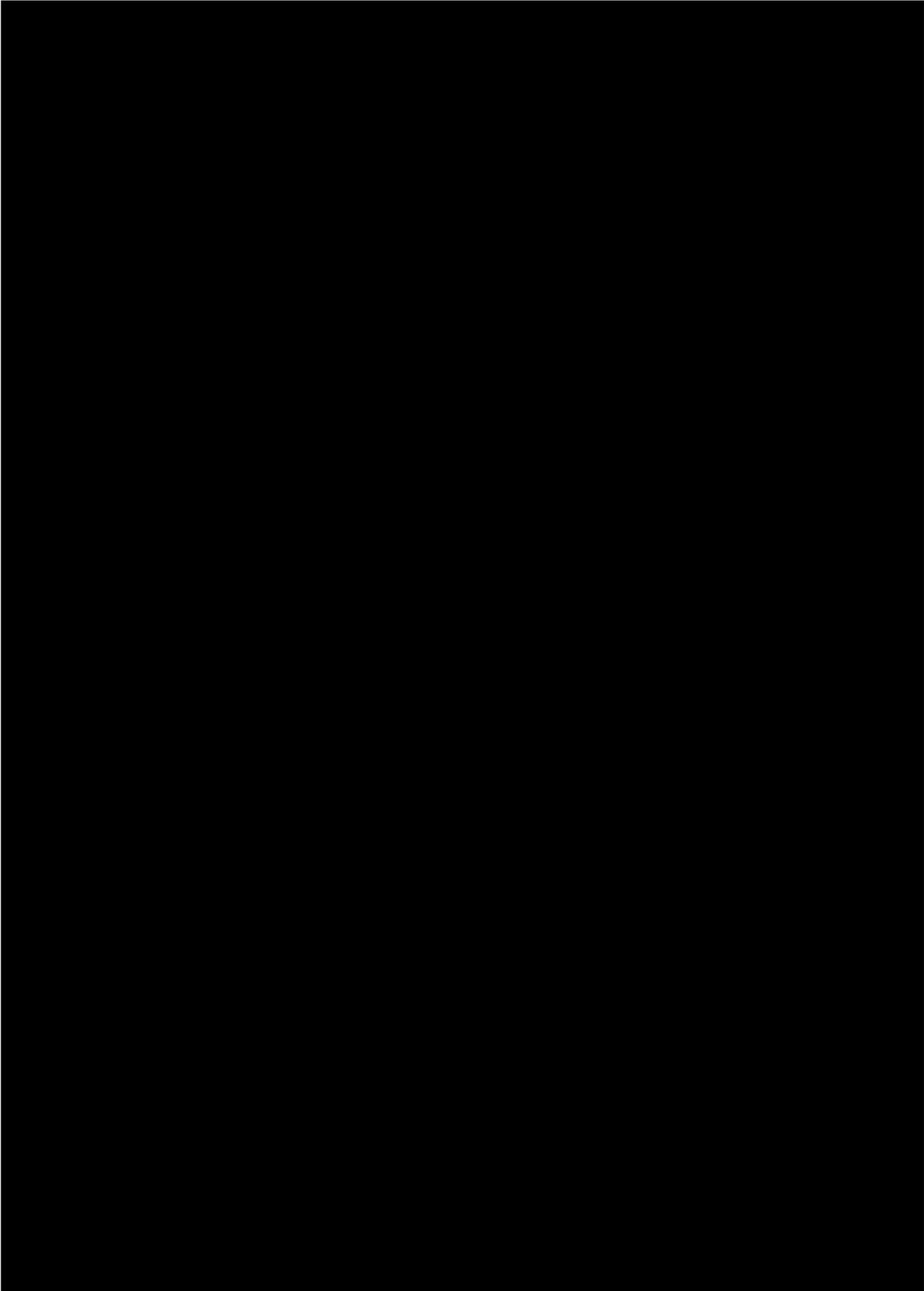
Figure 13. The confrontational syntax carries over to the second section of the film's penultimate sequence. Ben's death is made all the more shocking by how quickly and unceremoniously it occurs. As Ben is killed, his race would be salient for many interpretive communities in the register of *discours*, but given that the spectator has ostensibly identified with him as the film's hero, his death is powerful in the *histoire* register, as well.



The final sequence comprises still images that together form a dialectical montage (fig. 14). We are confronted first with Ben's body (shot 1), then a posse member who has come to retrieve it (shot 2), and then a close-up of his means for doing so: a metal hook (shot 3). Here I am reminded of Roland Barthes's discussion of *studium* and *punctum* in *Camera Lucida*. *Studium* refers to the "average affect" and "human interest" of a photograph, including, even, any meaning or context derived from "political testimony" or "historical scenes" (26). *Punctum* refers to that element in certain photographs in which some aspect—a single detail—"rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow" (26). The *studium*, Barthes asserts, is apparent for all to see—it reveals "the intentions which establish and animate" the photographer (28). As a viewer, I can decode the stills' meaning and glean the filmmakers' intentions: the stills, Russo explains, were "printed through cheesecloth" to code them as news photographs (qtd. in Kane 70). Here again is an appeal to *vérité*, an effort to render the horror *real*. However, the element that stands out for me—the *punctum*—is the detail of the *hook*. *Punctum* is a Latin word derived from the Greek *traûma*, "to wound" or "to pierce," and as the shots progress from a close-up (shot 4) to a medium shot (shot 5) and then to an extreme close-up (shot 6), it is as if the hook disappears and has only one place to go. It pierces Ben's body, and by extension, the spectator's. Anxieties regarding bodily integrity return in shots 7-9, which are rendered as point-of-view shots from Ben's perspective, hooks surrounding him. These associations, now apparent, long evaded me, which makes sense, as Barthes asserts that while the *studium* is ordered, comprehensible—its meaning is open for decoding—the *punctum* remains ineffable: "The incapacity to name," Barthes contends, "is a good symptom of disturbance" (51).

While Romero claims that the final few sequences were deliberately planned out and coded consciously, Russo insists that this sequence was also done out of expediency—it was "an effective ending" that involved little additional shooting (qtd. in Kane 70). Even if the latter account is closer to the truth, Barthes notes that the "pricks" and "bruises" of the *punctum* are often the result of an "accident" (27). The *punctum*, though it may be "lightening-like," also has "a power of expansion," one that "is often metonymic" (45). Make-up artist Tom Savini—who had been hired to work on *Night* before being drafted for the war—recalls how soldiers would use radio wire to lift and drag corpses rather than use their bare hands, and seeing the shots of the posse dragging Ben with the hooks evoked those experiences (*American*). One wonders for how many other returning veterans the hook was coded metonymically. The

Figure 14: The film's unrelenting final sequence, rendered in still shots.



war is evoked, in fact, as the sequence continues: the sounds of the helicopter and the short-range radio both return as other posse members with hooks appear and they Ben's body on a pile of wood to be burned, alongside the first zombie encountered in the graveyard (shots 10-12).

What is most striking about Ben and the zombie is not how different they appear, but rather how similar. Each shot of the two side by side acts as a kind of montage within the frame, not altogether dissimilar from Abel Gance's combination of the triptych screens he developed as part of Polyvision, as in his epic, *Napoléon* (1927). The spectator is left to make sense of the associations between the two—hero and monster, thesis and antithesis—the dialectic of the two potentially working to reinforce metaphorical revolution on the one hand and, on the other, real life revolution in the streets outside the theater. Just as the spectator is able to synthesize the two, however, the camera cuts to shots of the fire being lit (shots 13 and 14) and, in a return to the moving image, McClelland lights the fire and it burns wildly (shot 15). The shots, ultimately, leave the spectator only with one last apocalyptic vision.

Night's filmic text and the intertextual associations it evokes connect, too, with the mode of reception by the very fact that, for most, Ben is the hero and central figure of the film, yet as Ebert says in his review, "Even the hero gets killed." *Psycho* seemed so revolutionary, in part, because the protagonist—played by an established star with whom the audience has so strongly identified—dies halfway through, leaving the spectator to identify with other characters. In the end, *Night* leaves us no one. Image Ten refused to make the ending "happier" (with Ben and Barbara both living, and the latter potentially saving the former) when in talks with AIP, thus costing them a much more promising distribution deal than what they were able to arrange with eventual distributor Walter Reade. As Romero explains, it was the "anger" at the failure of the counterculture revolution that "created those final scenes" (qtd. in Kane 76). "If we'd ended it any other way," he adds, "it would have been hard for us to hold our heads up" (ibid). For Romero, *Night* ultimately is about "Not restoring order. That is the most important thing" (qtd. in Axmaker). The film ends in *histoire*, but there is no closure in *discours*: the film confronts the spectator with the fact that that horror continues in the real world.

V. The 1960s through a Glass Darkly: The Windows of *The Last House on the Left*

Sociohistorical context

The end of the 1960s was punctuated by more horror. As Romero laments, “Nothing had changed. If anything, things had gotten worse” (*American*). The assassinations of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy had further traumatized the nation. The election of Richard M. Nixon in 1968 exposed anew deep-seated political divides, including what Nixon referred to during his campaign as a “silent majority” that was angered by protests and social upheaval, and fearful of the rise of crime and drug culture, a suggestion supported, in part, by continued “white flight”—the migration of middle class white populations out of urban centers—and polls such as Harris’s from 1971 that showed that three-quarters of Americans agreed that “law and order had broken down in the country.”⁶⁸ A year after Nixon’s election, Altamont and the Manson Family murders seemed to speak to those very fears, while signaling for many the end of the promise of the 1960s. The tragedy at Kent State in 1970 confirmed that sense of loss.

Americans tuning in to the nightly news continued to be shocked by images of the violence in Vietnam, including General Nguyen Ngoc Loan’s execution of a Viet Cong prisoner in the streets of Saigon in 1968 and journalist Seymour Hersh’s revelatory report in 1969 about the mass murder of an entire village of civilians—mostly women and children—by American soldiers at My Lai the previous year. The soldiers’ claims that they were “just following orders”⁶⁹ were echoed in the central finding of Stanford prison experiment conducted in August 1971: “Good people can be induced, seduced, and initiated into behaving in evil ways.”⁷⁰ That same year Daniel Ellsberg leaked the “Pentagon Papers,” which proved definitively that the U.S. government had been lying to the American public about the war: about its intentions in Vietnam, about the war’s conduct, and about its progress.⁷¹ These were the contours of a seismic shift, the real life horrors and anxieties that influenced the making of *Last House on the Left*.

Ideological Categorization

For Wes Craven, the end of the 1960s proved to be almost incomprehensible. Craven remarks how the “entire nation was just repeatedly traumatized,” a repetition that “seemed to have no end” and which seemed to leave the country “completely at the mercy of this drunken fate” (*American*). Craven was, like Romero, a leftist, though arguably more politically committed. A former humanities professor, he has described how his campus was, like most, the site of counterculture protest (Prokopy). Soon Craven

himself embraced “the Woodstock version of the way things were” and left academe for filmmaking (Greenberg). Craven moved to New York where he lived in a communal apartment on the Lower East Side, made up, he recalls, of “musicians, drug dealers, Ph.D. candidates and anthropologists” (qtd. in Anderson). Wood recounts how at a director symposium at the 1979 Toronto Film festival, Craven described feeling a responsibility to make politically progressive films (*Hollywood* 129). Like Romero, he had increasingly grown disillusioned with the failures of the counterculture and outraged at the atrocities being committed in Vietnam. He wanted to make a film that addressed those concerns, but the best job offer he and friend Sean Cunningham received was to make “some drive-in fodder, a no-holds-barred horror movie” (Craven, qtd. in Robb 21). Hallmark Releasing Corporation, “a group of theater owners in the Boston area who owned outdoor theaters,” made the offer, Craven explains, as they “were in the habit of commissioning their own movies to run on the second bill” (qtd. in Anderson).

Craven and Cunningham took the offer, and Craven set out to adapt Ingmar Bergman’s *The Virgin Spring* (1960) for early 1970s America. Bergman’s film was itself an adaptation of a medieval Swedish ballad about a father’s merciless revenge on two herders who have raped and murdered his daughter and then unknowingly seek shelter in his home. Craven had studied Bergman’s use of the ballad while teaching college, and he describes the story as being “so simple and so pure and so powerful, and not only is it about delicious irony, it turns out to be about people who are straight and proper and descend into their own sort of darkness. I just found that very interesting at the time of Vietnam. The humanities professor in me saw the parallel” (ibid). Craven decided that his adaptation would be “a shout of rage against the Vietnam War” (Greenberg).⁷² It would address “sexual liberation and duplicity of the government and everything else” important in the era (Craven and Cunningham). It was, Craven notes, “a protest film... made during a time of protest” (qtd. in Robb 25). In less than two weeks, he had written the script (Schneider 79-80). With Cunningham producing, filming began in the fall of 1971.⁷³

Modes of Production and Distribution

As with *Night*, the cast was mostly made up of novices. Both films feature only two experienced actors, and for *Last House* it is Gaylord St. James and Cynthia Carr, who play John and Estelle Collingwood. *Night* also featured an aspiring musician, and in *Last House* Julliard-trained musician David Hess plays Krug Stillo, the head of the “Stillo Family,” the antagonists in *Last House*. Hess and Fred

Lincoln (Weasel) stayed in character throughout filming to bring menace to their scenes (Craven and Cunningham). Jeramie Rain (Sadie) and Marc Sheffler (Junior) bring hints of needed ambivalence to their roles as the other two antagonists. Sandra Cassel (Mari) and Lucy Grantham (Phyllis) round out the main cast and give performances that are typical of its more inexperienced members.⁷⁴ Many critics derided the acting as “amateurish”; I would agree with journalist Phil Hardy, who describes the performances as “unmannered” and with a “lack of posturing,” which helps facilitate the sense of the *vérité* Craven sought.

As with *Night*, the crew for *Last House* was largely inexperienced in feature filmmaking, yet that led to impressive innovation. For example, the director of photography, Vic Hurwitz, modified a standard 16 mm camera to make it a Super 16 mm, enlarging the frame by some forty percent (Schneider 84). The result was a more polished film than had been anticipated (Szulkin 48). The end results were also largely credited to Craven’s efforts during post-production. Shooting took only four weeks, but like Romero, Craven spent several months editing the film (Schneider 80). Robb notes that the film’s original budget was only \$45,000, and Hallmark eventually gave Craven another \$50,000 for post-production. Craven had learned documentary filmmaking from the Academy Award-winning director and musician Harry Chapin (Schneider 84).⁷⁵ Craven’s background proved essential, as “It was Craven’s professional editing skills that saved the film from disaster” (Robb 30), thus truly establishing him as the film’s *auteur*.

Modes of Exhibition and Reception

Test screenings for *Last House* began at two drive-in theaters in rural Massachusetts on July 11, 1972 (Schneider 80). David Szulkin explain that Hallmark then proceeded with a regional distribution strategy, beginning with two theaters near Hartford, Connecticut.⁷⁶ *Night* benefitted from being released between the end of the production code and the advent of the MPAA, and *Last House* has a similar pedigree: Craven has said that the film avoided an X rating because Cunningham, exasperated by the MPAA’s refusal to grant the film an R rating without further cuts, simply took the R rating off another film’s negative and spliced it in (“MPAA” 36). As a result, the older, middle class audiences at early screenings were not aware of the film’s graphic content. As Schneider explains, they “were furious, often demanding that *Last House* be removed from theaters and their owners subjected to prosecution” (80). At one early screening a large crowd of angry viewers gathered in the theater’s parking lot afterwards. As described by an editorial in the *Hartford Courant* entitled “Film Ratings’ Clarity Fogged by Murky

Meaning,” viewers were “petition-bound to stop the manager from showing the movie,” and they “thought it should have had an ‘X’ [rating],” as had the MPAA.⁷⁷ The editorial, in turn, describes *Last House* as a “horrible, ‘sick’ film” filled with “lingering gore, senseless cruelty, sadism, and fetishism.”

The opinion was not atypical. Screenings of *Last House* usually were heavily edited, and, as with *Night*, early reviews were mostly negative.⁷⁸ Roger Ebert, however, had a strong influence, once again: in his three-and-a-half star review for *The Chicago Sun-Times*, he called the film “a tough, bitter little sleeper of a movie that's about four times as good as you'd expect” with “a powerful narrative, told so directly and strongly that the audience (mostly in the mood for just another good old exploitation film) was rocked back on its psychic heels.” Publicity for the film began to include quotations from Ebert’s review. It turned out to be a key endorsement, as Ebert was one of the only critics aside from Robin Wood to champion *Last House* early on. At the *Chicago Tribune*, Gene Siskel admonished, “I am surprised any theater owner would want to make a living by playing it. Theater owners who do not control themselves invite others to do so.” When the film arrived in New York in December 1972, it was met by a scathing rebuke by Howard Thompson in *The New York Times*, who referred to it as “sickening tripe” featuring “inept actors” fit only for those “interested in paying to see repulsive people in human agony.”

Perhaps *because* of the negative criticism directed at its graphic content, the film continued to do well. “What we expected,” Craven recalls, “was that the film would play at [Hallmark’s] theaters for that summer maybe and then disappear. But it caused such a sensation that Sam Arkoff heard about it and did a full national distribution” (qtd. in Anderson). Arkoff’s AIP, which had turned down *Night* because of its bleak ending, would bring the equally bleak and even more graphic *Last House* to the nation. *Last House* drew large crowds both at drive-in and theaters, but its reception, in fact, reveals a marked divide with regards to audience demographics: it was one of the first B-grade exploitation films to attract a large middle class audience. They often *hated* the film, yet kept returning, titillated by the uproar that followed the film from city to city. By contrast, younger viewers found it “disturbing, but highly entertaining” (Schneider 88). Like *Night*, *Last House* became a *succès de scandale*.

The contrasting demographics are perhaps not surprising given the film’s diverging marketing. Hallmark responded to the *Courant* editorial with an open letter that, as Lowenstein explains, “acknowledged (and perhaps exaggerated) the public hostility toward the film while supporting the

management's decision to continue" screening it (139). Exaggeration or not, Hallmark certainly still took advantage of the film's notoriety. They started including large sections of the letter into the marketing for the film, co-opting its negative reception. A typical advert ran in the *Milwaukee Sentinel's* "Milwaukee at Night" section on October 27, 1972 (fig. 15). It begins with the headline "*Last House on the Left: Can a Movie Go Too Far?*" The advert claims, "Many people who have gone to see the movie... and many public officials contacted by outraged moviegoers believe the answer is Yes!" It then ties the filmic violence to real life horrors: "The movie makes a plea for an end to all the senseless violence and inhuman cruelty that has become so much a part of the times in which we live. We don't think any movie can go too far in making this message heard and felt!" The message would not have been lost on the reader: the banner headline on the *Sentinel's* front page that day read, "U.S. Says Peace Agreement Just One Session Away" with a close-up photograph of National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger discussing the Vietnam War immediately below (fig. 16). The declaration proved to be horribly misguided.

The advert's tying of *Last House* to real horror perhaps does not end there. Lowenstein discusses at length what he finds to be remarkable resemblances between the still used in the advert and John Filo's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph "Kent State—Girl Screaming over Dead Body," taken on May 4, 1970 in the aftermath of Ohio National Guardsmen firing on students protesting the Cambodia Incursion, killing four students and wounding nine others (fig. 17). Lowenstein finds that the "ad's evocation of Kent State suggests the film's ability" to elicit real life anxieties, including the "disintegration of the New Left, as the antiwar movement came up against the shattering realizations that not only was President Nixon willing to escalate the Vietnam War by invading Cambodia, but that at home"—quoting Todd Gitlin—"the government was willing to shoot you" (115). Lowenstein also points to its "confusing solicitation of both the bourgeoisie ('parents who have taken their daughters to see the film') and the counterculture ('Warning! Not recommended for Persons Over 30!')" and asserts that both groups will be "encouraged to recognize themselves as implicated" in the advert's allusion to Kent State (126).

Figure 15. Below: A provocative ad for *Last House on the Left* featuring an image from the film (misidentified as the character Mari—it is actually Phyllis). It begins with the headline “*Last House on the Left: Can a Movie Go Too Far?*” The advert claims, “Many people who have gone to see the movie... and many public officials contacted by outraged moviegoers believe the answer is Yes!” It then ties the filmic violence to real life horrors: “The movie makes a plea for an end to all the senseless violence and inhuman cruelty that has become so much a part of the times in which we live. We don’t think any movie can go too far in making this message heard and felt!” The advert goes on to declare, “This fact is already borne out by the number of parents who have taken their daughters to see the film,” yet it includes a “Warning” that the film is “Not recommended for Persons over 30!,” thus creating at least two appeals to differing audience demographics.

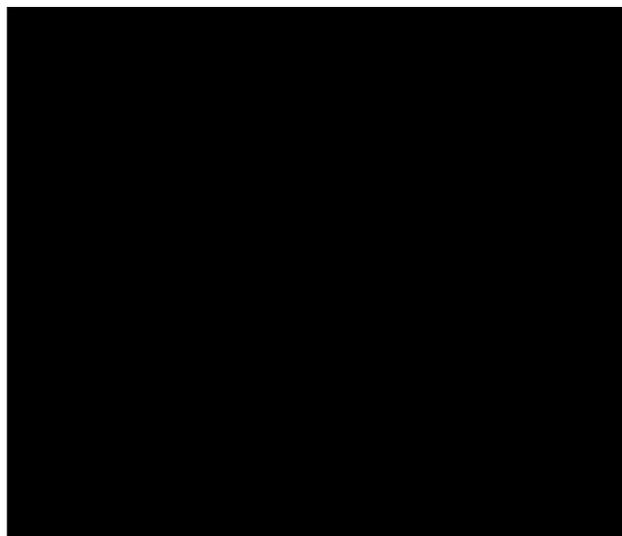
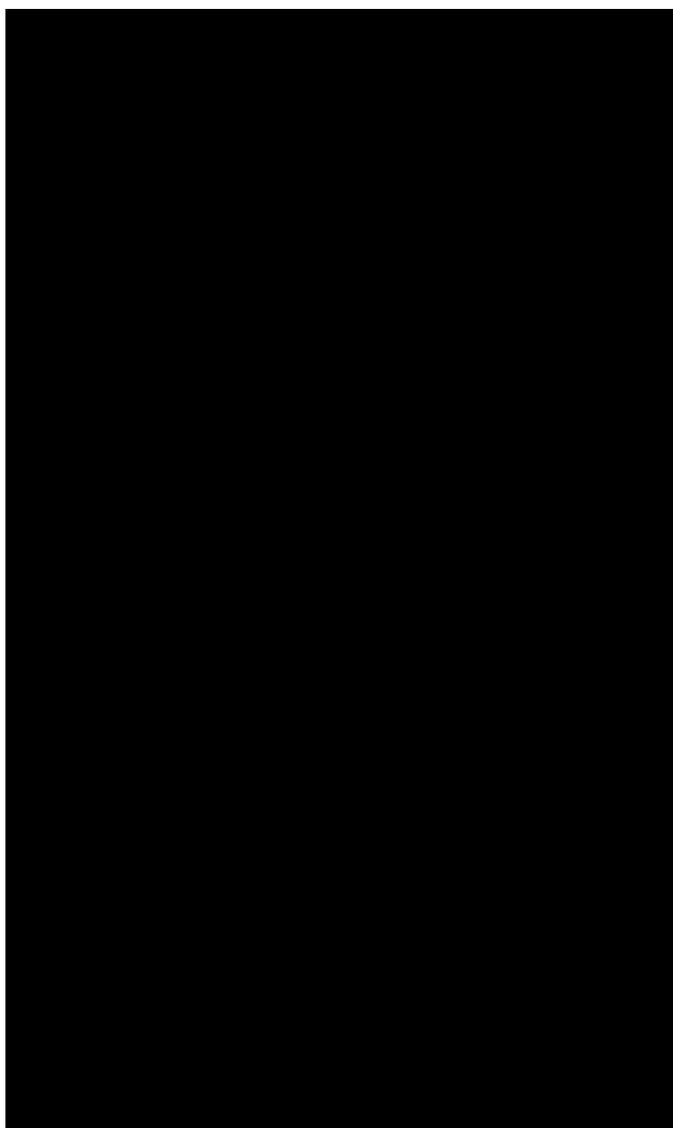


Figure 16. Above: A banner headline about the Paris Peace Accords to end the Vietnam War appeared “above the fold” along with a large close-up photograph of Henry Kissinger, who was in charge of negotiations for the United States, on the front page of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* on October 27, 1972, the same day as the advert for *Last House on the Left* appeared within the *Milwaukee Tonight* section, thus creating a strong paratextual association between the advert’s claims regarding real life violence and the war. The headline proved terribly wrong, as well: Operation Linebacker II, a heavy bombing campaign of North Vietnamese positions, began that December.

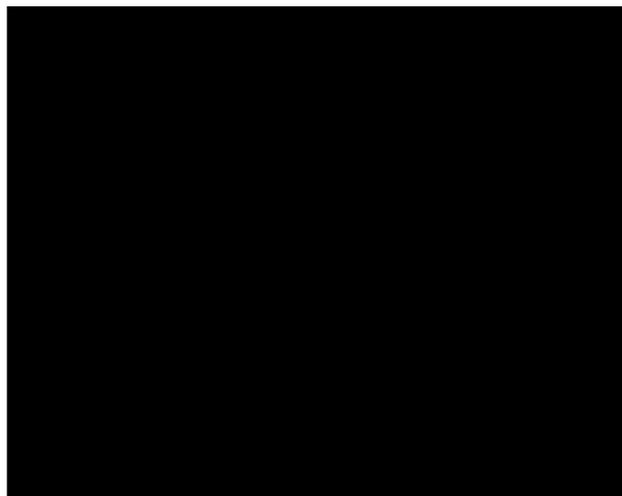


Figure 17. Scholar Adam Lowenstein points to a remarkable similarity between the still from *The Last House on the Left* used in the advert for the film (left) and John Filo’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph *Kent State—Girl Screaming over Dead Body*, (above) thus suggesting another paratextual association between the film and contemporaneous discourses.

The marketing worked. Made for \$90,000, it grossed just over \$3 million.⁷⁹ For its mode of exhibition to be largely at drive-ins is key to measuring its relative success, as well, as it means the film was often part of a double feature in which audiences were charged a flat rate per car and the theaters themselves would only be opened seasonally. Still, when *Variety* published its annual list of the top-grossing films of 1973, *Last House* managed to reach #3—close to eighteen months after its first release (Schneider 82). It went on to be “continually revived at drive-ins, college campuses, and second-run houses throughout the 1970s, and even into the following decade” (Szulkin 150). Film archivist David Beach explains *Last House*’s enduring appeal during that time: “Going to see films like *Last House on the Left*... at the drive-in was like a rite of passage for a whole generation of teenagers... *Last House* was the horror movie to see back in the ‘70s; if you didn’t see it one summer, it came back the next summer” (qtd. in Szulkin 151). As had been the case with *Night*, going to see *Last House* became an event.

Textual Elements

Publicity for *Last House* included the tagline “To avoid fainting, keep repeating to yourself: ‘It’s only a movie....’” The line works paratextually to call the spectator’s attention to the film’s opening claim: “The events you are about to witness are true. Names and locations have been changed to protect those individuals still living.” In the DVD commentary that Craven and Cunningham recorded together for the 2002 MGM DVD reissue, Craven acknowledges it was “a complete lie,” but goes on to point out that “Many people have believed it over the years.” While untrue, that *appeal* to truth speaks to Craven’s larger project: like Romero, he wanted to invest his film with a sense of *vérité* in order to confront the spectator. He and Cunningham watched newsreel footage of the Vietnam War on television every evening while planning *Last House* (Robb 24). Both found that it was “the most powerful footage” that they were seeing and that they wanted to adopt a documentary style; they also knew, however, that the “worst was being censored” (qtd. in Szulkin 15). The release of the Pentagon Papers had confirmed as much. Craven, like Romero, had already suspected that the government was “routinely... lying through its teeth” about the war, and that “destabilization of trust of government... was very powerful” (qtd. in Prokopy). Like *Night*, Vietnam lurks as a structuring absence in *Last House*’s violent excess.⁸⁰ In addition to My Lai, footage of Vietnamese children fleeing an errant attack on their village had just been released that June (fig. 18), and Craven recalls how “that was kind of my coming of age to realizing that Americans weren’t always the

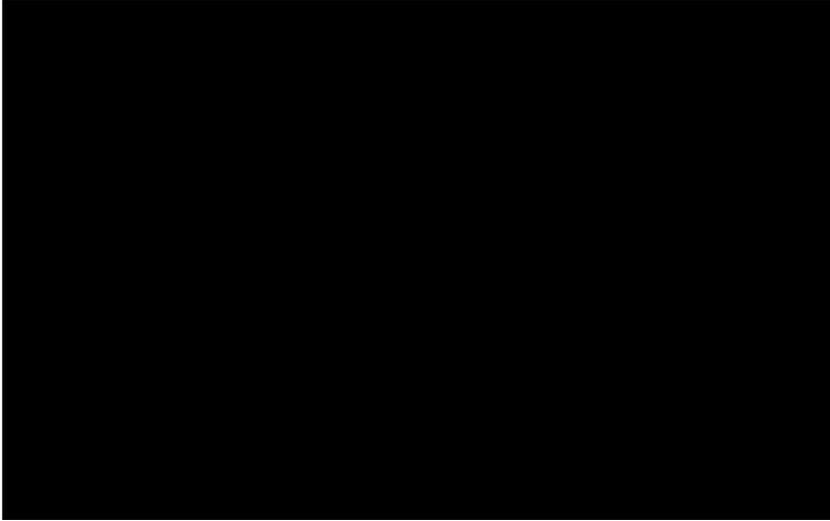


Figure 18. Nick Ut's powerful photograph *Terror of War* (June 8, 1972), featuring a naked nine-year-old Phan Thị Kim Phúc and other children fleeing an errant napalm strike on their village of Trảng Bàng, Craven credits video footage of the same incident for his realization that Americans "weren't always the good guys" (*American*).

good guys and things that *we* could do could be horrendous" (*American*). The narrative of the war that Americans had chosen to believe was that, as Craven describes, "[the North Vietnamese] were the bad guys and we'd go in like *Gunsmoke*... and bang, they'd be dead" (qtd. in Szulkin 16). Craven decided that his film would "not play by the rules that had been established for handling violence," in which violence is limited to the "bad guys," and it is "clean and quick" as it had been in dominant cinema (ibid). In *Last House*, Craven adds, "just when you thought the shot would cut away, it didn't" (ibid 15).

Not cutting away from the violence was crucial to Craven's project, and in *Last House* a confrontation with the reality of violence is further facilitated by the use of documentary techniques.⁸¹ Like Romero, Craven and Hurwitz both already had backgrounds in documentary filmmaking, and the two of them went about approximating a *vérité* style (Prokopy). That goal was first facilitated by shooting on location. Scenes at the Collingwood home were shot at Cunningham's mother's home and a rented house in Westport, Connecticut. The scenes in the woods were shot at an off-limits reservoir in Westport and the city scenes were shot on location in New York; Craven has referred to *Last House* as "guerilla filmmaking" because the crew never secured permits for filming (Szulkin 85). Craven recalls how he and Hurwitz would stage scenes in sequence and film them "from three or four different angles" and then they would "cut it together just like a documentary" (ibid 48). They were able to shoot almost exclusively with a handheld camera "like newsreel footage" (qtd. in Prokopy). For especially violent sequences Craven would switch to a "high-speed film [he had] used before in documentaries. The darks tend to cloud up and the whites burn out. You get a terrible WWII super-grainy footage, almost like those Auschwitz films which were



Figure 19. Craven often situates characters, props, and other elements within the frame in a way that highlights their juxtaposition. Left: The monstrous Krug rapes the innocent Mari—coded as opposing sides of the counterculture—during the film’s infamous rape scene. Right: Sadie and Krug, having adopted middle class personas while staying with the Collingwoods, are juxtaposed with a peace poster in Mari’s room.

embedded in my memory as a kid” (Craven “MPAA” 36). Unlike the black-and-white news broadcasts *Night* evoked, by 1972 the nightly news was broadcast in color by all three major networks, so Craven’s singling out the “super-grainy” quality to evoke a sense of *vérité* is key. There is rarely the pleasure that Hayward ascribes to fear’s role in the *mise-en-scène* of desire or any negation or relief offered by cutting away. The “real purpose,” of *Last House*, as Craven describes, was “to show violence the way we thought it really was, rather than the way it was typically depicted in films” (qtd. in Robb 25).

Just as Romero compliments his use of documentary techniques with “cubist” editing and “anti-establishing” shots to help him achieve desired effects, Craven employs noteworthy formal techniques to the same end. In Craven’s case, I find that he uses a kind of dialectic juxtaposition that works in four ways. The first is through *mise-en-scène*, similar to Romero’s composition of the shot of the bodies of Ben and the first zombie about to be burned at the end of *Night*. For example, during a sequence in which Krug rapes Mari—infamous for its depicted brutality—there is a shot of the monstrous Krug slobbering on the innocent Mari’s face. They are coded, arguably, from early on in the film as opposite sides of the counterculture—a juxtaposition that is reinforced later in Mari’s room, with Krug and Sadie directly juxtaposed with a peace poster (fig. 19). Craven often situates characters, props, and other elements within the frame in a way that similarly highlights their juxtaposition.

Craven achieves a similar juxtaposition by way of parallel editing. In a variation on dialectic montage, Craven will often crosscut between a sequence involving one group of coded characters and then another sequence featuring another group that is coded antithetically. For example, towards the beginning of the film Craven crosscuts between Phyllis and Mari driving to see a band called Bloodlust and the

Stillos, the implication being that Phyllis and Mari find what they were looking for, literal bloodlust, when their “thesis,” as it were—Mari and Phyllis are coded as being part of the “love generation”—collides with its “antithesis”, the Stillos, coded as the dark side of the counterculture. The synthesis that emerges from that collision speaks to what Craven saw in American culture in the aftermath of the counterculture’s demise: Americans had condoned—even embraced—violence when it was “over there” in Vietnam, but horrors like Kent State had brought it home.

A third method of dialectical juxtaposition involves the use of contrapuntal music. In *Unheard Melodies*, Claudia Gorbman describes how in dominant cinema a film’s score is typically subordinated to the film’s other elements. The score is in service of the drama—it is to facilitate viewers’ emotional investments in the narrative and to otherwise remain unnoticed, a phenomenon Gorbman refers to as “inaudibility.” In *Last House*, however, the score often disrupts the spectator’s immersion in the cinematic text and calls attention to itself. For example, “Baddies Theme (Sadie and Krug)” plays while the Stillos are making their escape after sexually assaulting Phyllis and kidnapping both her and Mari. The country ballad features a banjo, piano, and kazoo, and it is contrapuntal both in terms of genre and lyrics, which recount the Stillos’ crimes as if they were the misadventures of a romping comedy: “Weasel and Junior, Sadie and Krug/Out for the day with the Collingwood brood/Out for the day for some fresh air and sun/Let’s have some fun with those two lovely children and off them as soon as we’re done!” Hess composed the film’s score in collaboration with Craven and Cunningham during the film’s production, and his ethos, he asserts, was that, “music in movies should be a counterpoint to whatever is going on up on the screen” (qtd. in Szulkin 119). This disruption of the seamlessness between narrative and score reaffirms the spectator’s role as the constituting subject, allowing for a critical engagement once again.

Related to *Last House*’s contrapuntal music is the regular use of incongruent humor, a frequent source of critical derision.⁸² Even Ebert, in his otherwise positive review, remarks that there are “some silly scenes involving a couple of dumb cops, who overact and seriously affect the plot’s credibility.” The overacting, I find, is purposeful, in service of slapstick and an exaggeration of their ineptitude, as during all but the final sequence their role largely *is* to disrupt the narration. They serve, arguably, the same role as the scientists and military general serve in *Night*: to expose the impotence and unreliability of authority, an echo of the “destabilization of trust” in the government that Craven had found to be so jarring. Most critical

assessments also focus solely on the bumbling police officers and ignore the humor associated with the Stillos. For example, having just kidnapped Mari and Phyllis, the Stillos are making their way to Canada when their car breaks down. What should be a tense moment in which the spectator wishes for Mari and Phyllis's escape is disrupted when, pulling out the engine's measuring dipstick, Junior deadpans, "I think I found the problem. I just pulled this thing and it's all covered with oil." Such incongruent humor facilitates spectator identification with the Stillos, a key element in Craven's project.

Mode of Address

While the narrative and construction of characters facilitate identification in the mode of *histoire*, the four methods of dialectical juxtaposition work alongside the appeals to *vérité* in the mode of *discours* to facilitate a constant realigning of spectator identification. The film, at various points, strategically facilitates identification with three different groups: Estelle and John Collingwood, 2) their daughter Mari and her friend Phyllis Stone, and 3) the Stillos. Each group is coded to elicit sociohistorical contexts that render it in opposition to the others in some way, thereby constructing an elaborate system of identifications and real world associations. Incongruities exist *within* each group, as well, which begin to blur boundaries between it and the other two. As the groups connect and collide as the narrative progresses, their confrontations disrupt the very binaries that the four methods of juxtapositions highlight.

Last House opens with a suggestive incongruity that begins to introduce the film's complex system of identifications. A mail carrier, an older man wearing a cowboy hat whom Tony Williams aptly describes as "Norman Rockwellesque" (138)—pulls up alongside the Collingwoods' home and begins to provide a bit of exposition by talking to the family dog that has run down to greet him. Remarking on how many birthday cards Mari has received, he reasons that it makes sense for Mari to be so popular since, "she is the prettiest *piece* I've ever seen" (emphasis mine). I have yet to encounter any account that makes note of the comment's potentially vulgar connotation. Those commentaries that mention it at all only note how congenial the mail carrier is, so perhaps the comment only registers—as scholar John Kenneth Muir's paraphrases it—as "there is not a more lovely girl in the whole country..." (40). While the vulgar connotation would be subtle, however, it would also seem deliberate: Craven intercuts the shots of the mail carrier with shots of Mari showering and admiring herself in the mirror while nude. The incongruity of the

mail carrier's potentially salacious comment with his congenial appearance nods to the disruptions of spectator address to come.

In the *histoire* register Mari's parents, Estelle and John are characterized as affable, loving middle class parents. John is a doctor while Estelle, it is implied, is a homemaker. They engage in playful dialogue with each other and with Mari, particularly as they negotiate typical parent-child differences (e.g. music, fashion). Those differences, however, can also be read as coded in the *discours* register.⁸³ The differences between Mari and her parents are explicitly stated in terms of Mari belonging to—and John and Estelle disapproving of—the counterculture. To celebrate her seventeenth birthday Mari is going to the city to attend a shock rock concert by a band called Bloodlust; of the band's for on-stage theatrics, Estelle remarks, "All the blood and violence. I thought you were supposed to be the love generation." When Mari's parents object to her not wearing a bra, the ensuing conversation is rendered in generational divides over propriety (John declares, "It's immodest!"), but it also gestures towards women's liberation.

In addition to an opposition to the counterculture, John and Estelle also display anxieties about urban crime. They live in a secluded suburb, and when they first appear onscreen, John is reading a newspaper and Estelle asks what is going on in the "outside world." John replies, "Same old stuff—murder and mayhem" before quickly ending any engagement with such concerns by casually asking, "What's for dinner?" Wood's description of the repressive nature of the normative family, complicit, he asserts, in patriarchal capitalism and disengaged from history and the oppression of others, applies here. The Collingwoods' exchange also recalls, however, the Harris polls about the breakdown of law and order.⁸⁴ John remarks to Mari that he wants her to be careful going to the concert because Estelle has told him it is in "a slum." When he asks her who is going to the concert with her, Mari sheepishly responds, "Phyllis Stone." Estelle repeats the name incredulously, and Mari explains, "I know you don't like her mother, but I'm staying with her. She comes from that neighborhood where the concert is. You know, that *slum*." Phyllis is coded early on, in fact, in terms of socioeconomics, urban decay and, indirectly, crime: when Phyllis arrives to pick up Mari, Estelle pointedly asks her what her father does for a living. Phyllis responds that both her parent are in "the iron and steel business." When Estelle observes, "Iron and steel together—how unusual!", Phyllis delivers the punch line: "Yeah, well, my mother irons and my father steals." She stands in for the urban centers from which middle class white families had migrated away. In the *histoire*

register John and Estelle are concerned parents who do not care for their child's friend (hardly uncommon), but in *discours* they are coded in terms of "white flight."

The Collingwoods' opposition to the counter-culture, their pronounced fear of crime, and their participation in white flight all point to what critics found in Romero's zombie: Nixon's "silent majority." The disillusionment and confusion that Romero and Craven have both expressed about the failure of the counterculture comes in no small part, one would think, in how sudden the shift was to a reactionary politics. The shift is reflected, for example, in two of *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year" covers. In both cases the honor went to a collective that had proven its political capital: in 1966 it was Americans aged "Twenty-five and under"; by 1969, it was "The Middle Americans." (fig. 20). *Time*'s publishers wrote of the latter that, "In a time of dissent and 'confrontation,' the most striking new factor was the emergence of the so-called 'Silent Majority' as a powerfully assertive force in U.S. society"; it was "Mr. and Mrs. Middle America," the explanation continued, "who sent President Nixon to the White House and... who feel most threatened by the attacks on traditional values" (Larson).⁸⁵ As Rick Perlstein asserts in *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, Nixon won largely by portraying himself as the candidate of stability in sharp contrast to social upheaval associated with the counterculture, to which the silent majority was opposed.

Nixon warned "middle America" not only about the counterculture, but also about how the crime rate and drug use were too high, about how Kennedy and Johnson had given up too much ground in the

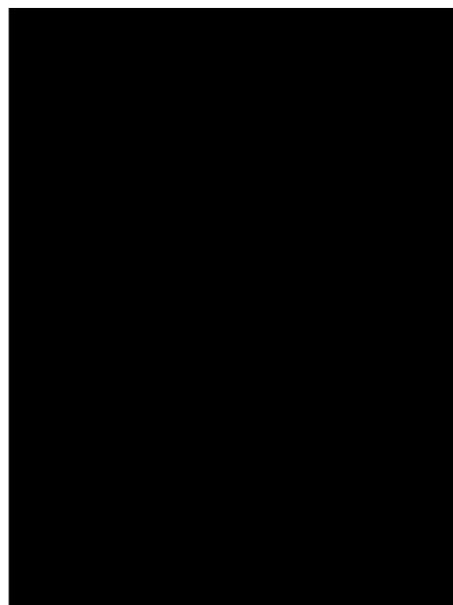


Figure 20. The respective covers for *Time* Magazine's "Man of Year" in 1966 ("Twenty-five and Under"), and "Man and Woman of the Year" in 1969 ("The Middle Americans"), point to a radical shift in perceived political power in the United States within a very short amount of time, from the emerging counter-culture to the reactive "silent majority" that elected Richard Nixon, who ran on a platform of restoring law and order.

arms race with the USSR and, on the crucial question of what he would do in Vietnam, he labeled anti-war protestors as radical subversives and promised “peace with honor” (748-9). Nixon, in other words, worked to construct the country in “us and them” terms, further dividing and polarizing those who supported him from whom and what they feared. As Perlstein asks, “For what was his injunction to join his Silent Majority, if not also an invitation to see one's neighbors as aliens, and to believe that what was alien would destroy us?” (749). The silent majority was “yearning for quiet,” but they also found in Nixon shared fears and anxieties, the very same that are coded in the Collingwoods.

The juxtaposition between Mari and her parents helps encode the former. When Estelle points out the incongruity of Mari going to a Bloodlust concert, Mari flashes a bemused smile and makes a peace sign with her fingers. Mari's gesture in turn reminds John to give her a birthday present that will come to stand in for Mari, herself later in the film: a gold peace symbol necklace. Both Mari and Phyllis wear “hippie” clothes and wear their hair long, and they stop to try and “score some pot,” as Phyllis says, before the concert. They're coded as part of the counterculture, but their performance of it reflects a real-life anxiety. As with the broader culture by that time, Mari and Phyllis exhibit no political engagement, only the largely empty signifiers that had been left in its place.⁸⁶ The movement had already ebbed by the time *Last House* was being made, and its manifestations were often limited to drug use, music, and fashion. Bloodlust, we're told, is famous for having bitten the head off of a chicken, not for singing protest songs, and the incongruence of Mari and Phyllis seeking them out could recall for contemporary audiences real life shock rock band Alice Cooper or, more significantly, Altamont.⁸⁷ As historian John Blum observed, the counterculture was “substituting pot for politics and rock for revolt” (364).

However, while there is arguably an implicit critique of Mari (and by extension, Phyllis) registered in *discours*, the next scene facilitates identification with Mari and Phyllis through *histoire*. At the lake just beyond Mari's house, the two of them frolic and drink a bottle of alcohol that Phyllis has hidden away to celebrate Mari's birthday. Mari confides in Phyllis that she's changed over the winter, that she “feels like a woman for the first time” in her life. Phyllis is characterized as a good friend to Mari and of the same generation and ethos, but differences the two of them display help mutually define each other. While it is Estelle who emphasizes the socioeconomic differences between them, those class differences

would also register within the counterculture.⁸⁸ It is implied, too, that Phyllis is sexually experienced while Mari is virginal, and Phyllis also appears slightly more streetwise and aware than Mari.⁸⁹

The Stillos' coding is conspicuous. They listen to the music of the counterculture, use drugs, ridicule the establishment, and when they decide to flee the city, they head for the Canadian border, associated at the time with Americans evading the draft.⁹⁰ At the same time, however, they stand in for the primal fear Wood associates with the monstrous family⁹¹, and in terms of sociohistorical specificity, they very neatly parallel the Manson Family. Manson's murder trial was being televised when *Last House* was being filmed, and audiences were able to see the allusions right away from following the sensationalized case. Krug Stillo stands in for Charles Manson, just as Fred "Weasel" Podowski elicits parallels to Charles "Tex" Watson and Sadie mirrors her namesake, Sadie Atkins. Manson was described as being charismatic enough that he was able to command his followers to both kill and die for him, a control aided by the use of drugs. In the film, a radio news bulletin notes that Krug intentionally "hooked" his son, Junior, on heroin in order to control him. Later when Junior attempts at gunpoint to stop Krug from killing Mari's father, Krug is able to *will* Junior to kill himself, instead. Weasel and Sadie hold her down while Krug carves his name into her chest, a direct allusion to the widely-publicized fact that the Manson family members had carved the word "war" into the chest of one of their victims. That the Stillos evoke the Manson Family is perhaps too obvious of a point. Most scholars who stop to reflect on the parallels between the two groups at all do so only briefly.⁹² The possible implications such an evocation would have for the spectator, however, could go far in helping to trace the contours of both the mode of address Craven intended and the mode of reception the audience experienced. The Stillos tie the primal fear of the monstrous family to the historical specificity of the Mansons, facilitating a confrontation with the dark undercurrents of the counterculture—those that already identified with the monstrous in what the Rolling Stones had called "Sympathy for the Devil." Indeed, many in the counterculture embraced the Mansons, including several underground newspapers, as they became a source of fascination in the months following their arrests (Bugliosi 221-22).

While the Stillos will evoke the primal fear of the monstrous family and the sociohistorical-specific anxieties of the Manson Family, they are not, in fact, caricatures. The mode of address adopted by the film crucially works to constitute the spectator-subject's identification with them early on. Sadie and Junior confide in one another a desire for normality in a scene that mirrors the bonding between Mari and

Phyllis at the lake. Sadie remarks that she wants to become a different person, and Junior imagines how much better life would be if he were a frog. Krug listens in disbelief from outside the room as Junior and Sadie both imitate frog noises. Krug eventually enters in mock admonishment of Junior: “Leave Sadie alone, you little toad, or I’ll squash you flat as a lily pad.” The Stillos often exhibit such goofy, slapstick humor that at times evokes the Three Stooges. Another complication to a complete rejection of identification with the Stillos is how they are coded as being somewhat more politically engaged than either the Collingwoods or Marie and Phyllis. Late in the film Krug articulates a crude but sympathetic critique of the Collingwoods’ bourgeois patriarchy, and Sadie, especially, is coded as progressive in terms of both gender and sexuality.⁹³ When Krug and Weasel fight over her, she affirms her independence. When Krug asks if she’s been reading “them creep women[’s] lib magazines,” she responds “May-be.” She goes on to call Krug a “male chauvinist dog” (Weasel deadpans “It’s male chauvinist pig”), and she demands more women be brought into their monstrous family: “Equal representation.”

As with *Night*, any binaries of normative/monstrous are further complicated by characters that serve as liminal figures. Junior, for example, is part of the Stillos and complicit in their crimes, but he is coded as the least monstrous: he aids the gang in trapping Phyllis and Mari, but only because of his addiction (after he brings Mari and Phyllis upstairs, his father throws him a container of heroin and remarks, “Here’s your fix, junkie”); he objects on more than one occasion to the gang’s violence; he flees with Mari after the latter works to befriend him and enlist his aid; and he tries to stop Krug from killing John. As Ebert notes in his review, “Craven has written in a young member of the gang... who sees the horror as fully as the victims do.” Mari, meanwhile, functions in much the same way as Junior, only as a mirror image: Junior comes from a broken home (including an absent mother) and has been addicted to heroin by his father, yet is peaceful and kind, setting him apart from the monstrous family—especially his father; Mari comes from an ostensibly picture perfect family yet rebels and is attracted to violence. Junior’s part in the monstrous order is overdetermined, and he yearns for normality: a yearning others recognize. Mari is part of that normative order but aspires to the monstrous order by choice.

Close Reading

During their stopover in the woods, Phyllis and Mari comment on how beautiful the area is. This sequence has received little attention in the critical literature, which is surprising given the attention the

woods receive elsewhere as “the terrible place” where the Stillos commit their monstrous acts. Lowenstein, for example, goes so far as to argue that the Stillos become coded as the “monstrous rural” as a result (133). Here, however, the woods are idyllic, which disrupts that later coding. Towards the end of the sequence, Mari wonders aloud, “What would it be like to make it with Bloodlust? Like in a whole bunch of cotton?” Laughing, Phyllis replies, “Cotton? You’re too much! It’s Bloodlust, man—they’re crazy, you know?” The juxtaposition between the naïve belief in the make-believe danger of the band and the genuine danger of the Stillos is highlighted in the next sequence. The drive to the concert is also initially framed as idyllic, with close-ups of each of them smiling with pleasant piano music playing, ostensibly from the car’s radio as Mari turns the dial and the music changes to a different song. The tune is mournful, accompanied by the lyric “And the road leads to nowhere.” An echo effect renders the word “nowhere” ominous, and at that moment Phyllis begins to drive erratically as she and Mari both laugh at the prospect of her losing control of the car. The combination of sound and image makes light of the message, but the music is contrapuntal: the lyrics act as a kind of Greek chorus. Phyllis changes the station and comes across a news bulletin about the Stillos’ prison break airs. Phyllis turns the dial again, but Mari tells her to turn it back, her voice conveying fascination more than concern.

The radio bulletin is joined by close-up shots of each of the Stillos rendered as the report gives their respective details, and incongruent humor works to help facilitate identification with them. Sadie is described by her role in the prison break of Krug and Weasel which, the reports states, “cost the lives of two prison guards and, surprisingly, the life of a German Shepherd” when “a young, animal-like woman... leaped from the getaway car” to attack it—a dark source of humor, but the delivery of the voiceover and the incongruent image of Sadie in a bubble bath makes it work. As the report describes Krug, a shot of him and Junior walking past a young boy holding a balloon accompanies it; just as the report warns, “The man is armed, and considered extremely dangerous,” Krug takes a lit cigarette out of his mouth and pops the balloon. Weasel listens to the report as it describes him as having been convicted of “child molestation... and assault with a deadly weapon,” but also “peeping tom-ism.” The bulletin concludes “Police believe the four may still be in the New York City area, but expect them to try to leave the state within the next forty-eight hours”; Weasel dryly quips, “Thanks. That sounds like good advice.”

Mari and Phyllis arrive in the city, which the on-location shooting helps figure prominently in the identification process. Mari remarks, “The neighborhood is so dirty. My mother was right.” Phyllis replies, “C’mon it’s not awful—just funky, that’s all.” Mari insists, “There’s dirt all over the place.” The exchange works to disrupt the binaries established earlier, coding Mari as not altogether separate from the bourgeois patriarchy of her parents. It also further codes Phyllis and the Stillos both as urban, which proves key later. Phyllis and Mari stop for ice cream, and parallel editing places their own normative behavior in conversation with that of the Stillos, who are all now resting at Sadie’s apartment. While cruder, the Stillos actually are also affable—even charming. The details of the news bulletin aside, there is little that codes them as monstrous. One could even imagine them as a sitcom family, and the film works to facilitate identification with both them and Mari and Phyllis in the *histoire* register.

The elaborate system of coding and identification is brought to bear, however, when Mari and Phyllis decide to find a dealer selling marijuana. They solicit Junior, who baits them upstairs. Once they enter the Stillos’ hideout, the subject-spectator has to negotiate the *discourse* register to know what to make of the ensuing action and staging of confrontation. Quickly surmising the situation, Phyllis tries to reason with the Stillos while Mari, more naïve, remains silent. The Stillos focus their attention on Phyllis and soon begin to molest her, with Sadie fondling her and restraining her from behind as Krug begins to remove her clothes. Krug berates Sadie for stepping out of turn (to which she pleads, “Come on. I had her first. Please!”). When Weasel begins molesting her, as well, Phyllis spits in his face. Weasel threatens her with a switchblade, but Krug stops him; Krug then punches Phyllis in the stomach, and Sadie lets her drop to the floor. The camera does not move, remaining in a medium shot so that Phyllis falls out of frame. Then Sadie, Krug and Weasel each follow Phyllis out of frame and gang rape her, a fact most critical commentaries neglect.⁹⁴ As Phyllis makes off-screen pleas for them to stop, the camera zooms in on Mari, standing next to Junior—the two liminal figures—registering a reaction shot: her expression conveys shock, but she does not turn away.

The spectator, sutured in by *histoire*, becomes bound to the horrors and implicated in the violence—both in the film and in the “real horror show”—as *discours* is brought to the foreground: here Craven begins to draw parallels between the Stillos’ monstrous family and the bourgeois normality coded in the Collingwoods. The camera crosscuts between Phyllis and Mari’s entrapment and Estelle and John

decorating the living room and making Mari's birthday cake, with jaunty non-diegetic music accompanying their efforts. The dialectic juxtaposition of the Collingwoods' idyllic home and the disturbing sequence the spectator just witnessed is then fully realized when John, admiring Estelle's efforts in icing the cake, declares, "Come out in the living room. I want to attack you" just before Phyllis's rape. While several critical accounts focus on that line as a manifestation of bourgeois patriarchy, they do not comment on how the mock-threat is also juxtaposed with the real violence of the Stillos, coded as working class, against Phyllis, also coded as working class.⁹⁵ The Collingwoods engage in mock violence, sublimating it; real life horror—out there from which they have fled—is coming.

A cut to the next morning begins in an alleyway from which the Stillos will make their getaway from the city. Junior is acting as lookout, and gestures for the others to come down. The incongruence between the ensuing sequence and what has immediately preceded it is almost surreal. Krug carries down a gagged and bound Mari, followed by Sadie. Weasel, at the car, opens the trunk, revealing that Phyllis is already inside. As he places Mari in the trunk, Krug tells her, "Okay, sweetheart, I'll put you right on top of your friend here." The reassuring tone he adopts is disarming in its apparent sincerity, as is Sadie's admonishment to "Take it easy! You could hurt 'em!" Weasel, also sounding sincere, reassures Sadie, "They're okay" and Krug tells Mari and Phyllis—as a parent would with children before a car trip—"Okay, the both of ya, settle down. You got a long ride ahead of ya." The effects of the incongruent dialogue are reinforced by Hess's "Baddies' Theme" playing over the sequence, giving it the feel of a getaway sequence from a lighthearted caper film. The juxtaposition illustrates how the film works to elicit identification with the monstrous, then alienate the spectator, and then enlist identification again.

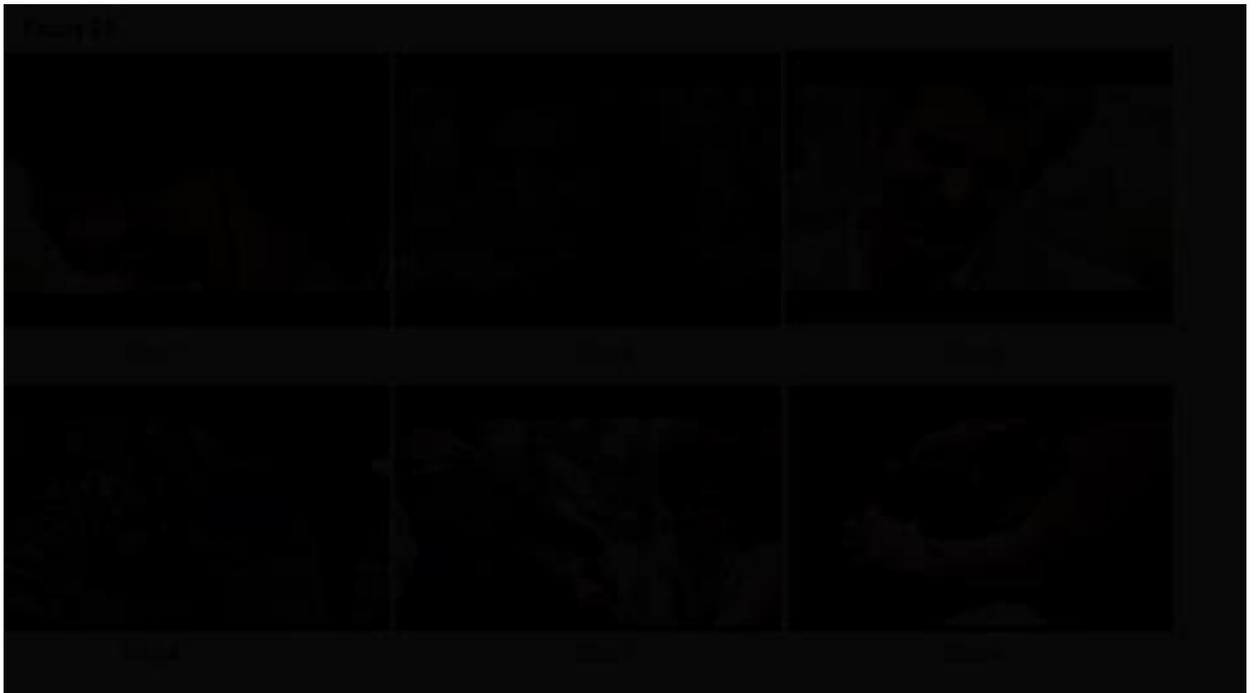
That identification extends to John and Estelle as the camera cuts back to them; they are concerned about Mari having stayed out all night. Estelle blames Phyllis's bad influence, while John thinks that it's just natural rebellion. The spectator, of course, knows that Mari is in danger, and the Collingwoods here are sympathetic figures. Going forward identification with all three groups—the Stillos, Mari and Phyllis, and the Mari's parents—becomes crucial. The camera cuts from the Collingwoods to a long shot of what appears to be the same wooded area as before. Sonorous string music accompanies shots of trees, ducks on a lake, and a babbling brook. I have yet to come across any comment in the critical literature about this sequence, perhaps because it seems unremarkable. I find it to be a kind of establishing shot and an

important one, with yet another idyllic sequence acting as a bridge between the Collingwoods and the Stillos' own sequence that follows in which the spectator realizes that their car is on the same road that Mari and Phyllis took to the city; the Stillos are already sharing the same space, in other words, as the Collingwoods, as the woods once again are not coded solely as a "terrible place" as most critical accounts attest; they are the shared space of all three groups.

The camera cuts to the Stillos on the road; the "Baddies' Theme" plays once again. Their getaway appears carefree as they drive with the convertible's top down and they debate who is the best serial killer of all time is as one might do with athletes. The contrapuntal music and dark humor work to align the spectator with the Stillos once again, but ultimately the audience is reminded that Mari and Phyllis are bound and gagged in the trunk of the car as the car breaks down. The camera cuts to a point-of-view shot from inside the trunk as Krug opens it to retrieve a tool kit and Phyllis bites him. After pulling her and Mari out and onto the side of the road, Krug decides to exact revenge, remarking, "We're going to have some fun." Weasel, standing just to the side of a mailbox, makes a weak protest about needing to get back on the road, and Mari notices that the mailbox is her own. The Stillos' car has broken down literally in front of her house, and the Stillos take her and Phyllis to the same wooded area across the road.

Craven has facilitated spectator identification with both the Stillos and Mari and Phyllis, all in anticipation of this confrontation in the woods. The Stillos untie the teens. Krug decides to humiliate Phyllis by threatening to kill Mari if Phyllis doesn't urinate on herself. She does so, and the Stillos—except Junior—begin to laugh sadistically. A reaction shot of Phyllis signifies her embarrassment, but also her disbelief at the Stillos' cruelty. It is a powerful moment, one that confronts the spectator in its implications: the Stillos' pleasure in the humiliation of Phyllis mirrors, in effect, the spectator's own pleasure in watching the film. Krug wonders aloud about other tortures he can inflict, and Junior, trying to stop his father from hurting Phyllis and Mari, suggests, unfortunately, that the gang make the two of them molest each other instead. The others love the idea and force Phyllis and Mari to comply.

Afterward, Krug tells Weasel that he is going back to the car to find something to "cut some firewood with." Phyllis understands he plans on killing her and Mari, and she tells Mari she is going to run in the opposite direction to try and distract the others so that Mari can escape. In terms of *histoire*, Phyllis's resourcefulness helps differentiate her from Mari, but Phyllis's sacrifice also proves Estelle's earlier



prejudice towards her to be misguided. While critical commentaries will occasionally point out Sadie's and even Estelle's proto-feminism, all ignore Phyllis's role as a heroine, both here and earlier at the Stillos' hideout. The *discours* register disrupts, too, the coding of the Stillos as victims of socioeconomic circumstance⁹⁶: Phyllis, is coded as urban and disadvantaged, as well, and the juxtaposition between them—the monstrous Stillos and the heroic Phyllis—foregrounds the limits of that defense or the coding of the city as a “terrible place.” When Phyllis runs and Sadie and Weasel give chase, the liminal figures Mari and Junior are left alone. Mari enlists Junior's aid to escape, giving him her peace symbol necklace and renaming him “Willow.” She even offers to steal methadone from her father's practice for him, but Junior is conflicted—he remains a liminal figure. He asks her, “What would you do if you were me?” and it seems to be a question meant as much for the spectator as it is for Mari.

The coding of the Stillos as “real” monsters escalates in the following sequence, punctuated by the slaughter of Phyllis (fig. 21). She first is able to evade Sadie and Weasel, making it just in sight of the road—cars are even driving by—but then there is, as Craven describes it in the MGM commentary, “one of the biggest jumps of the film, when you think she's made it out”: a sting sounds as an extreme close-up of a machete appears in the foreground of the frame. Holding it is Krug, and he and Sadie and Weasel surround Phyllis. Weasel stabs Phyllis from behind. She desperately tries to crawl away as the Stillos gather themselves, with Krug asking the others how she managed to escape; as Craven describes, “the bad guys [have] this small talk in the background as this woman's life is draining away” (ibid). Phyllis manages to

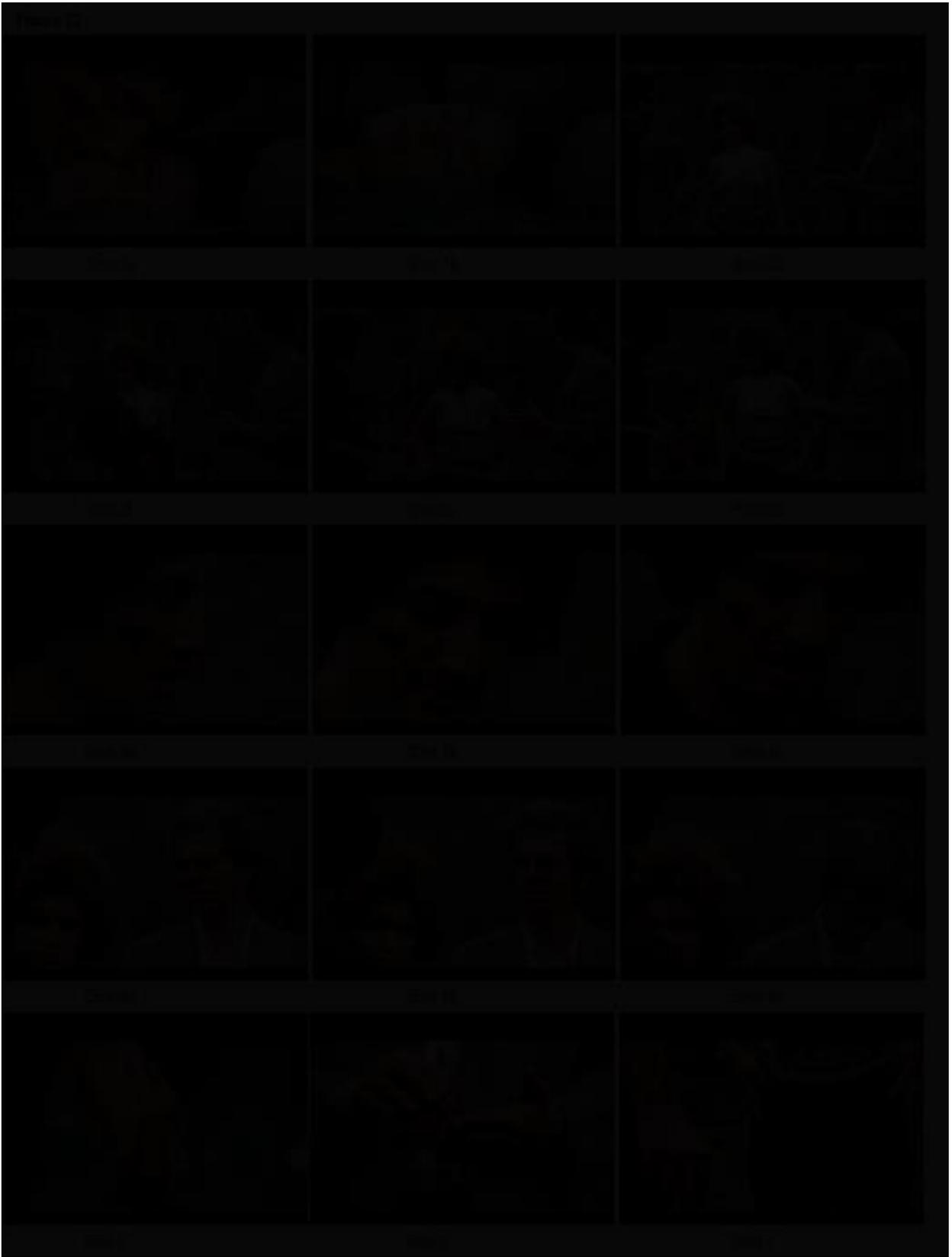
crawl away and to lean against a nearby tree, but the Stillos find her. Weasel picks her up and pushes her towards Krug and, as Sadie watches, smiling sardonically (shot 1), a gleeful Krug restrains Phyllis (shot 2) as an equally gleeful Weasel stabs her repeatedly (shot 3). The Stillos' crimes prior to the film were conveyed in voiceover rendered so outlandish that it aided in identification rather than alienation. Their rape of Phyllis occurred off-screen; the spectator could potentially evade implication in its violence. Here there is no escaping that implication: the viciousness conveyed by the close-ups confront the spectator with the reality of the Stillos' brutality. Krug pulls up Phyllis, revealing the stabs wounds through her bloody shirt (shot 4), and Sadie starts to stab her repeatedly (shot 5) to the point where—in the uncut version of the film—she is able pull out Phyllis's entrails (shot 6).⁹⁷

Intercut with the sequences in the woods are sequences involving Estelle and John's interactions with the police. The first comes just before when Mari notices her family's mailbox. Inside, John and Estelle are speaking to the local sheriff (Marshall Anker), who echoes John in assuring them that Mari is probably just rebelling, but that his deputy is in their police car radioing New York just to be sure. Immediately afterward, the deputy (Martin Kove) walks in and tells the sheriff—in front of Estelle and John—"the guy at the morgue says he hasn't laid a kid on ice all day." The thoughtless remark sets the tone for their remaining interactions, as they are so incompetent that it plays as farce. Just after the Stillos pull Mari and Phyllis into the woods, the police pull out of the Collingwoods' driveway where the Stillos' abandoned car is only a few feet away. The deputy asks if they should "have a look," but the sheriff admonishes him, "No, no. We have more important things to do. We need to find this Mari Collingwood." The camera then immediately cuts to Stillos as they begin to molest Mari and Phyllis. The next time we see the police, they simply have returned to the police station. While the deputy reads a *Classics Illustrated* comic book ("Caesar's Conquests"), the sheriff is on the phone talking about Mari with John, who tells the sheriff, "I'm holding you personally responsible." The line rings hollow, as the audience realize how unlikely it is that these police could ever save Mari and Phyllis. In fact, when they finally do realize where to look—a radio bulletin describes the Stillos' car while they play checkers—they run out of gas on the way, having not even first called Estelle and John with their discovery. They do not arrive until at the end of the film, after the bloodshed has already transpired. The Collingwoods' daughter is in their own back

yard, but John and Estelle naively participate in what they believe is a system that will protect them. Despite their efforts at fleeing the evils of the city, crime comes to them.

Mari finally convinces Junior to help her look for the road so they can get back to her house, but they run into the other Stillos. When Mari asks if Phyllis escaped, Weasel drops one of her arms that he and Krug cut off. Krug, coded as Manson, then brutalizes Mari, carving his name into her chest with a switchblade while Weasel and Sadie look on. Krug then rapes Mari in a shot that does not—as Craven insists it shouldn't—cut away (fig. 22). The two-shot close-up of Krug and Mari during the rape (shot 1a) creates a dialectic within the frame; as with the penultimate shot of *Night* with Ben and the first zombie, this shot synthesizes the thesis and antithesis of what had been two competing subjects of identification. Seeing the two of them in the same frame, Krug drooling on Mary's anguished face, foregrounds the spectator's prior identification with both of them; the spectator is thus implicated in the violence.

The Stillos each begin to stand up and leave the frame (shot 1b). In a cut to a three-quarters shot, Krug looks away while Sadie and Weasel both cast what appear to be judgmental glances his way (shot 2a). Mari gets up and enters the frame, then begins to walk away (shot 2b). Though Sadie and Weasel had looked on approvingly as Krug carved his name into Mari and they helped hold her down as Krug raped her, they now seem affected by her obvious trauma. Mari turns back and looks at each of them, further implicating them, but Krug's mannerisms suggest the impact does not register yet (shot 2c). When Mari doubles over and begins to wretch, however, Krug reacts, as well (shot 2d). Hess's song "Now You're All Alone" accompanies the sequence. At first the song's lyrics seem to refer to Mari ("Now you're all alone/Feeling that nobody wants you"). However, as the sequence continues, the song's lyrics correspond to a close-up of Krug's reaction to Mari, just as the words "you're all alone" play. Krug's then looks at both Sadie and Weasel, and his expression changes from a look of recognition (shot 3a) to contemplation (shot 3b) to something approximating self-disgust (shot 3c). Mari recites "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," which critics such as Lowenstein often misidentify as the "Lord's Prayer," and in a cut to an-over-the-shoulder shot of Krug (shot 4a), he continues to look down as Sadie and Weasel once more stare at him, their own expressions signifying a combination of accusation and shame. Krug casts a furtive glance in recognition (shot 4b) before once again looking down (shot 4c). Extreme close-ups of each of the Stillos' hands punctuate the sequence with the recognition of collective guilt: first Krug's (shot 5), then Weasel's (shot 6)

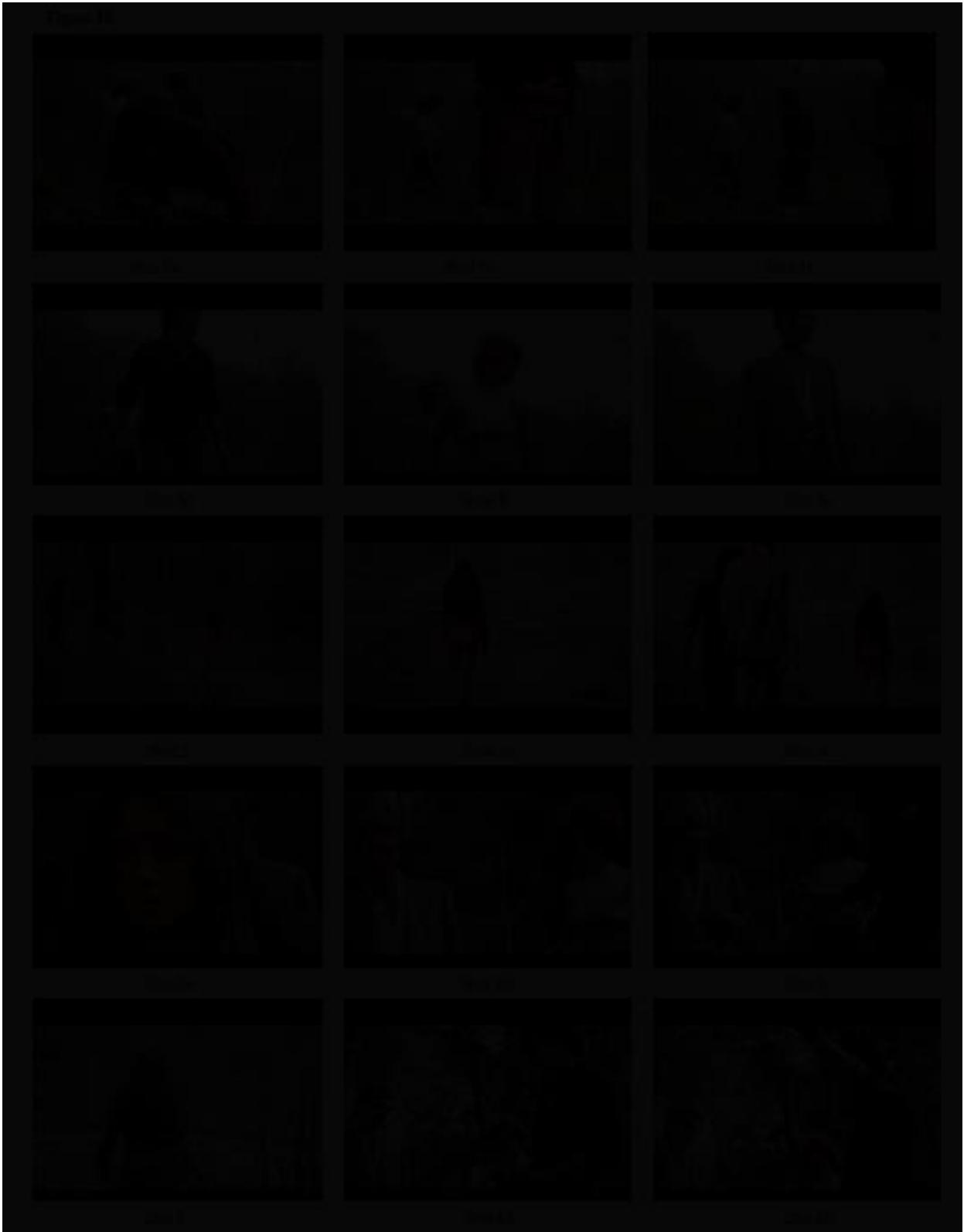


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and then Sadie's (shot 7). All have blood on their hands; all try in vain to get it off. Here the mode of production plays a role: a sticky syrup concoction had been used to simulate blood, and the actors really did struggle to get it off (Craven and Cunningham). At the same time, that difficulty registers as not only symbolic, but—extended to the spectator—almost physiological: as Laura Marks discusses in *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (2000), cinema can actually register in the spectator a physiological response through a sense of space and the spectator's memory of the other senses besides vision, including a "haptic visuality," whereby the spectator can experience tactile sensations as displayed on screen. The spectator thus identifies with the Stillos yet again; and as confrontational as the violence is for the viewer, the humanity that appears on the Stillos' faces is difficult to ignore. Craven does not allow the relief of dismissing them as monsters.

The silence continues in the following sequence (fig. 23). It begins with a cut to Mari in the foreground, still kneeling, and the Stillos in the background, still apparently affected (shot 1a). Mari stands up, with much of her top half leaving the frame so that the focus becomes her hands clutching her stomach, signifying her trauma (shot 1b). She slowly begins walking away, leaving the frame (shot 1c). The Stillos silently each begin to walk at an oblique angle towards the foreground to follow her—first Krug (shot 1d), then Sadie (shot 1f) and then Weasel (shot 1e), their procession all the more remarkable as the camera does not move as they each leave the frame. The camera cuts to a long shot of Mari, walking through the woods, the Stillos still following her (shot 2). Another cut frames Mari from behind, approaching the lake (shot 3a), the Stillos still following (shot 3b). The camera cuts to a close-up of Mari walking to the left of the frame (shot 4a) and out of frame as the shot tracks right to frame the Stillos (shot 4b), watching as Mari enters the lake. Krug gestures to Weasel, and Weasel pulls out his gun and hands it to Krug (shot 4c). Marie enters the lake (shot 5) and Krug pulls back the gun (shot 6a) and aims (shot 6b).

One striking element of the sequence is that the Stillos say nothing when Mari begins to walk off, and they do not hurry in their pursuit of her, as if they share with Mari an understanding of what is to come. Another striking element is that, aside from her prayer, not a word is spoken. Not Mari as she gets up, nor any of the Stillos as she begins to walk away. Not Krug when he gestures for the gun. The silence recalls Elaine Scarry's description of the ineffability of pain: "Whatever pain achieves," Scarry asserts, "it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to



language.... [pain] actively destroys [language], bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language” (4). Like Karin (Birgitta Pettersson), her counterpart in *Virgin Spring*, Mari simply has no language for what has happened to her. None of the Stillos have language for what they’ve done. Mari’s trauma destroys language not just for her, but for them: the sadistic taunts and glib banter that accompanied their previous transgressions are gone. Here all sources of spectator identification register the same silent confrontation for the spectator, the same implication in the violence.

The sequence is punctuated by Krug firing at Mari, and for that moment Hess makes very deliberate gestures in pulling back the gun and then aiming, as Craven wanted to deliberately evoke a horror from outside the theater (fig. 24). The subject of Eddie Adams’ Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph *General Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executing a Viet Cong Prisoner in Saigon* was also captured by NBC News video cameras. The perceived brutality captured by the image would help turn the tide of a large segment of the Americans against the continued war in Vietnam and Craven wanted to capture that same visceral quality: “That kind of methodical execution style,” he notes, “was translated right into the shooting of Mary at the lake. It’s an image I’ve never gotten out of mind” (*American*). Here, then, Craven ties the primal fear of violation of the body directly to an evocation of the real world horrors of the war.

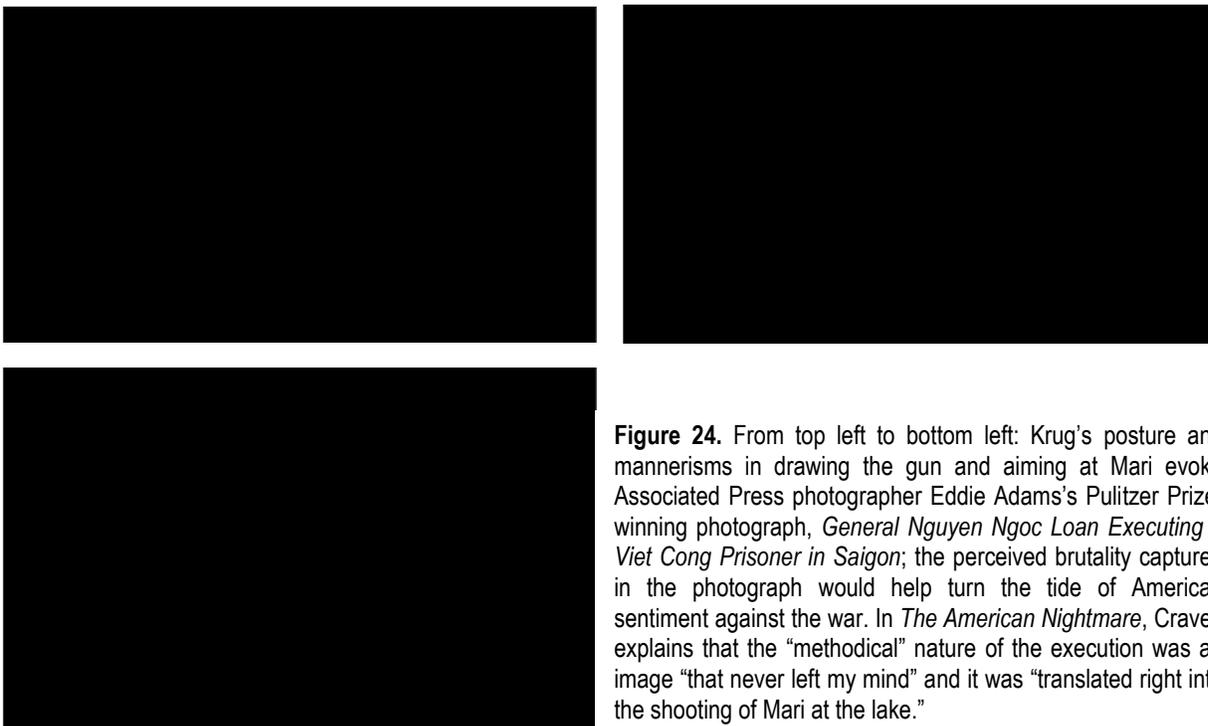


Figure 24. From top left to bottom left: Krug’s posture and mannerisms in drawing the gun and aiming at Mari evoke Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams’s Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, *General Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executing a Viet Cong Prisoner in Saigon*; the perceived brutality captured in the photograph would help turn the tide of American sentiment against the war. In *The American Nightmare*, Craven explains that the “methodical” nature of the execution was an image “that never left my mind” and it was “translated right into the shooting of Mari at the lake.”

The brutality of Mari's rape and execution serves to bookend the silence between the two. After the gunshot hits Mari she spins around and is thrown backwards, coming to rest on the surface of the water with her arms outstretched and her palms up as she lies still, floating, providing another long period of silence that the spectator must contemplate (fig. 25). The composition of the frame recalls for me another strong intertextual reference: John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (c. 1851-2), its subject the character from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (c. 1599-01). I have no reason to suspect that the association is intentional.⁹⁸ There are, however, some broad parallels between Craven's film and Shakespeare's play, including similarities between Mari and Ophelia, specifically, which interest me.⁹⁹ Mari's recitation of "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep" after her rape, for example, speaks to her anticipation of death.¹⁰⁰ Ophelia sings "mad" songs about death; she also sings about a maiden who is seduced and then abandoned.¹⁰¹ She collects herbs that have symbolic properties and hands them out to other characters, including rue, which is associated with regret or repentance and, as some commentaries point out, is also "a powerful abortifacient" (Epstein). Crucially perhaps, it is the only flower Ophelia keeps for herself.¹⁰² The suggestion, then, is that Ophelia is the seduced maiden about which she sings "madly."¹⁰³

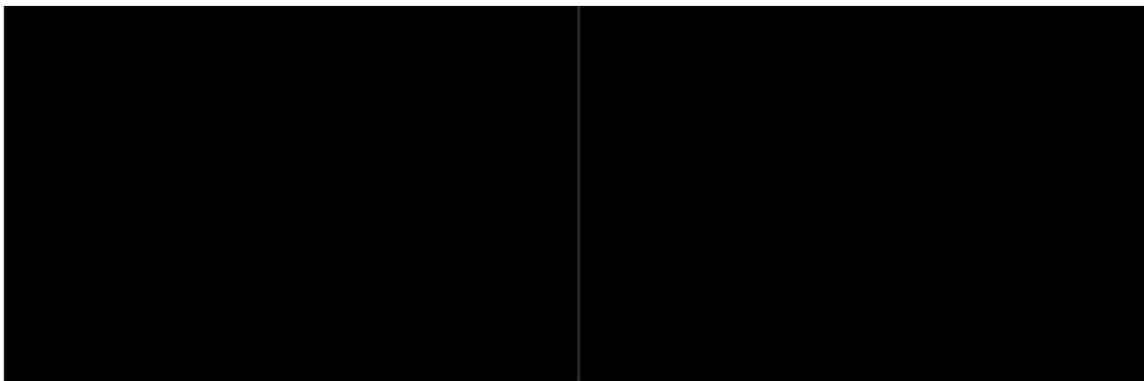


Figure 25. A series of parallels begins with the compositional similarities between Mari's floating body and the leaves that surround her (above) and John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (below, c. 1851-2), which depicts its titular subject singing as she floats in a "weeping brook," into which she has fallen, just before she drowns. Earlier in *Hamlet*, Ophelia sings "mad" songs about death and a maiden losing her virginity to someone who abandons her. Mari, a virgin before her rape, quietly recites "Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep" as she walks to what she seemingly knows will be her death, and David Hess's song "Now You're All Alone" plays as she does so. Ophelia's death itself occurs offstage; Mari—perhaps because of the film's limited budget—is shot off-camera. Queen Gertrude recounts Ophelia's death (Act IV, Scene VII): gathering flowers at a brook, Ophelia was "Clamb'ring to hang" to a bough when it broke and she fell in. The Queen offers that Ophelia was "incapable of her own distress." Mari similarly seems to be in a fugue-like state as she enters the lake.

The parallels between the two characters also include their respective deaths. Mari appears dazed as she enters the water, and her face registers genuine shock as the gunshot pulls her around and lays her into the lake. Her hair and clothes take on a noticeable weight as she floats on the water. Ophelia, as reported by Queen Gertrude (Act IV, Scene VII), was “incapable of her own distress,” singing as she floated in a “weeping brook” into which she had fallen, until “her garments, heavy with their drink/Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay/To muddy death.” As with Karen’s inversion of the myth of Cronus in *Night*, an allusion to *Hamlet* would include an inversion of a child’s filial obligation to avenge the murder of a parent, and with similar results: as Stephen Greenblatt says of the play’s violent conclusion, revenge “leaves [Hamlet] not with inner satisfaction, but with intense anxiety....” (1664).

Last House concludes similarly. The Stillos wash themselves off in the lake and change out of their bloody clothes, shoving them into a suitcase. Posing as traveling salesmen, they seek refuge at the nearest house—it happens to be the Collingwoods’. The Stillos’ façade is impressive at first: they adopt clothes, hairstyles, and speech that render them thoroughly middle class in the eyes of the Collingwoods. Estelle invites them to stay the night and the group has dinner, though Junior, wrecked with guilt and in withdrawal, stays away. At dinner the façade breaks down: the Stillos’ lack of etiquette shocks the Collingwoods and casts a stark contrast between the two families. Estelle tries to make polite conversation about the Stillos’ “recent sales,” but the latter contradict one another when they answer at the same time, further giving away that they are not who they say they are. The dinner itself is surreal, as the scene is staged against a completely black backdrop, foregrounding the juxtaposition between the two groups and the liminal recoding of normative space that emerges as the monstrous permeates it.¹⁰⁴ As Cunningham describes, it is as if they are “eating in limbo” (Craven and Cunningham). The proceedings are disrupted when Junior, sleeping in the other room, begins crying out in his sleep about Mari’s death. Krug—not excusing himself—rushes in to threaten him into silence, which the others hear.

The camera cuts to Mari’s room, where the Stillos have retreated after dinner. They reveal in their conversation their own class anxieties, highlighting once again their own humanity. Still in the clothes that code them as middle class, they are juxtaposed within the frame with the various signifiers of the counterculture in Mari’s room. Weasel finds pictures of Mari, and the group realizes who the Collingwoods are. Meanwhile, Estelle hears Junior vomiting violently in the bathroom and checks on him. While he’s

lying on the bathroom floor she recognizes the peace symbol necklace that she and John gave Mari. The necklace's full signification becomes manifest here. Estelle and John did not identify with its coding in *discours*, but rather presented it as a kind of talisman to ward off evil (it was "for luck") and it failed. The counterculture with which the peace symbol was associated had, in Craven's eyes, largely failed, as well. The necklace, he explains, was "the designator of the irony of the peace symbol and how fragile it was... we were realizing that the whole hippie movement was a bit of a pipe dream" (Craven and Cunningham). Her suspicions aroused, Estelle rummages through the Stillos' bags and finds their bloody clothes. The camera dramatically cuts to a long shot of Estelle and John running out to the lake to discover Mari lying at its edge, barely breathing, and she dies shortly thereafter. Having lost their daughter, the Collingwoods become monstrous at film's end.

The Stillos, in turn, offer reminders that they are human. The spectator witnesses, for example, a nightmare that Weasel has in which Estelle and John perform oral surgery on him, breaking his teeth; with both point-of-view shots and reaction shots aligning the spectator's identification with Weasel, his humanity is highlighted. In his commentary with Cunningham, Craven points out how anxiety dreams about bodily integrity—particular teeth—are universal across cultures. Weasel wakes up to discover Estelle in the living room and begins trying to seduce her. Recognizing the opportunity, Estelle lures Weasel into the woods with the promise of sex and tricks him into letting her tie his hands together. Even here, the film works to elicit identification through humor. In a day-for-night long shot simulating the early dawn, Estelle unzips Weasel's pants in such a way as to deliberately catch his penis in it. She purrs, "Oh, poor little fella" and Weasel replies, sheepishly, "It's not little—you just scared it, that's all." Lincoln's line reading sells the humor. A cut to John, too, provides darker humor, as he is in the basement deciding on the best instrument of destruction. He picks up a wrench and a trash can lid and acts out how they would work as makeshift club and shield. He decides instead on the shotgun, and proceeds to set up booby traps all over the house. Throughout the sequence the spectator still identifies with Stillos while identifying with the Collingwoods' vengeance, thus implicating the spectator in both groups' crimes.

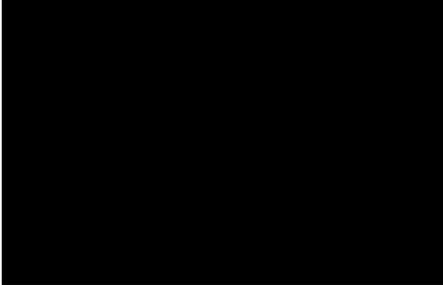
A series of intercuts between Estelle seducing Weasel and John confronting the other Stillos begin the film's denouement. Estelle bites off Weasel's penis and leaves him to bleed to death, eliciting the primal fear of castration.¹⁰⁵ A sound match of his screaming carries a cut to the bedroom, where it wakes

Krug and Sadie; they discover John pointing the shotgun at them. Krug manages to escape; he is able to disarm John and is about to kill him when Junior pulls a gun on Krug to stop him. Krug, coded as Manson once more, is able to manipulate Junior into shooting himself instead. With the spectator's mitigating agent dead, the violence begins in earnest. Krug hears John starting up a chainsaw in the basement and appeals to Sadie for help, but she pulls a knife on him and runs outside. John chases Krug throughout the house. The camera cuts to Sadie as she tries to escape but is tackled by Estelle. Shots of the two tearing at each other on the ground are intercut with John chasing down Krug. The diegetic sound of the chainsaw continues over both sequences and does not stop until the onscreen violence ends. The sheriff and deputy arrive only in time to urge John not to kill Krug, words uttered in vain as he does so while, in cross-cut, Estelle slits Sadie's throat. Not a word is said after the chainsaw stops. The sheriff's expression and the way that the deputy solemnly takes the chainsaw from John's hands afterward speak to an awareness that belies the incompetence they have heretofore displayed. They seem to know already what the Collingwoods realize in the film's final, freeze frame shot. Estelle puts one arm around John, her face obscured as she leans against him from behind. John's face, covered in Krug's blood, registers their realization: it mirrors that of the Stillos after their slaughter of Phyllis and Mari.

If *Last House* offers any relief, it does so only paratextually. The closing credit sequence begins with the actors' names superimposed over shots of their respective characters in the film (fig. 26). Both Mari and Phyllis are depicted in shots from the first scene at the lake in which they are smiling broadly. The spectator thus can be reminded, finally, that the actors are alive; it was, in fact, "only a movie." The credits are accompanied, too, by the song "Baddies' Theme (Sadie and Krug)" once again, the same upbeat song in which Hess sings about the events of the film as if they were a screwball comedy. While the song matches the images, both call attention to a devastating incongruity with the preceding horrors of the film. That incongruity lingers as the spectator is confronted with the film's ultimate themes. Having identified with the Stillos from their first appearance, we were implicated in the horror and reminded that they are human. Having identified with the Collingwoods in their turn to monstrous vengeance, we are implicated again. The Stillos provided a dark reflection to the Collingwoods; the former embodied the monstrous undercurrent of the counterculture while the latter had lived the American Dream while ignoring its many contradictions. Like *Night*, *Last House* offers no closure. The spectator is left with the realization that the

two families embody the difference between America's delusive view of itself and the brutal violence it unleashed both at home and in a country far away.

Figure 26. Below: The closing credit sequence begins with shots of Mari (Sandra Cassell) and Phyllis (Lucy Grantham) alive and well, accompanied by David Hess's "Baddies' Theme (Sadie and Krug)." The collective incongruence of Mari and Phyllis's ecstatic expressions and the contrapuntal music with the horrific violence that the spectator has just witnessed immediately preceding the sequence works to paratextually call attention to the latter and engages the spectator as a constituting subject.

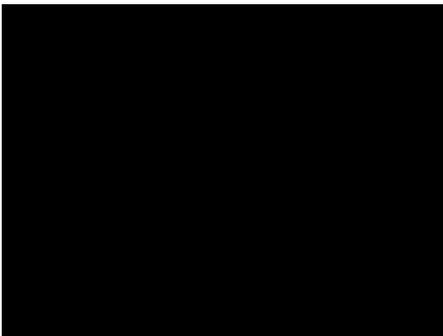


"Baddies' Theme (Sadie and Krug)"

*Weasel and Junior, Sadie and Krug
Out for the day with the Collingwood brood
Out for the day for some fresh air and sun
Let's have some fun with those two lovely children
and off them as soon as we're done!*

*Weasel and Sadie, junkie and dad
Quartet in harmony, barbershop band
Cut it and style it, deciding the shape
Krug don't you know that this fooling around
isn't getting us out of the state?*

*Collingwood manor is just out of reach
Phyllis is sucking up sun on the beach
Mari and Junior are stuck in the rain
The local police force is looking for
Someone to get their car started again.*



VI. 1974: No Gas and No Work—the Ingredients for a *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*

Sociohistorical context

The front page headline that ran in the same edition of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* as *Last House*'s "Can a Movie Go Too Far?" advert referred to how National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger had declared that "...peace is at hand" in late October, 1972. Within two months, however, the U.S. commenced Operation Linebacker II—informally (and derisively) referred to as the "Christmas Bombings"—which was the largest aerial bombing campaign the U.S had conducted since World War II and which was met with widespread condemnation throughout the world. (Olof Palme, the outspoken prime minister of Sweden, compared the bombings to the atrocities of Nazi Germany, prompting the Nixon administration to break off diplomatic relations). While U.S. involvement in Vietnam ended with the Paris Peace Accords signed on January 27, 1973, it was hardly a distant memory when *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* began filming five months later. The horrific incongruity between Kissinger's words and U.S. military action speaks to how the distrust in the government that had previously been exhibited by Romero and Craven in their films had only been exacerbated further for Hooper, who felt he was being "lied to by the government about things that were going on all over the world" (Hooper).

Hooper's reaction was not uncommon; it was shared by many Americans as President Richard Nixon was reelected in 1972 in a landslide victory and the Watergate scandal begun to unfold in the lead up to the release of *Texas*.¹⁰⁶ On November 17, 1973, Nixon gave what was to become an infamous press conference in which he declared, "I'm not a crook" to roughly four hundred Associated Press editors. Less than a month beforehand, Vice President Spiro Agnew had admitted to, in effect, being a crook, resigning and pleading no contest to tax evasion. Nixon announced his own resignation on August 8, 1974—two months before *Texas* premiered. Gerald Ford, who had replaced Agnew as vice president just the previous December, was sworn in as president and pardoned Nixon, eliminating the possibility of accountability in the minds of many.

Ford, in turn, presided over the beginning of what was until recently the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.¹⁰⁷ Mass unemployment and stagflation took hold, and the "No Gas" era effectively began in October of 1973 with OPEC's oil embargo and did not end until March of the following year, thus coinciding with the post-production of *Texas*. The "oil shock" of 1973 included scenes

of gas stations across the country having to turn customers away altogether (“Oil Embargo”). In addition to political and economic uncertainty, social conservative commentators, in particular, pointed to the erosion of the nuclear family. Women’s liberation had empowered women to join the workforce in increasing numbers and leave abusive and unhappy marriages. The divorce rate, which had begun steadily increasing in the late 1960s, rose sharply throughout the 1970s, reaching an all-time high in 1981 (“U.S. Divorce Rate”).¹⁰⁸ Hooper reflects how the era “zeitgeisted” into [his] head” (qtd. in Baumgarten).

Ideological categorization

Like Romero and Craven, Hooper embraced the counter-culture and had grown disillusioned by its failures (like Craven, he was also a former left-leaning academic). Like Romero, Hooper grew up reading EC comic books and credits their influence (Lovell and Kelley). His only previous film, *Eggshells* (1969), had focused on hippies engaged in the antiwar movement stumbling upon a supernatural presence (Phillips 102). It was, Hooper reflects, “a movie about 1969... about the beginning of the end of the subculture” (qtd. in Baumgarten). Hooper’s writing partner for *Eggshells*, Kim Henkel, joined him again to write *Texas*. Like the Image Ten, they knew that they could make a successful feature film outside of the Hollywood system, but to do so they would have to work within an established genre; they chose horror (*Shocking*).

The dynamic between Hooper and Henkel with regards to their authorial intent mirrors that of Romero and Russo: Hooper, like Romero, has had an uneven track record with regards to his professed influences, but he has stated repeatedly in recent years that he was engaged “politically [and] socially” (ibid). When asked how much the social unrest of the 1970s was an influence on *Texas*, he asserts “100 percent.... It all bubbled up out of that” (qtd. in Phipps). Henkel, like Russo, discusses the matter in terms of primal fears associated with “archetypes” and “myths” (qtd. in Jaworzyn 45). Henkel, in fact, feels “uncomfortable with such questions,” as he prefers to leave it a mystery (ibid). Hooper, on the other hand, has gotten very specific. While he, too, discusses writing the film with archetypes in mind, he also emphasizes how specific sociohistorical subtexts are present: “[T]he massacres and atrocities in the Vietnam War” weighed heavily on him as filming began,” he intones. (Hooper). Hooper adds, “Watergate and [running] out of gas” were influences, as well (qtd. in Baumgarten). So, too, was the nation’s rampant

unemployment rate (Phipps), and the “disintegration of the American family” (Jaworzyn 96).¹⁰⁹ In including these subtexts, Hooper observes, “I was trying to say...‘this is America’” (*Shocking*).

Modes of Production and Distribution

While subtexts regarding sociohistorical anxieties are present in *Texas*, Hooper himself describes the origin of the film’s narrative in terms of more primal fears. Hooper has recounted several times how he had an inchoate idea for a story “about isolation, the woods, the darkness, and the unknown” already when he was holiday shopping in a store’s hardware department (qtd. in Baumgarten). The large crowds made Hooper feel claustrophobic and, facing a display of chainsaws, he briefly thought about starting one to scare the crowd away. That experience gave him the skeletal structure for *Texas*, and he and Henkel began writing, finishing the script in three weeks (Phipps). The two then began seeking financial backing. Texas had just formed a commission to try to attract filmmakers to the state, and through contacts Henkel met with the commission’s newly appointed director, Warren Skaaren, and attorney Robert Kuhn, who helped Hooper and Henkel set up companies for production and financing (*Shocking*).

With that structure in place they were able to raise \$60,000 and begin filming. The crew was composed mostly of students from the film program at Hooper’s alma mater, the University of Texas-Austin (ibid). The cast was composed of people Hooper and Henkle knew or who were referred to them. Marilyn Burns, who plays sole survivor Sally Hardesty, worked with Skaaren on the Texas Film Commission, and Paul A. Partain, who plays Sally’s brother Franklin, was a local actor who knew Henkle’s wife. Allen Danzinger, who plays Sally’s boyfriend Jerry, had acted in *Eggshells*. Local actors Teri McMinn and William Vail rounded out the cast of young victims as Sally’s friends Pam and Kirk, respectively. The monstrous family had a similar pedigree. Jim Siedow, who plays the Old Man (also known as the Cook), was the sole professional actor, and he was under a limited contract. Ed O’Neil, a fellow University of Texas alumnus, was recruited to play the Hitchhiker, and Gunnar Hansen, a graduate student, eventually was hired to play Leatherface. Henkel’s young brother-in-law John Dugan rounded out the monstrous family’s cast as Grandpa.

Shooting began on July 15, 1973, and lasted four weeks (*Shocking*). Like *Night* and *Last House*, filming was done on location. Filming was somewhat chaotic. The Texas summer heat soon began to fray nerves, and because of the limited budget much of the cast and crew took deferred payments in return for a

share of the film's profits (ibid). Hooper and Henkel were also largely unprepared when filming began and the first week's worth of shooting had to be redone (Jaworzyn 51). Like *Night*, however, the production benefitted from a free-flowing collaboration of ideas. Hooper welcomed the cast improving dialogue; Danzinger, for example, recalls that "most" of his dialogue was adlibbed (ibid 42). Henkel was also constantly taking new ideas from others and to revise the script as shooting continued (*Shocking*). Members of the crew contributed essential elements for which *Texas* is known.

While production ended in August of 1973, *Texas* was not released for over a year (ibid). Like Romero and Craven, Hooper spent months editing the film. He also created the film's much-celebrated instrumentation. Working with sound designer Wayne Bell, Hooper made a library of experimental sounds, which gave him almost limitless possibilities to compose the film's disturbing soundtrack by mixing them together. The sheer amount of postproduction nearly doubled the film's budget, however, and the added costs meant that Hooper and Henkel had to keep selling more shares of Vortex to other investors to raise funds, thus diminishing the value of the already existing shares held by the film's cast and crew (ibid). The film's final cost was still only \$125,000.¹¹⁰ Hooper, however, initially could not find a distributor for *Texas*. Crown International, 20th Century Fox, Universal, and Warner Bros all turned it down; Columbia agreed to distribute the film but then withdrew the offer (Jaworzyn 80). Even AIP, which had passed on *Night* but agreed to distribute *Last House*, declined (*Shocking*). Then Skaaren arranged for Hooper to meet with a new studio, Bryanston Films, which purchased the distribution rights (ibid).

Mode of reception and exhibition

Hooper at first tried to secure a PG rating for the film, going so far as to place phone calls to the MPAA asking for advice (ibid). Ultimately it received an R rating, which probably only helped with audience reception. *Texas* opened on October 1, 1974. As with *Night* and *Last House*, it first was distributed regionally, opening in drive-ins and small theaters. The initial critical response varies depending on which historical account you consult¹¹¹, but Roger Ebert's two-star review of the film speaks to the overall critical reaction: first referring to it as being "as violent and gruesome and blood-soaked as the title promises," Ebert observes that it is "without any apparent purpose, unless the creation of disgust and fright is a purpose" before conceding, "yet it's well-made, well-acted, and all too effective." Ebert goes on to place *Texas* in the same "select company" as *Night* and *Last House*, in fact, saying that they are "films that

are really a lot better than the genre requires. Not, however, that you'd necessarily enjoy seeing it." Many reviews were similarly divided. Others awarded praise without qualification. Hooper recalls that Rex Reed called *Texas* the scariest film he had ever seen, after which "it really took off" (*Shocking*). *Texas* also garnered much more vitriolic reactions. Tom Wolfe cited it as an example of "pornoviolence" in an essay by the same name. Similarly, in an essay for *Harper's Magazine* entitled "Fashions in Pornography," Stephen Koch called the film's depiction of violence "unrelenting" and "sadistic... as extreme and hideous as a complete lack of imagination can possibly make it" (110).

As with *Night* and *Last House*, the vitriol the film received contributed, in part, to attracting audiences, as did audiences' own word-of-mouth, which, as Hooper recalls, "just ran like crazy" from early screenings (Phipps). Actor Bill Moseley recalls going to see the film in Boston in 1974. A trailer for the Bruce Lee film *Enter the Dragon* played immediately before *Texas*, and "the audience was really into it, shouting at the screen 'Come on Bruce!'... then *Chain Saw* started and it sucked the air right out of the auditorium. I think we all just realized, just with the opening shots and the weird music—we all realized we were in for something serious" (qtd. in Jaworzyn 99). The widespread popular reception of *Texas* kept it in circulation for years. Hooper recalls that it was re-released by three different distribution companies over a period of about eight years, and put out again in first-run position.... once a year it would come out again and make its way across the country" (Phipps). It was during one of those re-releases that Robin Wood recalls witnessing an audience identify with the monstrous: he watched *Texas* "with a large, half-stoned youth audience who cheered and applauded every one of Leatherface's outrages against their representatives on screen" ("Introduction" 191).

One of the original taglines for *Texas* was, "Once you stop screaming, you'll talk about it." Many did. While mainstream reviews were not always positive, *Texas* also shares with *Night* and *Last House* the distinction of almost immediately having invited commentary about its status as art and its relation to larger American culture. While Wolfe and Koch condemned its "pornographic" violence, Hooper recalls how "straight away.... It was recognized primarily as a kind of art" (qtd. in Phipps). *Texas* was "the high film at the Directors Fortnight at Cannes that year" and it won Outstanding Film of the Year for the London Film Festival (ibid). It won the Jury's Special Prize at Avoriaz in 1976, plus prizes at Trieste Festival and Antwerp Festival in 1976 (Jaworzyn 86). Just as *Night* had a Cinescope at MOMA, *Texas* was purchased

for its permanent collection (Rockoff 42). Richard Buonno, writing in *Castle of Frankenstein's* June 25 1975 issue, deemed *Texas* the “new heir apparent” to *Night's* cult favorite status. Referring to *Texas* as a product of the “Watergate Era,” Buonno observes that *Texas* [proves] once again... the most horrible monster of all is, at times, man himself” (qtd. in Jaworzyn 107). Like *Night* and *Last House*, *Texas's* evocations of real life horrors and anxieties had been recognized early on.

The filmmakers were ecstatic about the film's success until word reached them that Bryanston had known ties to organized crime (*Shocking*). Box office revenue for the first seven years of *Texas's* run may have been anywhere from \$30 million to \$100 million; it is impossible to know for sure as profits were being embezzled. The filmmakers eventually sued, but not before Bryanston declared bankruptcy (ibid). Robert Burns explains that a trustee was appointed in 1982, but by then most of the film's profits were already gone (Jaworzyn 84). Like *Night*, *Texas* became one of the most successful independent films of all time and, like *Night*, most of the filmmakers would see few of the profits, themselves.

Textual Elements

Audience reception of *Texas* is undoubtedly affected by its title. Robert Burns recalls how the film's shooting title was *Headcheese*, then changed to the astrology-themed *Saturn in Retrograde*, which he attributes to Hooper and Henkel's “old hippiedom at work” (Jaworzyn 34). Marilyn Burns recalls that Skaaren came up with the *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (ibid 33). Hooper tested it with friends who said that they would never go see a film with such a horrible title; he knew it was perfect (*Shocking*). The title grounds the films in geographical specificity, lending itself to Hooper's larger project of coding *Texas* as “real,” but it also situates the film in a larger American mythos. *Texas* evokes the Western genre and the open space of the frontier, “Chain Saw” elicits images of clearing timber and settling the land, and “Massacre” recalls stories of settlers massacred by “natives”; together they reinforce a mythic quality.

That mythic quality dovetails with how the story that became *Texas* was originally about isolation, but it was a sense of *claustrophobia*—feeling trapped in a hardware department—that gave Hooper the film's skeletal structure. The interplay of claustrophobia and isolation that went into the genesis of the film is intriguing. One of Kracauer's main points in *From Caligari to Hitler* is that German Expressionism reflects a sense of intense claustrophobia on the Continent, a feeling manifested grotesquely in Hitler's *Lebensraum* (“Living Space”) ideology. By contrast, the dominant mythos of the U.S. has been the

expansive American Frontier and stories of opportunities in the great West that went hand-in-hand with the government's presumption that the country had a "manifest destiny" to spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The American West was also coded as wild, however, as well as the site of mythic tragedy. From *High Noon* (1952) to the *The Wild Bunch* (1969), the Western genre in the 1950s and 1960s increasingly shifted from romantic depictions of cowboys defeating "Indians," and sheriffs in white hats outgunning outlaws in black hats, to depicting the moral ambiguity and everyday horror of living on the frontier. The western genre also increasingly evoked anxieties of encroaching modernity. *The Wild Bunch* included such anxieties, as did *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). As the genre became largely exhausted, the space for such encounters moved. Films such as *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Deliverance* (1972) reflect in part growing tensions between the dominant movie-going populace of suburban spaces one hand and an impoverished periphery, located largely in the South, on the other.

That tension existed *within* the South, as well, as the "Rise of the Sunbelt" saw a dramatic reversal in the large-scale population exodus that had existed for over a half-century and the region underwent a dramatic economic resurgence. As scholar Margie Burns notes, however, that resurgence, crucially, was limited to metropolitan areas—"the countryside received no mass migration" (52). Seven of the largest Sunbelt cities each saw population increases of 300,000 or more, and, perhaps crucially, five of those seven cities were in Texas: Houston (over a million and half) Dallas (nearly a million), San Antonio, El Paso, and Austin (*ibid*). Population growth in turn led to a sharp increase in real estate values and the expansion of suburban areas. The filmmakers of *Texas* are almost all from the state, but they are specifically from the Austin metropolitan area, and they themselves speak of rural Texas in somewhat foreboding terms; Hooper and Henkel, in particular, have both expressed their anxieties about how "out there," as Hooper describes rural Texas, "got kind of scary" (*Shocking*). The acute manifestation of the Southern Other and the consumption of films featuring it—even (or especially) in the South—makes sense, as it is coded not just in terms of geography ("Southern") but also in terms of modernity (urban/rural) and social class. Indeed, like the complex coding of the farmhouse of *Night* and the woods of *Last House*, assuming that that the South (or Texas) is solely coded as the "terrible place" misses the film's further coding of space. The Southern Other is not just an anxiety for Americans from other regions to fear; urban and suburban Southerners themselves can experience it in terms of an impediment of Progress, the new "savage native" of the

frontier.¹¹² Class anxieties become salient. As Clover argues, the rural is typically coded as impoverished, and to confront the rural is “to confront the poverty that one may have colluded in creating and maintaining” (132).

Several critics (e.g. Wood, Bould, Sharrett) have also pointed to the apocalyptic tones and themes of the film, and the first promotional poster for *Texas* seemingly speaks to such concerns. Included on the poster is the question, “*Who will survive and what will be left of them?*” (fig. 27). “What will be left of them” evokes primal fears of bodily integrity and, more directly, death. The tagline also arguably speaks to sociohistorical anxieties. While the antecedent for “who” and “them” is ostensibly the protagonists of the film, there is an inherent slippage that gestures towards a broader reference—to the eschatological mood of the era that arose from the apparent eroding of existing social structures as explored in the film. As Sharrett describes, the film speaks to the sense that

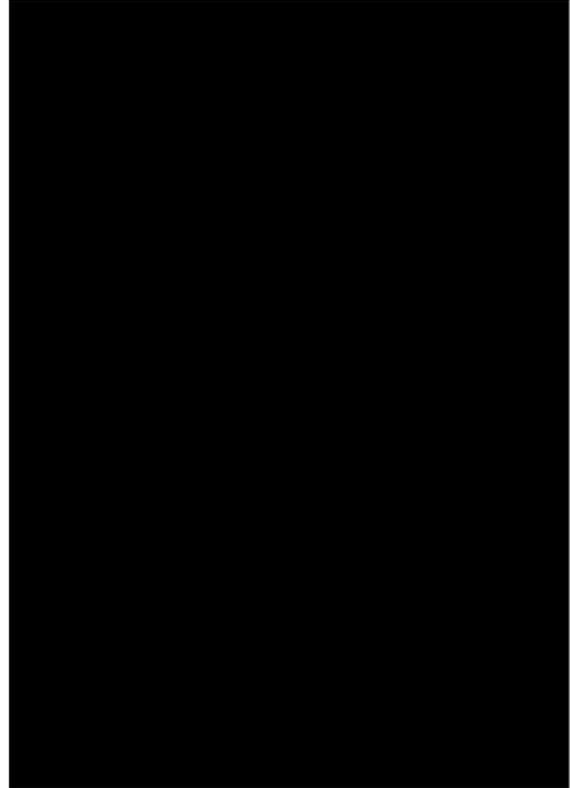


Figure 27. The promotional poster for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* nods to the film’s apocalyptic themes and begins a paratextual appeal to *vérité*.

“the civilizing spirit has run its course; its energies are depleted, its myths not only dead but inverted and forced to show the consequences of their motivating force” (271). That meaning is suggested elsewhere on the poster: it also includes the claim that “What happened is true. Now the motion picture that’s just as real” which speaks to how, like *Last House on the Left*, *Texas* adopts an appeal to verisimilitude.¹¹³ It works to attract audiences and once there, to suture them into the film’s confrontation with real life horrors and anxieties. The goal of achieving authenticity was carried over from the film poster to other paratextual appeals of the film’s crawl. Accompanied by narration (by John Larroquette) it proclaims, “The film which you are about to see is an account of the tragedy which befell a group of five youths, in particular Sally Hardesty and her invalid brother, Franklin.”

The spectator, even if incredulous, is primed to associate the horrors onscreen with real life, as well as to anticipate identification with these two specific characters amongst a larger group of five protagonists. The crawl concludes, “The events of that day were to lead to the discovery of one of the most bizarre crimes in the annals of American history, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.” The attention to crime and American history inform what immediately follows. First a title card indicates the date, August 18, 1973, and the spectator, then, is not set adrift in the atemporal mist of the Hollywood dream factory, but is grounded in immediate present. While Henkel asserts that he never intended for people to believe the crawl (he thought it was sensationalized, like Orson Welles’s *War of the Worlds* broadcast), he recalls how—like the viewers of *Last House*—“a lot of people” in fact believed its claims (qtd. in Jaworzyn 91). Hooper asserts that he, like Craven, thought of the crawl as part of a false document approach that he took in response to government misinformation—about the war and Watergate, in particular (Hooper).

Hooper’s visual style in many ways mirrors that of Romero’s and Craven’s, as he too was trained as a documentarian and embraced *cinéma-vérité*.¹¹⁴ The composition of *Texas* resembles both *Night* and *Last House* in its suggestion that what we are watching resembles something closer to a newsreel of horrific events than a polished Hollywood film. On-location shooting and the frequent use of handheld cameras facilitated that goal, though as with both *Night* and *Last House*, happenstance played a role. Director of Photography Daniel Pearl recalls that there were no 35 mm blimp camera available, so the crew shot the film in 16 mm and it was then blown up to 35mm. While the film’s visual style was largely adopted out of necessity, the result was audiences frequently commented, as Marilyn Burns recalls, on how *Texas* “looks so real” and has “that grainy, documentary look” (qtd. in Jaworzyn 59). Henkel adds that the effect was “exacerbated” due to carelessness when Bryanston made prints of the film, and so the film was “grainier than it should have been—which lent it a quality of authenticity” (ibid 90).

The appeal to authenticity carries over to the *mise-en-scène* of individual shots, and here collaboration is key. Robert Burns worked with Hooper to achieve the latter’s vision for the film, especially with regards to the monstrous family’s home. Recalling stories he heard from his Wisconsin relatives about serial killer Ed Gein, Hooper wanted the family’s furniture, walls, and living space to appear adorned with human and animal bones, teeth, and skin when possible. Hooper recalls how he would describe what he wanted to Robert Burns, and “instantly overnight he would invent another prop or another mask or another

piece of ‘dead art’” (*Shocking*). Burns took an almost functional anthropological approach in imagining what the family would do with “these parts left over from people and animals that they’ve killed” (ibid). Burns procured real animal skeletons from local farms and a veterinarian’s bone yard. He then designed the “skin” using “a formula... of liquid latex and fiberglass insulation” to create a “fibrous-looking, translucent” material that would “naturally turn this brownish, yellowish color” (ibid). Burns’s efforts resulted in one of the most disturbing elements of the film. As he points out, “you think you’ve seen... a bloodbath, and you’ve seen very little blood” (ibid). Critics often were fooled, as Ebert’s description that the film is “blood-soaked” attests. That effect, I believe, is facilitated by Burns’s inventive attention to detail with regards to *mise-en-scène* on the one hand, and Hooper’s masterful editing on the other.

As with Romero and Craven, Hooper joins a documentary-like *mise-en-scène* with montages that bombard the viewer’s senses. After the title card fades out, the screen remains black for close to twenty seconds. One of the film’s anxiety-inducing themes remains on the soundtrack throughout, and the spectator begins to hear what sounds like the shoveling of dirt, labored breathing and wood being split; but the spectator *sees* nothing. Then a flash of light from the bulb of a camera suddenly floods the frame, accompanied by the whir of the camera’s shutter, beginning the film’s opening sequence: a series of graphic snapshots of various decaying body parts (fig. 28). The flash of the bulb (shot 1) cuts to an image of the first photograph taken, an extreme close-up of a corpse’s right hand, palm up (shot 2). Then with another flash of the camera (shot 3), a cut to an extreme close-up of a corpse’s left hand from slightly underneath (shot 4). A third flash (shot 5) illuminates what registers only as rotting flesh (shot 6).

An opening sequence seemingly plays an especially large role in enunciation. Here, for example, these graphic images are the first the spectator encounters, and as enunciator—the *constituting* subject-spectator—the spectator desires to know their source in order to produce meaning. In dominant cinema, this role is typically facilitated largely by the text itself in the *histoire* register through continuity editing and the seamless style. Here, however, there is no establishing shot or the other cinematic codes of dominant cinema present, and the constituting subject-spectator struggles to make sense of the text. In fact, I would argue that enunciation is articulated in the register of *discours*, which, scholar Annette Kuhn suggests, “foregrounds subjectivity in its address” (49). The text confronts the spectator: in terms of images, all that is offered are these photographs being taken of disinterred corpses. The images are disjointed, each

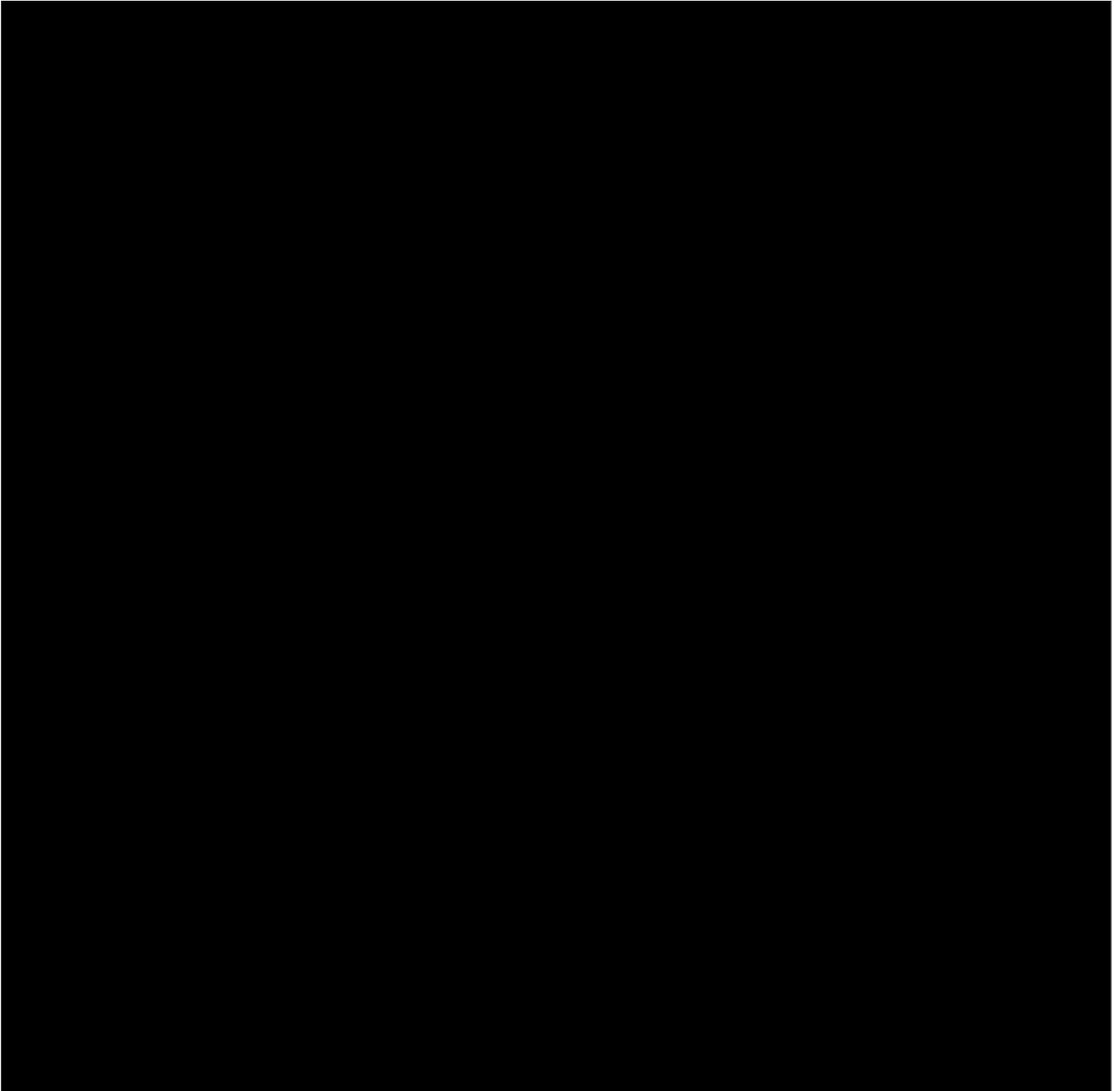


Figure 28. The first grisly images the spectator encounters in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). The snapshot effect combined with the angle and distance from subject to camera effectively register as point-of-view shots, implicating and suturing the spectator into the filmic text as an accomplice in what is soon revealed to be the robbing of graves for the creation of a grotesque corpse sculpture.

separated from the next by (relatively) long periods of darkness, and each appears for only a few seconds at a time. There is also no figure present in the frame to indicate a subject with whom the spectator is to identify; in considering the images, the enunciator—the subject-spectator—is the only subject present. The camera’s subjectivity is further suggested by the remaining shots in the sequence. A flash (shot 7) illuminates a shot that is taken far enough back that part of the corpse’s lower leg is still visible (shot 8), while a subsequent jump cut tightens the frame around an extreme close-up of what is now not even the entire shoe (shot 9). The move from close-up to extreme close-up gives the spectator the sense of having *actively* gotten closer to it, as if the spectator is the intelligence behind the camera. Several shots, in fact, are composed in such extreme close-up that the spectator would have to be *behind* the camera itself for such images to be rendered. These are, in effect, point-of-view shots, and the spectator is implicated as the source of the horrific images. The next series of shots has the same potential effect: three shots of the same hands that jump cut from a close-up (shot 10) to an extreme close-up (shot 11) to an even closer extreme close-up (shot 12). The last series works similarly, only along with the proximity, the angle of the camera with respect to the subject also changes: a low angle close-up of a corpse’s mouth (shot 13) jump cuts to a shot taken from slightly further away and at an oblique angle above the subject, capturing the left eye socket and the nasal cavity as well as the left half of the mouth (shot 14), which jump cuts to a shot taken from the right in profile and parallel to the corpse (shot 15). The images of these series are not random—they suggest a presence that is moving the camera in a deliberate way, and with no other subject with whom to identify, the spectator is implicated.

While it has become a commonplace when discussing John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) to note how its opening sequence is rendered subjectively, implicating the viewer in the process, I have yet to find any suggestion that Hooper accomplishes a similar feat here. When critical assessments include a discussion of the sequence at all they do so in terms of its relationship to the narrative only, and even then there are omissions and incongruities. Scholar Rick Worland, for example, assumes the photographs were taken *after* the graves were robbed: “In conjunction with glances at the melting dead, these sounds not only record what’s happening now—presumably the corpses being photographed by the authorities as evidence—but simultaneously present the atrocity’s initial stage when the robbers (implicitly the Leatherface gang) defiled the grave” (212). Worland attributes the images and sounds of the camera to one

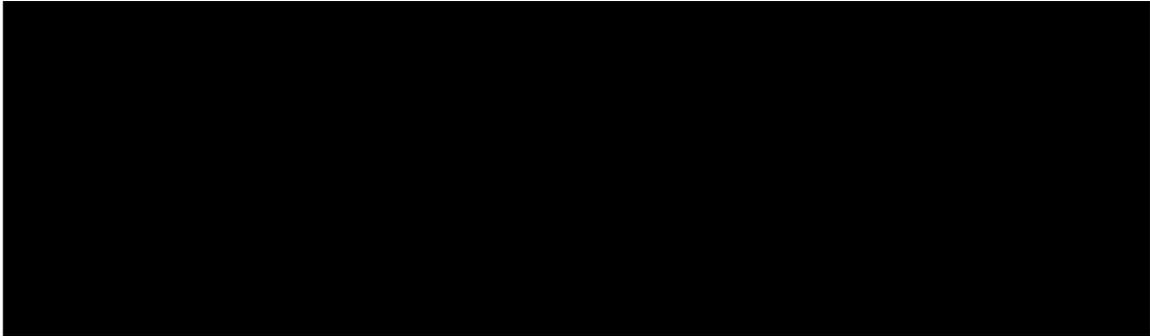


Figure 29. The grotesque corpse sculpture that the photographs of the opening sequence were documenting. source (the authorities) and the sounds of digging to another (grave robbers). The sounds stop, however, before each camera flash and then begin again afterward, suggesting it is the same intelligence operating both shovel and camera.¹¹⁵ Taken together the sounds and images reinforce the syntax of the sequence, suggesting a single unseen presence with which the spectator is left to identify.¹¹⁶

Worland's assessment also overlooks a final image that punctuates the opening sequence: a cut to the graveyard at dawn reveals that the photographs have been taken to document, it seems, the creation of a grotesque sculpture (fig 29). The revelation, however, only raises further questions for the spectator, who is unaware of how the sculpture's creation fits within the confines of the narrative, and unaware still of how the prior images were created at all. Questions the constituted spectator-subject needs answered to be situated in the narrative ("What am I doing in this graveyard?") potentially relate to a sense of disgust or even shame ("Who am I to be watching this?") but they also call forth questions for the constituting subject-spectator ("Who am I that I'm helping to create such horrific images?"). Wood points to an "unintelligibility" in the film's grammar, in general, which he ties to a perceived apocalyptic theme, an assessment that critic Lew Brighton discusses at length in "Saturn in Retrograde or The Texas Jump Cut." This unintelligibility often works, however, to confront the spectator: as with *Night* and *Last House*, s/he is implicated in the horrors that will be depicted, arguably from the very first frame.

The next several sequences further suture the spectator alternately into the *histoire* and *discours* registers by eliciting both primal fears and real life horrors that pervaded 1970s America. As the shot of the sculpture sequence slowly fades out, a radio news report begins in voice-over: "Grave robbing in Texas is this hour's top news story. An informant led officers of the Muerto County Sheriff's Department to a cemetery just outside the small rural Texas community of Newt early this morning." In giving such specific details from "real life" from which the subject-spectator is to finally make sense of the text, Hooper further

grounds the narrative in a specific milieu. The report describes how “the remains of a badly decomposed corpse wired to a large monument” before going on to elaborate that at least a dozen crypts had been emptied, and “in some instances only parts of a corpse have been removed, the head or in some cases the extremities removed, the remainder of the corpse left intact.” As with both *Night* and *Last House*, Texas evokes the primal fear of bodily integrity. The report also notes, “Sheriff Jesus Maldonado refused to give details in the ghoulish case, and said only that he did have evidence linking the crime to elements outside the state.” The narrative goes on to explicitly prove this to be untrue, retroactively calling into question the official account. In fact, just before the viewer learns that the Hitchhiker is responsible, a second news report elaborates on the sheriff’s theory: he blames a “west coast” syndicate that robs graves for jewelry. That Hooper calls attention to the unreliability of official accounts recalls his own claim that the film is in part a response to governmental duplicity and the similar efforts of Romero in *Night* (with the evasive general) and Craven in *Last House* (with its incompetent sheriff and deputy).

Close Reading

A cut to the titles sequences is accompanied by discordant music and shots of solar flares that have been tinted a deep red (fig. 30, shot 1). Hooper recalls how his “thinking about solar flares and sunspots reflecting behaviors” influenced the structure of the film: “it folds continuously back in on itself, and no matter where you’re going it’s the wrong place.... That’s the reason the movie starts on the sun” (qtd. In Baumgarten). The camera cuts to a shot of the sun (shot 2), which dissolves to a close-up of dead armadillo on the side of a highway, setting the film’s bleak tone (shot 3). In the background of the shot is the group of “five youths” traveling by van, and an initial sequence introduces the protagonists and sets the film’s tone further. Jerry pulls over so that Kirk can help the wheelchair-bound Franklin out to urinate. A passing semi kicks dirt up into Kirk’s face and startles Franklin, who loses control of his wheelchair, slides downhill, and falls out of his chair. Pam and Franklin’s sister, Sally, scream out, as Kirk hurries down to help him. Back on the road, the group suffers in the Texas summer heat. Pam reads astrological charts for group, one of which notes that Saturn is in retrograde, and that “the condition of retrograde... is evil.” While the film itself does not specify it, Saturn in retrograde traditionally is a sign that the social order is breaking down, and the news report the group listen to on the van’s radio testifies as much: it includes stories of domestic violence, an office building collapse that killed twenty-nine people, a ritualistic murder, war in South

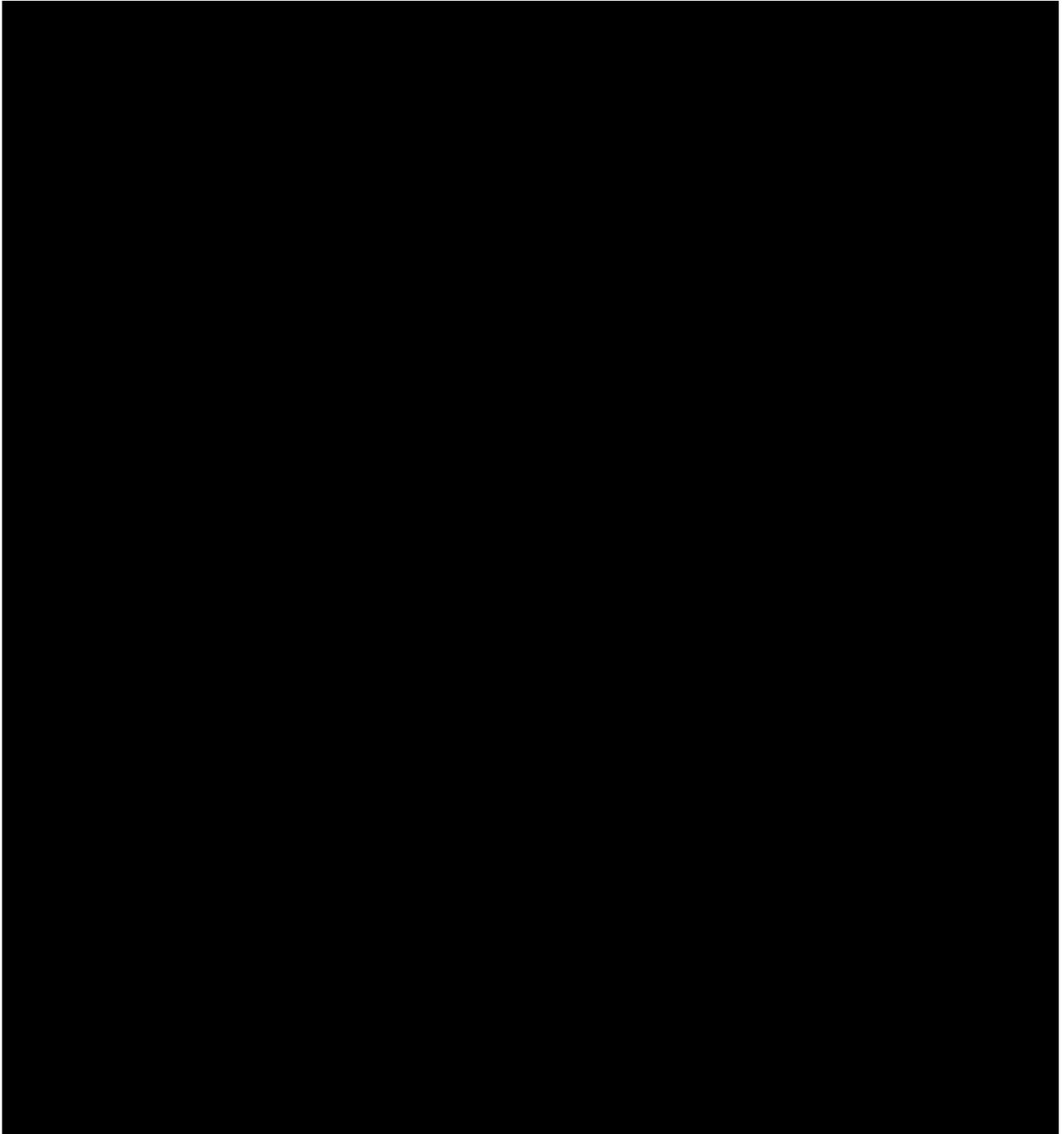


Figure 30. The opening title sequence of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* comprises a series of shots of solar flares that have been tinted an ominous red, accompanied by the film's discordant score, setting the tone for the film and establishing the role astrology will play in the unfolding narrative (shot 1). As discussed further below, the sequence also gestures towards real life anxieties: a series of massive solar flares had knocked out communications the year prior to *Texas's* release. A cut to an ominous shot of the sun accompanied by the same discordant score is the first of several such shots throughout the film (shot 2), and the ominous tone these first shots establish is reinforced by a shot of a dead armadillo on the side of the road (shot 3). The disruption of the rural as a "terrible place" is highlighted by the ensuing sequence that begins in a cemetery (shot 4), in which the camera crosscuts between figures coded as rural are both congenial (shots 7, 10, and 14) and foreboding (shots 8, 12, and 15).

America over oil, and, finally, a story about parents charged with starving their child that they kept chained in an attic. The oil crisis, the breakdown of the American family, crime: these are the kinds of real life horrors and anxieties that the film will continually evoke, reflecting the “the brutality of things” that Hooper found in the news of the world (qtd. in Bowen 17).

A bit of playful dialogue reveals the group’s coding and their relationships to one another: as Pam is telling Jerry about how Jupiter’s “maleficence is increased” when the planet is in retrograde, Jerry turns to Kirk and asks, “Hey man, you believe all that stuff your old lady is hocking me?” Pam and Kirk are a romantic couple, as are Sally and Jerry, and the group’s speech, their clothes and hair, their van, and their general interest in astrology come together to code them as holdovers of the counterculture.¹¹⁷ Sally and Franklin’s grandfather’s grave is in the same graveyard that was vandalized, and the group is traveling to check on it. A cut to a long shot of the van outside a cemetery (shot 4) establishes the next sequence, with an early contrast between the locals gathered there, most of whom are middle aged or older, wearing clothing coded as rural (shot 5), and the group of teens (shot 6). The remaining shots in the sequence highlight how the rural is itself coded as both idyllic and menacing. Sally asks one a kind-looking elderly man if she can find out if her grandfather’s grave has been disturbed (shot 7). Smiling warmly, he directs her to the sheriff. The camera cuts to another older man who is sitting on the ground, visibly drunk (shot 8) and then cuts back to Sally as a tall, young local man in a cowboy hats comes over to accompany her; he even turns to Jerry to joke, “Say, fella, I’m gonna run off with your girl—you don’t mind do ya?” before lightheartedly directing the crowd to let them in: “Hey folks, let us through, this girl’s granddaddy’s buried here!” (shot 9). Sally smiles and follows him into the graveyard while the others wait by the van (shot 10). As Sally goes to check on their grandfather’s grave, Franklin’s attention turns towards the drunken man (shot 11) as he cackles and ominously remarks, “Things happen here about—they don’t tell about. I see things. You see, they say it’s just an old man talking. You laugh at an old man. There’s them that laughs and knows better” (shot 12). The camera then crosscuts between Franklin’s disturbed reaction (shot 13), Sally and the handsome cowboy (shot 14), and the drunken man as he continues to cackle ominously (shot 15). The locals thus are coded from early in the film as both warm and inviting on the one hand, and menacing on the other. *Texas* disrupts the metonymic chain of other films featuring the Southern Other, such as *Easy Rider* and *Deliverance*—coded, as Margie Burns describes, as “southern accent equal pickup,

pickup equals shotgun, shotgun equals death to hippies” (56). Here—like with *Night* and *Last House*—space is divided from within.

Sally tries to reassure Franklin that their grandfather’s grave had not been disturbed as the camera cuts to back inside the van and the group already back on the highway. They decide to go visit Sally and Franklin’s grandparents’ old house. On the way they pass a slaughterhouse; all at once the group reacts to the noisome smell. Only Franklin knows what it is (“that’s where grandpa used to sell his cattle!”); he becomes visibly animated as he describes how the workers killed the cattle by braining them with a sledgehammer, disgusting the group. The camera cuts to foreboding close-up shot of an obviously sick cow—a conspicuously incongruent image—then a long shot of long line of the cattle pens along the highway as they pass. The cows’ mooing can be heard over the sound of a saw cutting into flesh and bone. It is an ominous sequence; the youths, like the cows, are being led to slaughter. Franklin continues to gleefully describe to the group the slaughtering process in graphic detail. When Pam, a vegetarian, objects to the cruelty of it, Franklin tries reassuring her: “Well they don’t do it like that anymore. They got this big air gun that shoots a bolt into their skull and retracts it.” Then he mimics the gun’s action in morbid detail, once again disgusting the group. Franklin is coded, in fact, as a liminal figure, here and throughout the film. His disability helps characterize him differently, yes, but that is not the extent of it. Henkel explains that, if anything, it should elicit “a bit of sympathy” from the others and the audience, but Henkel and Hooper decided to “play against it by making him an obnoxious and unattractive whiner” (qtd. in Jaworzyn 45). It is Franklin’s disposition rather than his disability that alienates him at times from the rest of the group.¹¹⁸ Like Mari in *Last House*, he has a morbid fascination with violence; like Mari—and like Karen in *Night*—he also connects to the monstrous in liminal space.

In *Texas* the monstrous takes the form of a family of cannibals, the first of which is the Hitchhiker that the group picks up. Wood was an early champion of *Texas*, just as he had been with *Night* and *Last House*, regarding it as part of the golden age of progressive American horror. Wood situates the film’s cultural anxieties almost exclusively in terms of “monstrous family” who, for Wood, are another example of the return of the repressed—they are the embodiment of patriarchal capitalism: the family’s cannibalism, Wood contends, “only carries to its logical conclusion the basic (though unstated) tenet of capitalism, that people have the right to live off of other people” (*Hollywood* 84). While Wood’s assessment is typically

ahistorical, such a reading dovetails perfectly, in fact, with how at the time of the film's release the 1970s were already marked by a turning away from the communal focus of the 1960s countercultural back towards the self-interests of patriarchal capitalism (Tom Wolfe would go on to refer to the 1970s as the "Me Decade" a year later).¹¹⁹ In such a reading, the cannibalistic family, the embodiment of capitalism, kills and feeds on the counterculture, represented by the van of hippie teens.¹²⁰

In his description of the family, however, Wood seemingly neglects a key detail about their circumstances that potentially speaks to why audiences often identified with the monstrous family (a fact he himself had bemoaned). When Franklin comments that he has "an uncle who works in a slaughter house," the Hitchhiker replies, "I was at that slaughterhouse. My brother worked there. My grandfather, too. My family's always been in meat." The slaughterhouse, it seems, was the source of employment for the family going back several generations. When Franklin asks him about using the air gun, the Hitchhiker protests, "That gun's no good. The old way—with the sledge! See, that was better—they died better that way!" Franklin says he thought the gun was better, and the Hitchhiker explains, "Oh, no. With the new way, people [are] put out of jobs." That last detail is key. Wood refers to the family as "retired, but still practicing slaughterhouse workers" (*Hollywood* 68). "Retired" is euphemistic: the family has been *mechanized* out of work. The family are themselves as much victims of late capitalism as they are capitalism's embodiment, and their story evokes 1970s anxieties over closing factories, high unemployment, and what was economically the worst decade since the 1930s.¹²¹

There are echoes, too, of the Vietnam War, of soldiers that—like the slaughterhouse workers—have only been trained to kill and are ill-equipped to return to society. When Franklin asks the Hitchhiker if he had used the sledgehammer, the former eagerly pulls out photographs of slaughtered cattle. As Franklin looks at them, the hitchhiker gleefully declares, "I was the killer!" The Hitchhiker arguably is coded as a veteran of the war: he wears an olive green shirt, tan pants, and what appear to be black leather lace-up boots—possibly combat boots. He also has what appears to be a long line of red grease paint from his right eye to around his nose and down the right side of his face; it could signify blood, but with the rest of his appearance it could also be coded as camouflage. He is also not alone: when the group get to the gas station, the attendant who washes their windshield appears disoriented, and he, too, wears a dark green shirt, khakis, and combat boots, further suggesting the parallel to newly returned soldiers (fig. 31).

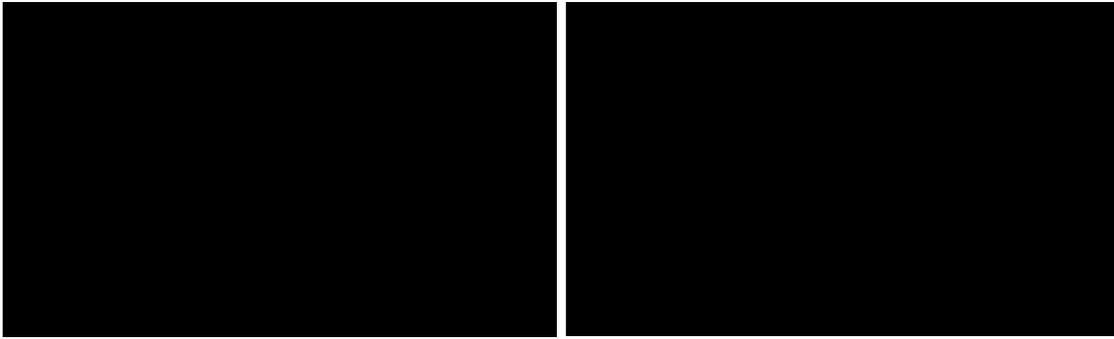


Figure 31. The hitchhiker (top left) and the gas station attendant (top right) are both arguably coded as Vietnam War veterans. Both wear dark green shirts, khaki pants, and military boots. The Hitchhiker also has what appears to be caked-on blood stylized like camouflage on his face. Returning soldiers were often young men who had often only been trained to kill and were ill-equipped to return to society, just as the Hitchhiker’s family had only been trained to kill at the slaughterhouse and were ill-equipped for society when they were mechanized out of work.

Right before reaching the gas station, however, the group has an even more disturbing experience with the Hitchhiker. Franklin, the liminal figure, bonds with him over their shared knowledge of the workings of the slaughterhouse and the ingredients of headcheese. The rest of the group, however, has grown visibly disgusted and Pam, a vegetarian, asks if they can change the subject. Franklin says, “You’d like it if you didn’t know what’s in it,” much to the Hitchhiker’s delight. Kirk agrees with Pam, saying “Come on Franklin, you’re making everybody sick,” to which the Hitchhiker appears to feel dejected. When Franklin takes out a pocketknife the Hitchhiker takes it from him, and, to the horror of the group, slashes himself and displays the wound proudly. He gives the knife back to Franklin, but then takes out his own. The group, visibly disturbed, is only partially relieved when he puts the knife away. He then takes out a camera and points it at each member of the group, before taking Franklin’s picture, much to the latter’s shock. When the Hitchhiker suggests the group can take him to his house, they say they’d rather drop him off on the road near where he’s going. He then invites the group to dinner; turning to Franklin, he proclaims, “You like head cheese! My brother makes it real good!” When Kirk insists they have to “press on,” the Hitchhiker takes out Franklin’s now developed picture and hands it to him—a parallel to handing him the picture of the slaughtered cows earlier. When the Hitchhiker asks for two dollars for it, a bewildered Franklin refuses. When the Hitchhiker demands payment, Paul intervenes: “No, man. Franklin, give him back the damn picture.” The Hitchhiker then ritualistically burns the picture and slashes Franklin with his knife. The van comes to a halt as the others force the Hitchhiker out.

After the group speeds off and regains their composure, Pam reads Franklin's horoscope: it predicts a disruption "in long-range plans" and how "upsetting persons around you could make this a disturbing and unpredictable day. The events in the world are not doing much either to cheer one up." Jerry tells Pam to read Sally's, and Pam notes ominously that Sally's sign is "ruled by Saturn," and her horoscope reads, "There are moments when we cannot believe that what is happening is really true. Pinch yourself and you may find out that it is." The camera cuts to the gas station attendant, staring first at his combat boots, then up directly into the sun. A cut to a shot of the sun itself is accompanied by the same ominous musical *leitmotif* from the film's opening title sequence. Mark Bould is typical of several critics in that he finds astrology and solar activity being offered as explanations for the horrors of the film to be at odds with sociohistorical explanations, and that "the fragmented presentation of both rationales... undermines their coherence" (98). Such assessments miss the potential sociohistorical significance astrology and solar flares would have had for both Hooper and the audience at the time. The counterculture had embraced the so-called "Age of Aquarius," so foregrounding how "Saturn is in retrograde" offers a strong contrast to the horrors of the age. Also, throughout the previous August sunspots had appeared, followed by intense solar activity, culminating in a massive solar flare—one of the largest on record—that affected radio and cable lines throughout the United States. An article in *Time Magazine* entitled "Storm on the Sun" described it thusly: "It was as if a poltergeist had suddenly gone on a global rampage.... Short-wave radio communications were disrupted... and utilities braced for stray surges of current that could knock out their power lines." Perhaps critics neglect the historical resonance here because that history is itself relatively obscure—I have yet to come across a critical assessment that even mentions it—but Hooper includes a discussion of solar flares alongside his comment about how the era had "zeitgeist" into him as he was conceiving the film's structure (Baumgarten). While he does not explicitly state that they were an allusion to the real-life breakdown in communication, such a resonance arguably would have been present for audiences.

The loss of the nation's systems of communication would be disquieting, and so, too, would a massive disruption in its oil-based economy. Hooper, in fact, evokes both. When the group arrives at the gas station, the owner solemnly tells them, "I got no gas," and that the fuel truck might not arrive until morning. The fear elicited here is "straight out of the 'No gas' time," Hooper observes (*American*). The oil

crisis left a strong impression on him and would have on audiences at the time, as well: as he explains, “we were really afraid—things may really change if we’re really out of fuel.” (ibid). The inability to communicate or to move are tied to the primal fear of isolation that is central to the film, but they also reflect the sociohistorical anxieties of the time—the fear that society *was* breaking down.

As Sally and Pam go to use the station’s restroom, the men talk with the owner. Franklin asks him if he knows whether or not an unmarked dirt road that the group just passed leads up to his grandparents’ abandoned property. The owner says it does, but tries to dissuade the group from going: “Well now look, you boys don’t wanna go messin’ around no old house. Those things is dangerous—you’re liable to get hurt!” When Jerry dismissively remarks, “We’ll be careful,” the owner adds, “You don’t wanna go foolin’ around other folks’ property. Some folks don’t like it and they don’t mind showin’ ya.” Franklin explains that his father owns the property, at which point the station owner changes tactics, offering the group “good barbecue” and assuring them that they should stay and wait for the gas transport to arrive. The group presses on, however. Arriving at the abandoned house, Franklin is awestruck by a mark the Hitchhiker made with his blood on the van while the others go inside to romp around, leaving him behind. Franklin, spits and curses them from afar, further coding him as a liminal figure.

When Pam and Kirk return, Franklin tells them how to get to a “swimming hole.” When they set off on their own to find it, Kirk spots a nearby house and hears a generator running, and he and Pam head towards it to barter for gasoline. A long shot frames a juxtaposition of coded space: in the foreground of the shot sunflowers fill the frame; in the middle ground Kirk and Pam walk towards the house; and in the background there is a large wall of camouflaged netting. Peeking through it, Kirk and Pam find a graveyard of what appear to be abandoned late model cars (including two Volkswagen “beetles,” which were associated with the counterculture). Right next to the cars is the generator, but they do not make the connection that the gas powering it possibly came from them. Finding the house, Kirk and Pam knock but there is no answer. Kirk finds a human tooth on the front porch and drops it in Pam’s hand. Disgusted, she goes to sit in a large swing in the front yard while Kirk goes through the unlocked door. Looking into the house, he (and the spectator) sees a red wall with various animal skulls hung up. He yells into the house but there is no answer until what sounds like a pig squealing rings out. Kirk investigates and, stumbling through a doorway, encounters Leatherface.¹²² A cut to a point-of-view shot reveals the human monster

only briefly: wearing a slaughterhouse apron and wielding the kind of mallet that Franklin described earlier, he immediately is coded in those terms: he brains Kirk like livestock, and the camera cuts to a point-of-view shot from Leatherface's perspective as Kirk falls to the floor and begins convulsing.¹²³ Leatherface grabs Kirk's body and drags him effortlessly inside the room, slamming shut a metal door—conspicuously incongruent in the old house.

The incongruence becomes more pronounced in a key sequence that features horror images that are grotesque yet banal, an effect accomplished by a masterful combination of *mise-en-scène* and montage (fig. 32). When Kirk does not quickly return, Pam goes searching for him, stumbling and falling into a different room (shot 1). A reaction shot of Pam (shot 2) begins a disjointed montage that registers the horrors she witnesses inside: first a chicken that is cruelly being kept in a cage barely larger than itself (shot 3), then a human jaw bone on the floor (shot 5a) begins a pan to the bones of a human foot (shot 5b), and then the camera tilts up and around the edges of a piece of furniture covered in bone, ending with a human skull centered above it (shot 5c). The camera cuts to a long shot of the horrific display (shot 6). The camera continues its rapid-fire cutting to shots of the room's horrors: a human skull with a horn jutting through its mouth, hanging from the ceiling (shot 8), a broken, empty tortoise shell (shot 10), bones on display as bric-a-brac (shot 12), and feathers and teeth covering the floor like a grotesque carpet.

The brief length of each of the shots—none lasts more than a few seconds—leaves the spectator with only glimpses of the room's horrors as the camera cuts between them and reaction shots of Pam (shots 2, 4, 7, 9, and 15) in a shot/reverse-shot sequence, complete with low angle/high angle matches, replicating the typical relationship between the technique and its common use, *except* in its effects: rather than obscuring the enunciation and placing the spectator in a pleasurable position of mastery over the visual field in the register of *histoire*, the disjointed succession of images instead bounds up the spectator with the horror as a constituting-subject, trying to make sense of the images in the register of *discours*. That task is itself difficult: rather than, say, the dialectic of Soviet montage or disjunctive editing that engages the spectator intellectually, here the effect is completely visceral and disorienting. The sheer horror of the scene becomes overdetermined as the spectator is bombarded by its spectacle.

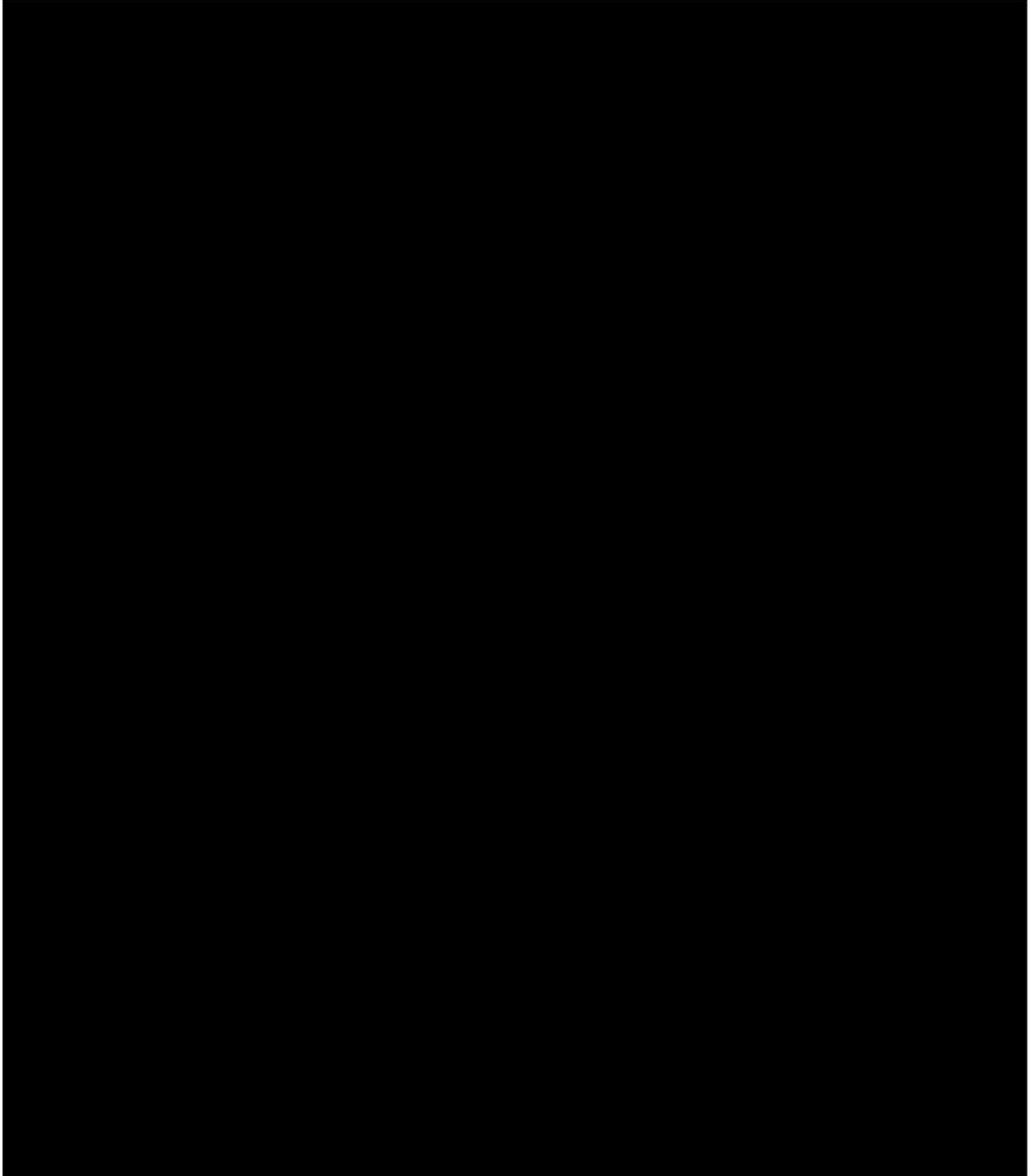


Figure 32. Art director Robert Burns's "dead art" and director Tobe Hooper's rapid fire editing combine to create a horrific marriage of *mise-en-scène* and montage. Looking for Kirk in the cannibal family's home, Pam stumbles into a room full of nightmarish images (shot 1). The spectator registers Pam's reactions (shots 2, 4, 9, 11, and 15) to a full-grown chicken cruelly being kept in a canary cage (shots 3 and 13), bones, teeth, and feathers that adorn the floor like a grotesque carpet (shot 5), a chair frame made of human and animal bones (shots 6, 7, and 8), a hanging skull adorned with feathers and a horn jutting through its mouth (shot 10), an empty tortoise shell (shot 12) and various bones and other grotesque objects ready to be displayed like horrific bric-a-brac (shot 14).

When Pam flees, Leatherface intercepts her and drags her to be hung on a meat hook, reinforcing the earlier coding of a slaughterhouse. That the gas station proprietor offered the group “good barbeque” turns out to be a bit of foreshadowing: he is the “Old Man” who belongs to the same cannibalistic family as both the Hitchhiker and Leatherface. They kill other human beings for food and sell what they don’t eat through the gas station. They use the remains for furniture and décor. With the family’s monstrosity coded in the everyday, their evil becomes banal. Hansen recalls Hooper and Henkel telling him “we decided to have a family of Ed Geins” (qtd. Jaworzyn 39). Ties between these filmic transgressions and real life horrors, however, go beyond the inspiration from a single case. In addition to his relatives’ stories of Gein, Hooper’s family doctor told him stories about attending a Halloween party wearing a skinned cadaver’s face as a mask and seeing lampshades made out of human skin (*American*). Scholar David Bell goes so far as to argue that the “cannibalism and the fetishisation of human remains” in the film “point to the Nazi death camps” (101). In describing why *Texas* is so disturbing, Hansen singles out how its grotesque horrors are utterly believable: “there are people like this out in the world” (*Shocking*).

The people to whom Hansen refers are also not coded *solely* as monstrous. The Hitchhiker bonds with Franklin. The Old Man actually tries to discourage the youths from going to Sally and Franklin’s grandparents’ home. He seems genuinely concerned about who they might stumble upon. Leatherface, especially, is rendered as alternately the most monstrous—he alone will kill the members of the group—and yet he is also the most sympathetic. When Jerry leaves Sally and Franklin to try and find Pam and Kirk, he enters the house (fig. 33) and wanders into the kitchen where he sees the meat hook with blood still on it (shot 1), and hears noises coming from a freezer (shot 2). He opens it and Pam, blue from exposure, sits up violently, ostensibly an involuntary reaction (shot 3). Before Jerry can react Leatherface comes from behind (shot 4) and brains him, as well (shot 5), then quickly pushes Pam’s body back into the freezer (shot 6). Leatherface then hurries about the room, looking down each hallway (shot 7), before taking off running into another room where he throws open the curtains (shot 8), frantically looking outside (shot 9), then looking down at the ground (shot 10), as if he were looking for someone.

What the scene seems to suggest, in fact, is that this is exactly what Leatherface is doing: he sits down in front of the window (shot 11), clearly anxious. A cut to a close up (shot 12) lasts only a split second, titillating the viewer with the briefest of glances at his monstrous mask illuminated by natural light

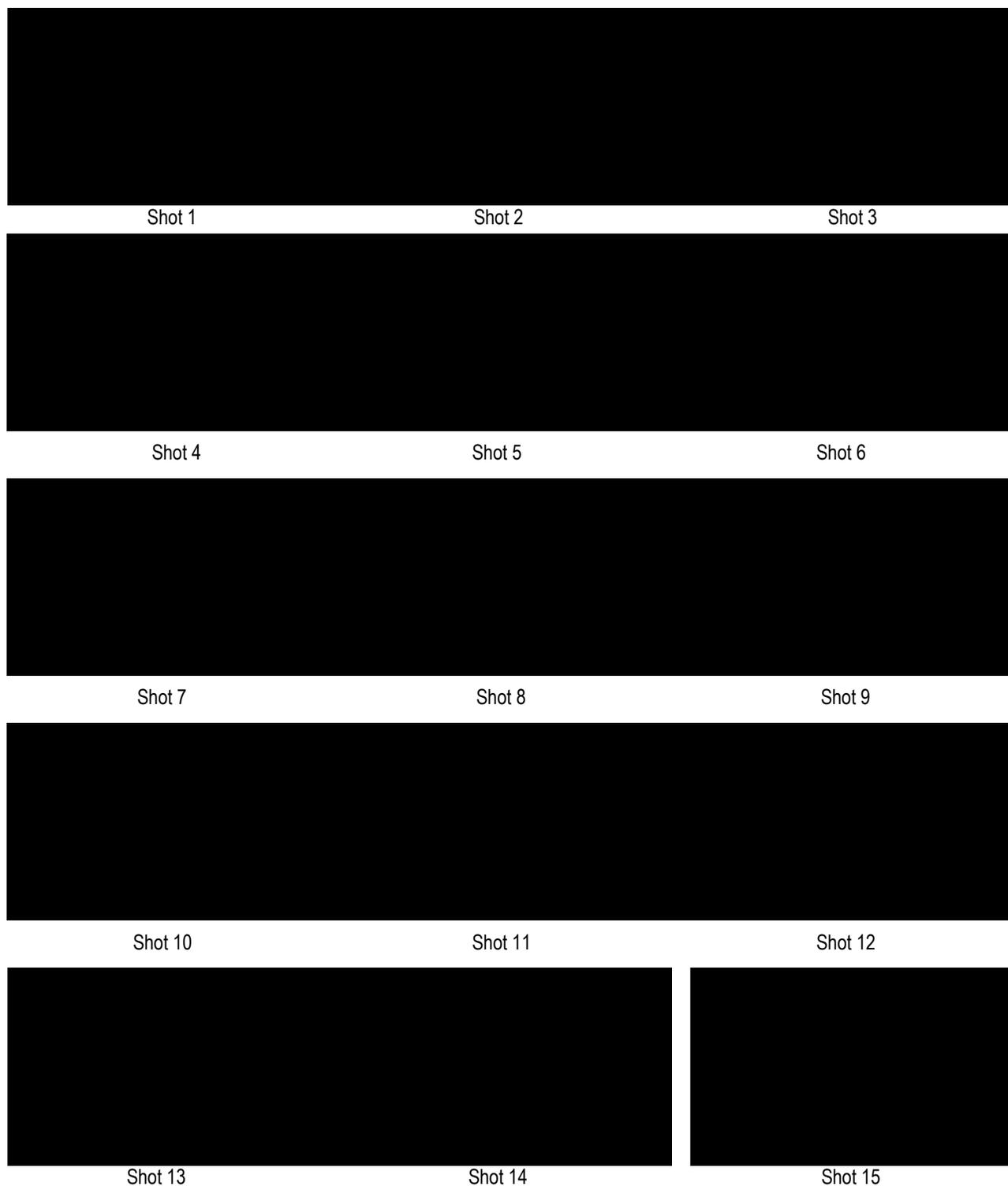


Figure 33. Jerry leaves Sally and Franklin behind to try and find Kirk and Pam, stumbling as they did upon the cannibal family's home. Inside he discovers the kitchen where a meat hook—with Pam's blood still on it—hangs down (shot 1). Investigating noises coming from a freezer (shot 2), he discovers Pam convulsing inside (shot 3). Before he can react Leatherface comes from behind (shot 4), brains him (shot 5), and stuffs Pam back into the freezer (shot 6). Leatherface then runs throughout the house (shots 7 and 8) and anxiously looks outside a window (shot 9), as if concerned. He then sits in restive contemplation (shots 10, 11, 13), and close-ups register his concern (shots 12, 14, and 15), humanizing him for the spectator.

from the window. The camera cuts again to a long shot of him from the hallway, rendering him in shadow once again—he clasps his hands together, gesturing his anxiety again (shot 13). A cut back to a close up lasts much longer this time; he looks past the camera, off into the distance as if he is contemplating something (shot 14a). The camera zooms in to a tighter close-up (shot 14b) of a much clearer view, including what appear to be deformities underneath his mask. His eyes are unmistakably human—even gentle—and it is difficult, even after witnessing his brutal acts, for the spectator to not sympathize with him (shot 15). The construction of Leatherface here dovetails with comments Hooper has made about Leatherface, that we should, in fact, sympathize with the monster because, like the five youths, he is just having “a bad day”: he does not know where all these people keep coming from, or how many more there are (*Shocking*). As Hansen says of his character, “[it is] like the washing machine has broken down or some other domestic disaster has occurred” (qtd. in Jaworzyn 41). Wood bemoaned the audience’s identification with the monstrous family, but the film works diligently to ensure that it occurs.

Darkness arrives as the camera cuts to a shot of a full moon. Sally decides that they have to find the others, but Franklin wants to go get help. They argue until Sally, disgusted with him at long last, begins to go look for the others without him. Franklin follows her, whining all the way. Their flashlight scarcely illuminates the frame as Sally struggles to push Franklin’s wheelchair. The sound of the nearby generator provides an ominous soundtrack, a constant reminder that the monstrous family’s house is near, and Franklin frequently stops Sally to say that he heard a noise. The entire sequence becomes a relentless series of misdirections as the viewer’s anxiety is continually raised and then put at ease. After Sally is able to get Franklin’s wheelchair on flat ground and the two begin gliding effortlessly in the frame, Franklin points the flashlight to the left of the frame and once again says, “Sally, I hear something. Stop, stop!” One would expect that, if anything, there would be a cut to a long shot, a few seconds of darkness, and then—maybe—this time the monstrous would appear relatively slowly. Instead, in a jump worthy of Val Lewton’s name, the camera cuts to a point-of-view medium shot of Leatherface, fully illuminated by the flashlight, chainsaw already revving the split second the shot begins. The camera then quickly cuts again to behind Franklin as Leatherface cuts into him with the chain saw. The camera intercuts between Franklin’s murder and reaction shots of Sally screaming and gesturing wildly, helpless to aid her brother. She runs towards the house, Leatherface giving chase—the continuous sound of the chainsaw indicating his varying distance.

Sally runs frantically into the house and stumbles upon the desiccated remains of the family's grandfather and grandmother upstairs. Leatherface, temporarily locked out, simply cuts through the front door and chases Sally as she jumps through a second floor window to escape and flees back towards the gas station, with Leatherface still in pursuit. Once inside the station, the sound of the chainsaw stops as the Old Man tries to calm her down, telling her that he will go get help. When he returns with a giant burlap sack and rope, Sally realizes he is a threat, as well. She tries to defend herself with a nearby knife, but the Old Man disarms her and knocks her unconscious. He ties her up and forces her into his truck, then drives her back to monstrous family's house. They arrive just as the Hitchhiker does. Seeing him, the Old Man stops the truck, gets out, and beats the hitchhiker, exclaiming, "I told you to stay away from that graveyard!" Inside, the Old Man beats Leatherface and questions him accusingly about whether or not he let "any of those kids get away." When Leatherface (through gestures and muffled grunts) convinces him that the "kids" are all packed safely away, the Old Man beats him for ruining the door.¹²⁴ The Hitchhiker, recognizing Sally, taunts her for leaving him behind on the side of the road.

Leatherface has changed masks, the second of three that he alternates between, rendering him a kind of a floating signifier. Here he is wearing a woman's face, becoming the family's makeshift matriarch in serving the family human sausage in a scene of monstrous domesticity. Leatherface and the Hitchhiker bring Grandpa downstairs and they sit Sally alongside him and prick her finger so that he can suck her blood. The camera cuts to a reaction shot of a panicked Sally blacking out. A cut to a shot of the front door then zooms out to an extreme long shot that pulls the spectator out of the house and into an open space, as if the spectator—and Sally—has somehow escaped (figure 34, shot 1), and it slowly dissolves into a shot of the moon, once again (shot 2). If solar flares and Saturn have governed the film's action before, the moon—the mythical source of lunacy—governs what is to come. The camera cuts back to a close-up of Sally, still passed out (shot 3a).

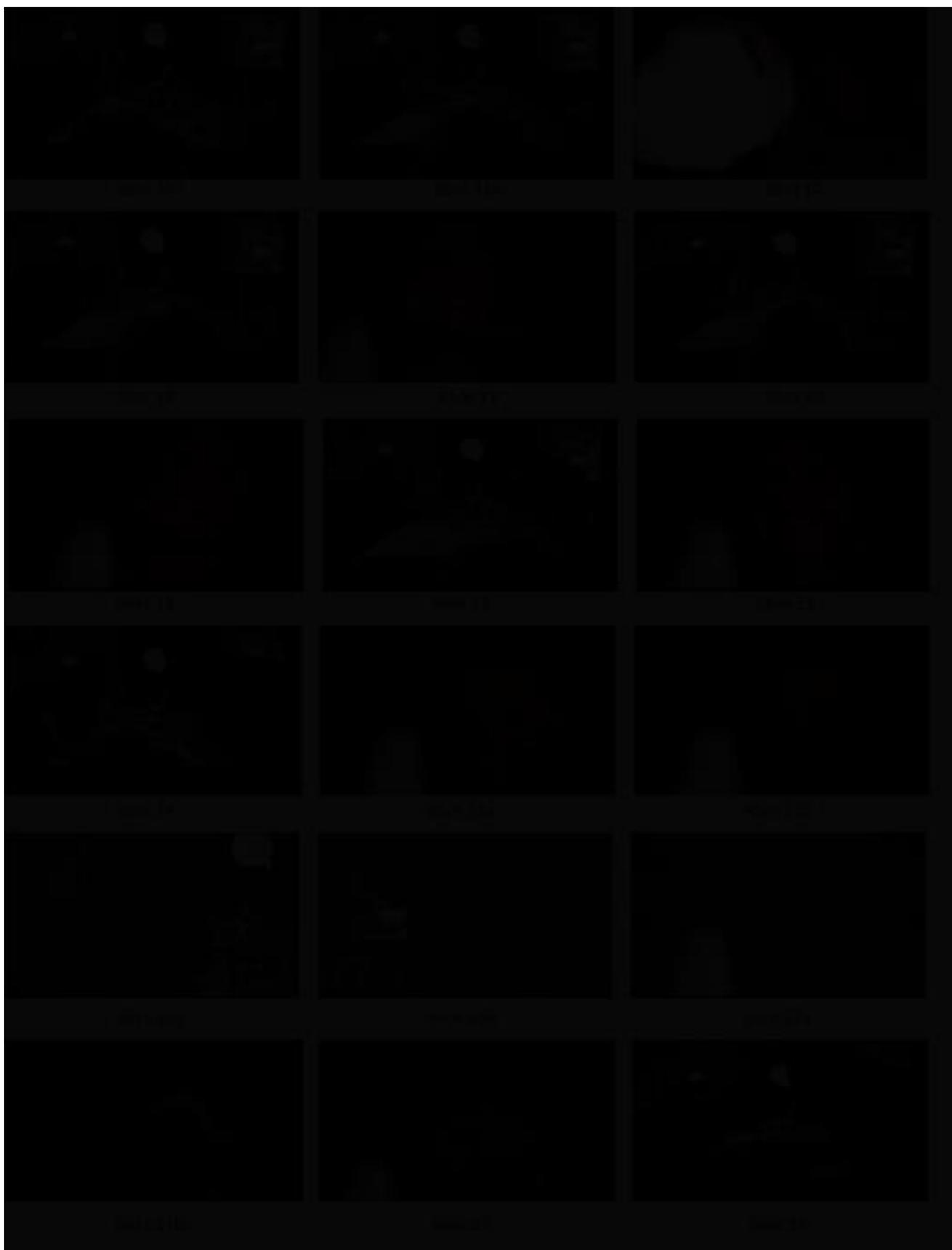
As she regains consciousness (shot 3b), the camera cuts to a close-up point-of-view shot of a dead chicken (shot 4a), then tilts upward to reveal a dead armadillo and a cow's skull (shot 4b), and upwards still to reveal Grandpa (shot 4c). The camera cuts to an overhead long shot of Sally screaming (shot 5); she is back in the nightmare. A series of crosscuts follows between more overhead long shots of Sally screaming (shots 7, 9, 11, and 13) and the family mocking Sally and howling upwards, as if at the moon (shots 8, 10,

Figure 34



12) until the Old Man tells the others to be quiet (shot 14). The camera cuts to a medium shot of Sally out of focus as she stares at a lampshade made out of a human face in the foreground (shot 15), then back to a long shot of the family. The Hitchhiker points a knife at Sally and spits, “We’re just having fun” (shot 16a), to which the Old Man admonishes, “You think this is a party?” (shot 16b), a question that at once reinforces the Old Man’s authority over and disdain for the others, while also suggesting an evocation of the “Mad Tea Party” scene in Lewis Carol’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), an evocation that will be reinforced in the sequences to come. The camera cuts back to the prior shot of Sally, having racked focus to her in the background (shot 17). She quietly pleads, “Please. You can make them stop.” The comment is directed at the Old Man, who has shown flashes of empathy and censured the others, but Sally is not looking to the right of the frame, where the Old Man would be in cinematic space; instead she is looking *directly into the camera*—as if she is speaking to the spectator, pleading for intervention. Even if Hooper did not mean to break the fourth wall, it is effective nonetheless as the end result is that the spectator once again is implicated in the violence, confronted with the complicit participation in the violence onscreen.

That implication is reinforced as the Old Man tells Sally he cannot help and the Hitchhiker and Leatherface begin to torment her anew. The camera begins a series of intercuts between close-ups of Sally (shots 19, 21, 23, 25a), screaming and writhing in the chair in which she has been tied down, and point-of-view shots to register what she sees (shots 18, 20, 22, and 24): the Hitchhiker and Leatherface look directly at the camera, their ridicule and menace felt by the spectator as well as Sally. The two draw close, increasing the sense of menace as the Hitchhiker’s head obscures Sally in the frame (shot 25b). The camera cuts to a close-up of him (shot 26a), then pans left to a close-up of Leatherface: the syntax suggests that Sally and the spectator both are surrounded. The Hitchhiker then asks Leatherface if he “likes this face,” and the camera cuts to a close-up of the Hitchhiker’s hand pawing at Sally (shot 26a), then tilts down to an extreme close-up of a human skull (shot 27b), and then cuts back to the prior shot of the Hitchhiker’s hand on Sally’s face (shot 28), before cutting again to a shot from behind Sally as Leatherface runs his fingers through Sally’s hair (shot 29), as if imagining what it will look like when he removes it along with Sally’s face and adds them to his collection of masks.

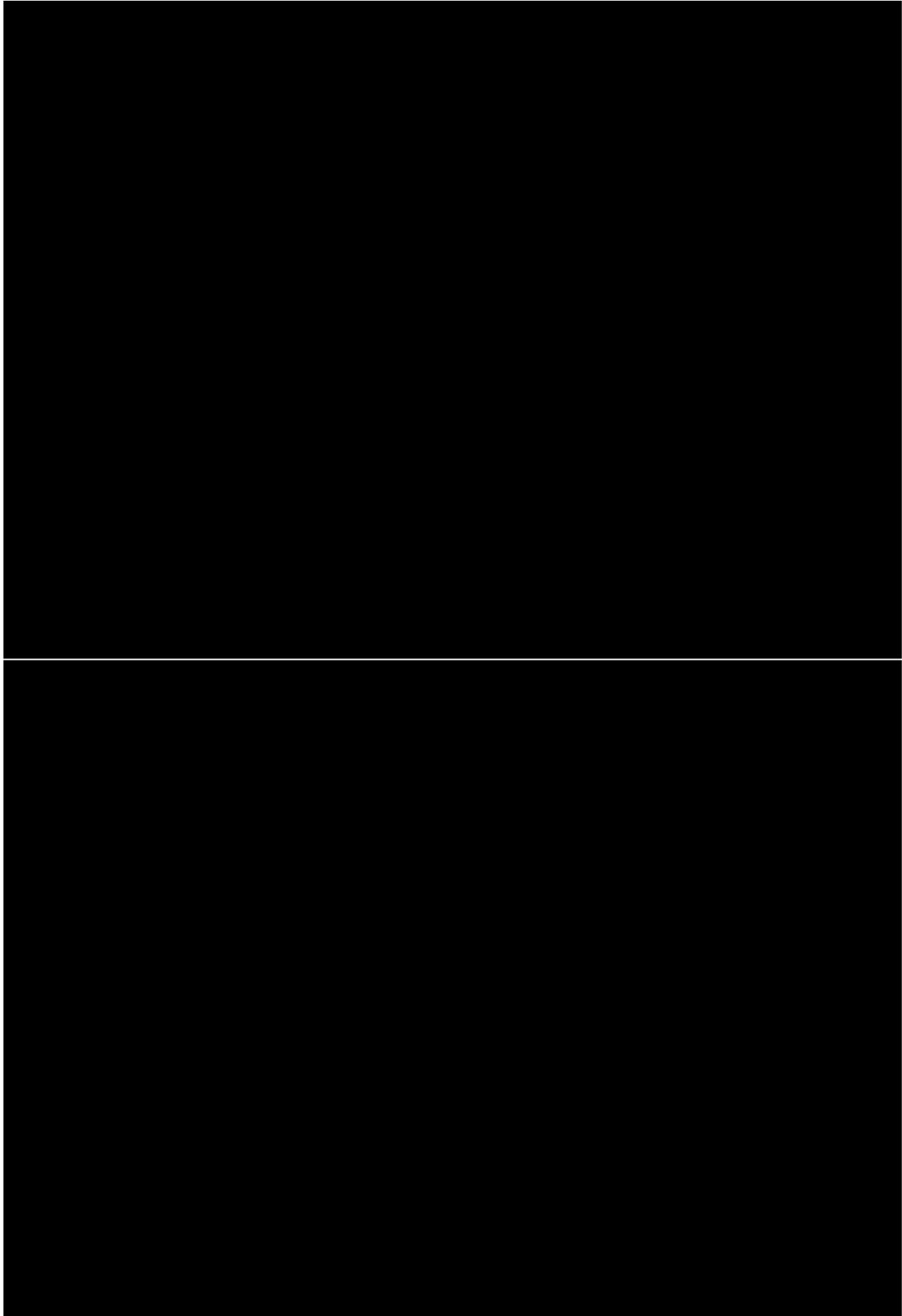




Leatherface's intention is confirmed when the camera cuts to a long shot framing the human face lampshade in the foreground (shot 30). The syntax reinforces the symbolism, the juxtaposition of Sally with the skull and lampshade a grotesque before-and-after. A cut back to a long shot (shot 31) brings the Old Man back into frame. Sally pleads with him again (shot 32), but the Hitchhiker scoffs that he is "just a cook" (shot 33). The Old Man objects (shot 34), and a series of intercuts between the Old Man and the Hitchhiker arguing (shots 35, 37, and 39) and Sally reacting (shots 36, 38, and 40) follows. The Hitchhiker ridicules the Old Man for not enjoying killing. There is a brief moment of hope wherein it appears the Old Man might intervene (shot 38), but he does not; the Hitchhiker gloats (shot 41) at Sally's terror (shot 42). The Old Man begins "reassuring" Sally that he does not like that she will die (shot 43). The camera cuts between Sally breaking down (shots 44 and 46) and the Hitchhiker mocking her (shots 45 and 47).

Wood is typical of many critics in asserting that there is a repressed sexuality on display with the cannibal family's sadistic torture of Sally (*Hollywood* 82), a possibility that becomes foregrounded when the camera cuts to a close-up of Sally as she momentarily regains her composure and begins to desperately bargaining with the cannibalistic family. Sally pleads that she "will do anything you want" (shot 48) before breaking down again and screaming loudly (shot 49). Henkel insists that it is Sally that introduces the possibility that sex might at all be involved, and that the family is not interested ("That wasn't part of their game"); Hansen, by contrast, points to how Leatherface's reaction is ambiguous ("he's kind of banging on the table going 'moo'"), but the Old Man "has got that gleam in his eye" (shot 50), as if he is considering it (both qtd. in Jaworzyn 69). When the camera cuts to the Old Man, however, he begins to also laugh at Sally, and she seems to realize that his joining in with the others means that there really is no hope. That realization registers in a series of reaction shots that follows: the frame moves violently around Sally's face: (shot 51a) and the camera zooms in to an extreme close-up of her eye (shot 51b) and then jump cuts to an extreme close-up of her mouth as she screams (shot 52a) and rotates around to her eye (shot 52 b) before cutting back to her mouth (53a) and rotating around again (shot 53b) in a surreal syntax that reinforces her anguish.

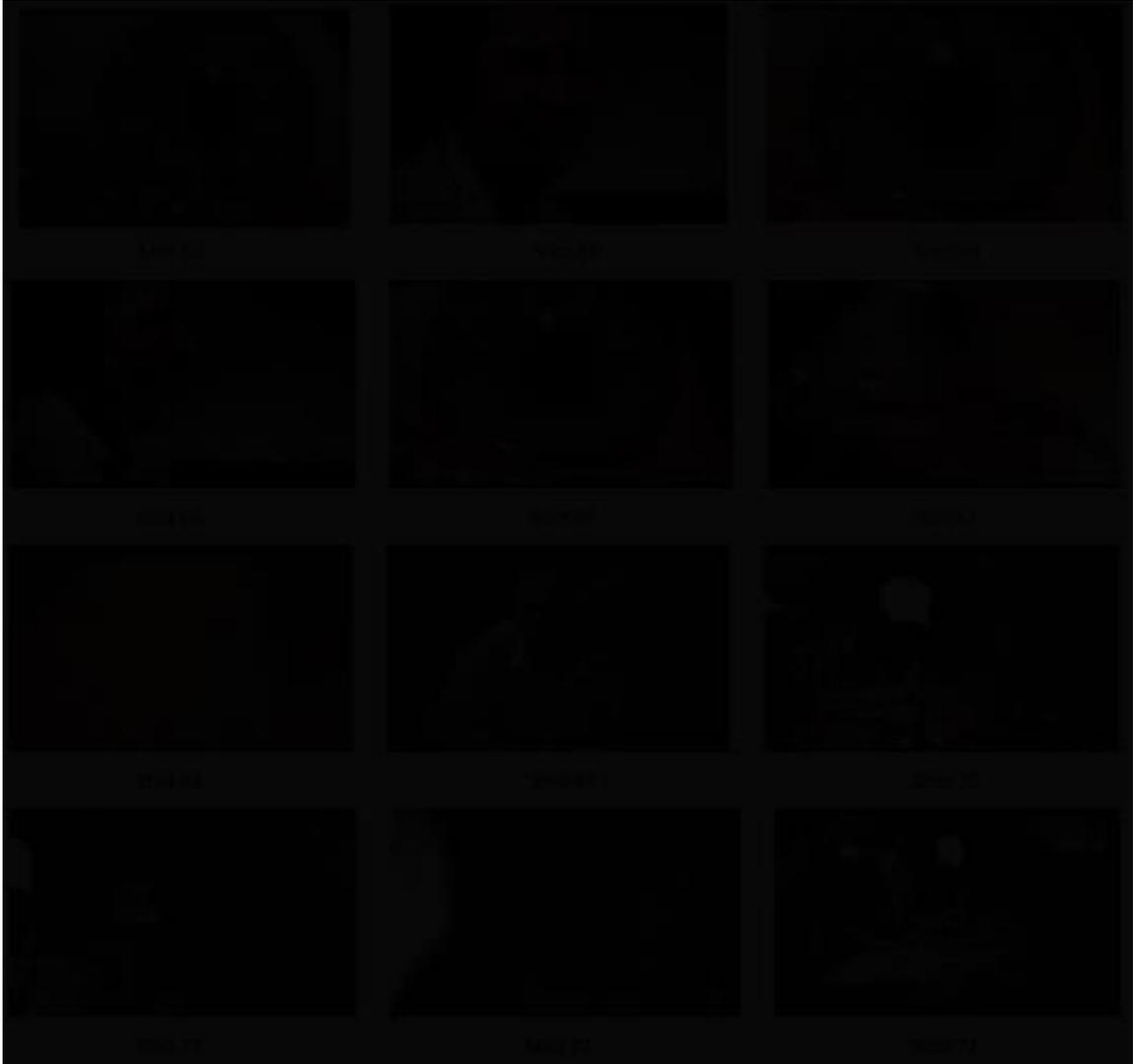
That anguish continues in a series of cross-cuts between Sally and her captors: a close-up of the Hitchhiker mocking her (shot 54) is followed by another extreme close-up of Sally's eye, suggesting her attention to the Hitchhiker's ridicule (shot 55a) and then a close-up of her panicked reaction (shot 55b). The



camera then cuts to a close-up of the Old Man's amused reaction (shot 56) and back to Sally, now appearing to have regressed to almost childlike state in the face of the family's collective taunting (shot 57). The camera cuts back again between the Hitchhiker continuing to mock her (shot 58) and an extreme close-up of her eyes (shot 59), then a jump cut to an extreme close-up of one eye as it tears up (shot 60), and then the camera cuts back to the Hitchhiker mocking her crying (shot 61). The sequence works to elicit primal fears. As Tom Gunning points out, the family's taunting evokes "the worst childhood teasing... when someone has teased you to the point [that] you start crying and then mocks your tears"; it evokes "really primal childhood memories of helplessness" (*American*). Here I am reminded of how Wood succinctly summarizes a position with which I myself would agree. "To empathize exclusively with the victims," Wood contends, "is to see the violators as strictly Other..." whereas "On the other hand, to empathize exclusively with the violators is to adopt the position of the sadist, seeing the victims as mere objects" (*Hollywood* 112). Wood contends that *Texas* comes "perilously close" to adopting the latter position "in its failure to endow its victims with any vivid, personalized aliveness" (*ibid*). Surely Wood is excluding this powerful sequence in his assessment; the earlier identification with the cannibal family is ostensibly wholly transferred to Sally here.

That identification with Sally is reinforced by a series of intercuts between extreme close-ups of Sally's eye (shots 62, 64, 66—and jump cuts to shots 67 and 68) and the Old Man's now-animated laughing (shots 63, 65, and 69) as his sadism and Sally's fate are confirmed. The camera's attention to the eye reinforces the primacy of the visual field as the spectator's attention is channeled into what becomes wholly a symbolic image: Sally's eye functions as synecdoche for the shared torment of Sally and the spectator that identifies with her. The violent intercutting between that bound-up identification and the sadistic laughing of the Old Man channels the experience of Sally's torment, then the threat that the family poses to her as the Hitchhiker and Leatherface close in on Sally again (shots 70 and 71). The sequence strongly works to facilitate a connection between Sally's panic (shot 72) and the spectator's own before the Old Man, finally, stands up and orders an end to the torment, after all (shot 73).

In *The American Nightmare* Clover remarks that she feels *Texas* is "an archetype," such as "'Little Red Riding Hood'" (*American*). Hooper himself has commented that it is "like a Grimm's fairy tale... some kind of archetype... almost like Hansel and Gretel" (qtd. in Phipps). The family's madness and the



Old Man's earlier comment about "a party" reminds me of another intertextual possibility. The *mise-en-scène* of Sally's point-of-view shot at the end of the sequence suggests to me John Tenniel's illustration of the "Mad Tea Party" from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). The arrangement of the actors in the frame are similar to their literary analogues (though admittedly not perfect): Sally sits as Alice does at one end of the table; the spectator is sutured into the surreal scene by the point-of-view shot; the Hitchhiker takes the place of the March Hare, and both of them are turned away from Sally/Alice and are facing a standing figure who is facing Sally/Alice: the Old Man and the Mad Hatter (both proprietors, of sorts), respectively. Finally, the decrepit grandfather serves as a perfect analogue for the sleeping Dormouse (though as the family's patriarch, he is placed at the head of the table opposite Sally). Leatherface, the floating signifier, is the only character without an analogue (fig. 35).

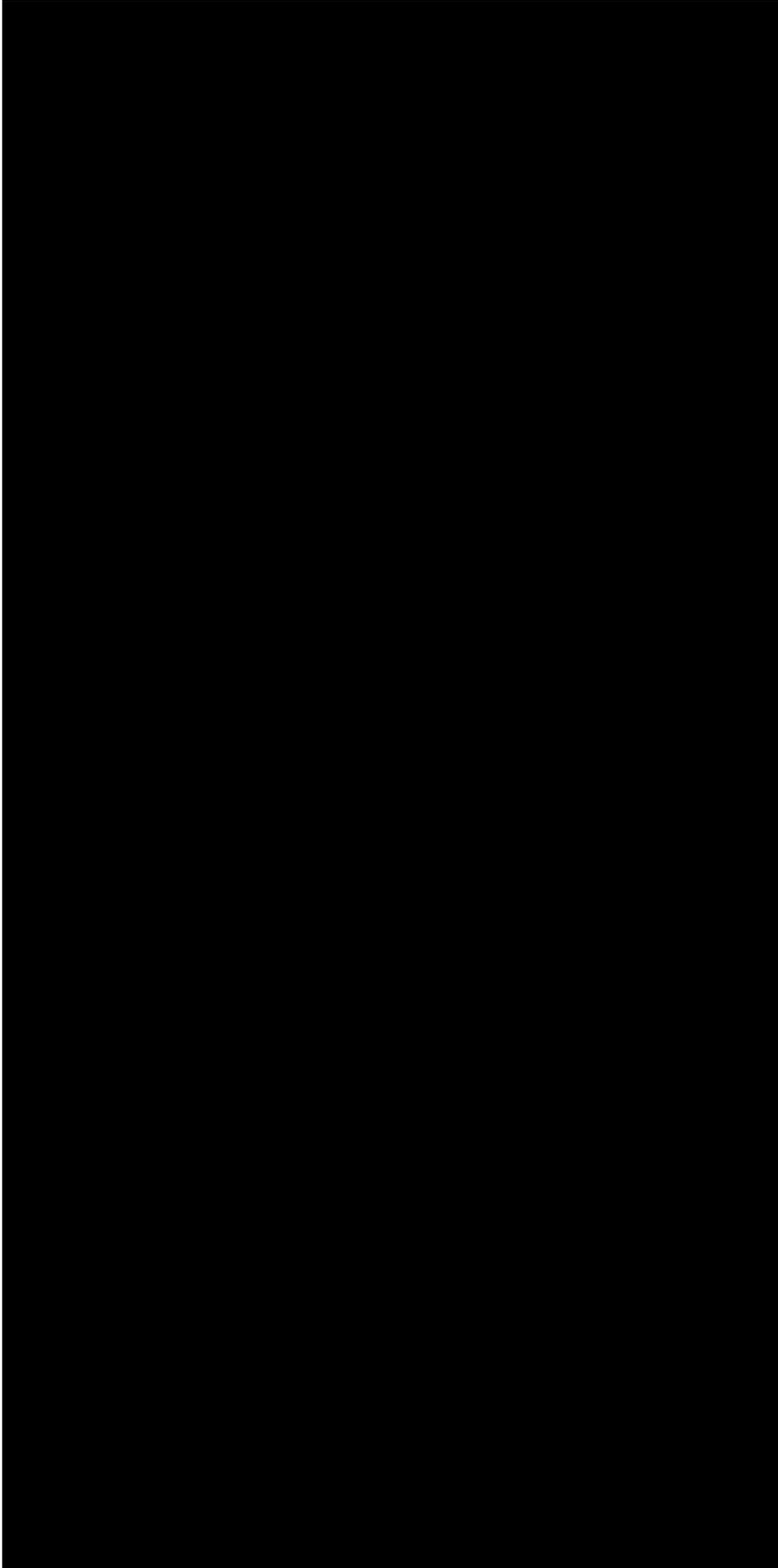


Figure 35. Left: John Tenniel's illustration of the "Mad Tea Party" from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Middle left: A still from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. The similar positions and roles of the monstrous family and their literary analogues suggest an intertextuality: Sally/Alice sit at the head of the table, the Hitchhiker/March Hare have their heads turned towards the Old Man/Mad Hatter, both of whom are proprietors, looking towards Sally/Alice. Finally, the decrepit grandfather serves as an analogue to the sleeping Doormouse despite slightly different positioning. Leatherface, a floating signifier, has no analogue.

Figure 36. A still from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. A pocket watch hangs from a tree just outside the monstrous family's house. Inside the house cinematic time does not seem to match up with the time outside, and modernity has left the family behind as they have been mechanized out of work. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), the Mad Hatter explains to Alice that the reason he and the March Hare are always having tea is because the Queen of Hearts had sentenced the Mad Hatter to death for "murdering the time," after which Time "won't do a thing" he asks.

I have not found any comments by Hooper or any scholarly commentary that discusses the association, but it is not that far-fetched.¹²⁵ Disney's animated adaptation, *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), was re-released for the first time the same year as *Texas* after having enjoyed a revival as a "head trip" film on college campuses, with Jefferson Airplane's song "White Rabbit" (1967) having helped solidify its association with the use of psychedelics and the counterculture. Disney even embraced these associations, marketing the re-release with a new psychedelic-themed poster (Beck 12). The possible intertextuality also does not necessarily end with the similar *mise-en-scène*. The youths enter the family's home without being invited, which echoes the March Hare's admonishment to Alice: "It wasn't very civil of you to sit down without being invited" (55). Earlier in the film—just before Kirk and Pam become the first of the group to enter the monstrous family's house, there is a three-quarters shot of a dead tree with an assortment of rusted tea kettles, pots, and frying pans tied to its branches, as if the intelligence that placed them there did so long ago to collect rain. The camera cuts to a close-up of another hanging object: a pocket watch with a railroad spike nailed through it (fig. 36). The cinematic time inside the house does not seem to match that outside the house when Sally eventually escapes. The Mad Hatter explains that the reason that he and the March Hare are always having tea is because he was to sing at a concert held by the Queen of Hearts, but he had hardly begun when she sentenced him to death for "murdering the time," after which, he laments, time "won't do a thing I ask! It's always six o'clock now" (ibid 58). Time, it seems, has passed the monstrous family by, and they take out their frustration on Sally.

As the sequence ends, the Hitchhiker and Leatherface drag Sally over to Grandpa so he can be the one to kill her because, the Hitchhiker enthuses, "He's the best!" The Hitchhiker presses down on the back of Sally's head while Leatherface tries to help Grandpa brain her, but he is too weak. As with the zombies of *Night* and the Stillos of *Last House*, they are horrifying and yet affable, at times even vulnerable; and as with the other films, this effect is partly achieved with humor. Scholar Isabel Pinedo observes how the inability of the corpse-like Grandpa (John Dugan) to hold the mallet steady enough to kill Sally is an example of how the film "not only incorporates horrific and humorous effects, but actually uses one to exacerbate the other" (48). Several commentators—including Hooper, himself—highlight how when the Old Man comes home to find Leatherface's handiwork and, like a parent annoyed with a child's writing on a wall, admonishes him vicariously to Hitchhiker: "Oh, look what your brother did to the front door!"¹²⁶

No Closure

Sally crashes through a window and is able to stumble down the drive to a nearby highway with the Hitchhiker giving chase and Leatherface further behind. The Hitchhiker keeps up with Sally just close enough to slice away at her with his pocketknife, torturing her still. Sally makes it to a highway that connects with the family's long gravel driveway, and an oncoming semi-truck isn't able to stop in time and runs over the Hitchhiker, covering Sally in his blood. The driver begins to help Sally get into the cab, but Leatherface catches up with them and attacks, forcing Sally and the driver to escape out the other side. The driver grabs a wrench lying on the floorboard on the way out and when Leatherface gives chase he turns and throws it, knocking Leatherface on the head. Leatherface falls down, his chainsaw falling and cutting into his leg. An oncoming pickup truck swerves to avoid Sally, who is flagging him down. The semi-truck driver runs away from the scene as the pickup driver stops to let Sally climb into the bed of the truck and speeds away as Leatherface, having gained his composure, closes in. The truck speeds off with Sally covered in blood, laughing manically as she has finally escaped.

This frantic series of events would seem to suggest closure and, indeed, some critics have discussed the ending in largely positive terms. Clover, for example, furthers her reading of Sally as Red Riding Hood by observing a key difference: "No woodsman comes in. She basically saves herself. One of the lessons... is you don't have to save girls—girls can save themselves" (Simon). It is a fair reading, as Sally *does* escape, a kind of *Ur*-"Last Girl" as Clover has formulated the trope. Sally, however, does not escape unscathed. She has lost her brother, her boyfriend, and two friends, and the final shot of her laughing manically points to the torture that she, herself, endured. Crucially, it is also not Sally that we see last: the final shot of the film is one of Leatherface dancing defiantly, backlit by the same sun that menaced the group the day before (fig. 37). There is no suggestion that he will be caught. As with *Night* and *Last*



Figure 37. The last two shots of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*: Sally, covered in blood, laughs manically as she escapes (left), and Leatherface dances defiantly in the sun, his chainsaw slicing the sky (right).

House, there is no return to normality at the end of *Texas*—no satisfying closure, catharsis, or even rationality: the spectator is ultimately left with that final shot of Leatherface’s chainsaw oscillating wildly, slicing at the morning sky. At his inauguration, Ford had assured the country that “our long national nightmare is over.” Hooper, like Romero and Craven, leaves us with a nightmare that is ongoing.

VII. Conclusion

By tracing these three films' shared modes of production, distribution, exhibition, reception, and address, their common sociohistorical context and ideological investments, as well as their similar textual and paratextual elements, I hope to have offered a stronger historical and theoretical accounting for their success. In reconsidering these three films, I am reminded of what Walter Benjamin observes about film in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "The film," Benjamin asserts, "is the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face. Man's need to expose himself to shock effects is his adjustment to the dangers threatening him" (250, n 19). This cinema of confrontation that I have traced emerged in large part as a renewed effort by these filmmakers to fulfill that role that Benjamin identifies, and, beyond that, to push audiences towards a renewed engagement with the real world in order to encourage them to transform it for the better. "Horror is radical," Romero observes, "It can take you into a completely new world, new place, and just rattle your cage and say, wait a minute—look at things differently." The goal, Romero continues, is to upend the order/disorder/order restored paradigm where "at the end of the story... everything's fine and things go on just the way they were." Instead, Romero offers, these films argue for a radical alternative: "We don't want things the way they are," he points out, "or we wouldn't be trying to shock you into an alternative place" (qtd. in Jones 245-6). These films not only reflected contemporary cultural anxieties, but also helped articulate them. Rather than their characters reaching some transcendent understanding of these anxieties to be shared by the spectator, the latter must find meaning, with the language of cinema opened up to create a dialogism between spectator and screen, as these films provided a space for "working through" real life horrors and anxieties in order to open up insights about possibilities of a world that could exist without them. The implication of the spectator thus ultimately becomes a kind of emancipation.

Similarly, the ultraviolent sensibility and appeals to truth of all three films is part and parcel of that same project. As Craven asserts, "gore stood for everything that was hidden in society. Guts stood for issues that were being repressed, so the sight of a body being eviscerated was exhilarating to the audience because they felt: 'Thank god it's finally out in the open and slopping around on the floor'" (qtd. in Szulkin 15). Craven's description of the exhilaration audiences experienced recalls for me, too, the relatively recent role of theoretical interventions involving the body and physiological responses to film in cinema studies

and how going forward those interventions might fit within this same material-semiotic approach I have outlined here. For example, in *The Cinematic Body: Theory out of Bounds* (1993), Steven Shaviro posits that the theorization of the spectator need not be limited to a psychoanalytical construct—the physical, visceral responses to cinema (and the role of the body of the filmic text, itself) are important. More recently, Torben Grodal has introduced evolutionary theory and neuroscience to cinematic studies in *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture, and Film* (2009), arguing for the use of a physiological paradigm (specifically, his PECMA model—perception, emotion, cognition, motor action) that can be used to account for everything from aesthetics to spectator identification. While both Shaviro and Grodal offer their own models as alternatives to other theorizations, I would posit that both could be incorporated into a broader material-semiotic approach, as well; rather than a solely psychic construct, the spectator would become fully embodied.

We could add, too, recent theorizations (e.g. Sobchack, Frampton) involving phenomenology that follow Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty wrote his influential “Film and the New Psychology” in 1947, the same year that Kracauer published *From Caligari to Hitler*. Merleau-Ponty’s approach seems complimentary, in fact, to material semiotics: in his view the cinema is composed of “intended objects,” or “thought-things” as Daniel Frampton describes them (40). Film itself, in fact, is a “perceptual object, for Merleau-Ponty, and in thinking of the objects before us, he muses, we “own” them in a sense, creating a “strange possession” of the world that is mirrored in a film’s “possession” of its characters, settings, and so on. Phenomenology and film are complimentary, Merleau-Ponty, posits, because the former focuses on “the bond between subject and world, between the subject and others” and the latter makes “manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other” (58). The confluence of phenomenology and film that Merleau-Ponty posits—how “modes of thought correspond to technical methods”—recalls the same kind of assemblage that I have tried to trace here.

I would not dare claim that this material-semiotic approach that I have outlined is itself a new totalizing theory—far from it. I cannot claim, in fact, that this approach can be used for all films or groups of films. Instead I have only endeavored to illustrate a method that can be used to arguably *better* describe a group of films that have themselves received a significant amount of critical and scholarly attention already. By tracing associations between these films more fully, my goal has been to help bring a richer

account to the discussion of early 1970s American horror, a discussion that has been ongoing since almost immediately after each film's release and that has been taken up again with renewed vigor in recent years, but has nonetheless remained limited in some ways. My hope, ultimately, is that this method *can* be applied elsewhere, and that it will continue to add new theoretical approaches and vital historical data in cinema studies in order to provide richer accounts of the "sociological events" that Truffaut describes.

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¹ *Psycho* proves to be a transitional film in many ways, including with regards to the locus of horror: the Bates home stands in between the gothic castles of Europe and contemporary American homes in that it is itself rather gothic.

² Hitchcock capitalized on star Anthony Perkins's status as a teenage heartthrob to facilitate this effect, just as he had similarly cast James Stewart against type in *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958).

³ There is the child killer Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre) in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) among others on the German screen, and Norman Bates has antecedents in American cinema, as well: Josef Cotten's serial wife-killer Uncle Charlie in Hitchcock's own *Shadow of a Doubt* (1947) and Robert Mitchum's Harry Powell in *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) among them. In British cinema, Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* was also released in 1960 and its human monster has much in common with Norman Bates. The fact that the latter three films are typically labeled "thrillers" while *Psycho* represents, as Hendershot describes, "Hitchcock's most explicit connection to the horror genre" (34) speaks to how rather arbitrary generic distinctions elide historical connections that can otherwise be made.

⁴ Low-budget horror and science fiction often included, for example, marketing gimmicks with psychological themes, such as William Castle's "Percepto!," launched alongside *The Tingler* (1959). It involved vibrating devices being placed in the seats of theaters, their activation corresponding with jump scares in the film.

⁵ Roger Ebert, for example, contends that with the psychiatrist's "long winded... lectures... Hitchcock marred the ending of a masterpiece with a sequence that is grotesquely out of place" in "an anticlimax taken almost to the point of parody" (*Great* 378). Ebert goes so far as to say that if he were "bold enough," he would edit out all but only the initial explanation of Norman's dual personality and then cut to him wrapped in the blanket and speaking in his mother's voice, as he has "never encountered a single convincing defense of the psychiatric blather" (*ibid*).

⁶ The association between cinema and hypnosis arguably goes back further still. In *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema* (2008), Stefan Andriopoulos traces concerns regarding film's ability to hypnotize audiences back to the earliest days of cinema. There existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in fact, a prevalent anxiety about the loss of individual control to outside forces, an anxiety reflected in both film and literature—including a prevalent theme of committing crimes against one's will, such as in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).

⁷ Independent producers began international collaborations, as well, with British studios such as Hammer Films and Italian studios such as Galatea importing films to the United States, genre films such as horror chief among them.

⁸ Hitchcock certainly succeeded. David Cook notes that *Psycho* was "the film that lent the most legitimacy to horror in the 1960s" and that it was the first horror blockbuster, produced for approximately \$800,000 and earning \$8.5 million in rentals (approximately \$18 million gross), which also made it the top-grossing film of 1960 (222).

⁹ See, for example, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Production to 1960* (1985) and David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985) for discussions of how, as Staiger notes, the presumption is that "knowledgeable and cooperative readers and viewers of texts normally do certain things with the sense data of a film, depending on the type of sense data they receive," including "seeking relations with characters/human agents... the identification with and empathy for those characters, and a disidentification with villains... to seek resolution or closure in the narrative chain" (33).

¹⁰ Wood's thinking on the horror genre is mirrored in the theoretical approaches of scholars in other fields. Literary critic Leslie Fiedler, for example, posits that the function of popular art in general is "to express the repressed: especially the dark side of our ambivalence toward what any status quo demands we believe.... Whatever is officially defined at a given moment as abhorrent to civility and humanity is what such art celebrates..." (141-2).

¹¹ Speaking to Kracauer's continued influence, Mike Budds asserts in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories* that scholars of Weimar cinema often ground their own work in Kracauer's, even when they disagree with him (2). Along with Kracauer's methodological errors, he was often simply ill-informed. His premise regarding the very figure of Caligari, for example, was founded on the faulty assumption that the character was originally written to more explicitly represent the tyranny of the state. As Stefan Andriopoulos discusses in detail, Kracauer believed that director Robert Wiene was the one who added the film's frame tale as told by an insane asylum inmate, robbing the film of its political commentary. Kracauer depended on an unpublished account of the film's production history by one of its two screenwriters, Hans Janowitz, who insisted Wiene added the frame over the protests of Janowitz and his fellow screenwriter, Carl Mayer. Andriopoulos explains that, "The recovery of the original film script in 1976, however, disproved a number of claims made by Janowitz," including his contention about the frame tale (100). For a history of the reception of *From Caligari to Hitler*, see Gertrud Koch's *Siegfried Kracauer: An Introduction*. For a discussion of Kracauer's methodology and its potential faults, see Leonardo Quaresima's discussion in his "Introduction" to the 2004 revised and expanded edition of *From Caligari to Hitler*, which Quaresima also edited.

¹² Prince remarks that sketching such a method "is beyond the scope" of his "small essay" (24), and instead offers a close reading of a single film, John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), drawing on work in cultural anthropology and theories of the taboo—specifically those of Edmund Leach and Mary Douglas—to provide an example of the kind of social analysis he feels is crucial. In *The Philosophy of Horror, Or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Noël Carroll provides a generalized theory of horror and, like Prince, he employs Douglas' theories of taboo and pollution—articulated largely in her influential work, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966).

¹³ I use the term *interpretative communities* as it is defined in the work pioneered by Stanley Fish, such as his collection of essays *Is There A Text in This Class?* (especially "Interpreting the *Variorum*," pp. 147–173).

¹⁴ In 1966 Whitman killed his wife and mother in Austin, Texas before driving to the University of Texas campus just blocks from his home and climbing the clock tower in the middle of campus, from which he shot a total of thirty-four people, killing fourteen of them, before being killed himself by police. For a detailed account of the tragedy, see "96 Minutes" by Pamela Colloff in the August 2006 edition of *Texas Monthly*.

¹⁵ I will use the terms *histoire* register and *discours* register throughout. Metz, via Emile Benveniste, uses *histoire* to refer to a film's narrative which, in the seamless style of dominant cinema, is made to appear self-evident: the spectator passively accepts the film's conveyed meaning, rendering the spectator a wholly constituted subject. *Discours*, by contrast, involves placing a film's meanings in conversation with outside discourses that the spectator must negotiate to make sense of the filmic text, rendering the spectator a constituting subject with agency.

¹⁶ As Genette explains in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, paratexts in literature include anything that adorns the text, itself, such as the author's name and the book's title, as well as the preface, introduction, illustrations, figures, etc. Genette explains that paratexts are often ignored because they represent "an 'undefined zone; between the inside and outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary... [a] fringe" (2).

¹⁷ Genet contends that "...although we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of the verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption..." (1). Genette further elaborates that the paratext is

always the conveyor of commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author... a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (2)

¹⁸ Clover finds in several horror films the inclusion of a "terrible place," which she describes as "...most often a house or tunnel, in which the victims sooner or later find themselves"; it is, Clover asserts, "a venerable element of horror" (197). Discussions of coded space in horror typically remain abstract, whereas I am interested in the historical specificity that these films evoke regards to space. In *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, geographer Edward Soja argues that we tend to privilege history as the driving force behind culture and society, transforming the people and places that become subsumed under its weight, with geography relegated to the background. Soja contends, however, that space is equally important: the concrete environments in which we live have an important impact on abstract constructs such as society and time. Soja also argues that what he regards as postmodern space has become increasingly "paranoid," with mass surveillance in even the smallest of cities—and within individual homes—and gated communities fencing themselves off from the rest of the world. The historically specific anxiety to re/create safe space is arguably reflected in these films.

¹⁹ In *The Anguish of Change*, Louis Harris himself identifies 1968 as the year when public perception dramatically shifted: "...almost overnight, the entire hierarchy of orderly communications in a democracy was being by-passed... suddenly the streets had become a battleground, no neighborhood was immune. Life had been reduced to the raw and primitive proposition of physical survival right outside the house where one lived"; see Harris, especially 168-74, for a detailed discussion of how public polling reflected this dramatic shift.

²⁰ There is an interesting slippage between the living dead and the silent majority, as the latter had been used as a euphemism for the dead since the nineteenth century.

²¹ Halperin's zombie was in turn based on William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929), a travelogue that "credulously expounded Haitian voodoo [and] introduced 'zombi' into U.S. speech" ("Books: Mumble-Jumble").

²² It would have been possible for critics to find in Romero's zombie that same blue-collar worker while maintaining their own reading. The working class largely supported Nixon in 1968. In fact, Nixon's speechwriters had borrowed the phrase "silent majority" from labor union leader George Meany, whose description of union workers who supported the war in Vietnam ("the vast, silent majority in the nation") introduced the term into the political lexicon of the era (Perlstein 212).

²³ Romero's attitude towards collaboration is itself a refreshing hallmark of his style: "My sets are very open... and anybody's allowed to say whatever they want... I think that if you're confident in what you're doing, you accept ideas that fit, and you reject ideas that don't... I'll buy anybody's suggestion if it works" (qtd. in Kane 57).

²⁴ For example, participating in a "roundtable discussion" with Hardman, Streiner, and *Cinefantastique* contributor Gary Anthony Surmacz in 1975, Russo even juxtaposed his statements with Romero's own: "A lot of the critics have jumped off the deep end in likening the ghouls to the silent majority and finding all sorts of implications that none of us ever intended. I think George [Romero] wants to encourage that kind of thinking on the part of some critics. But I'd rather tell them they're full of shit" (Surmacz, 16).

²⁵ “It is clear,” Russo states, “that all of us must have a deep-seated fear of being set upon, attacked, by unfeeling, uncaring personages who do not take the time to know and respect, but only to hate us. We all dread the witch hunters, the lynch mob, the terrorists who plant bombs to kill those they have never met. The existence of this primal fear, this dread, within our psyches, and its vivid evocation, is the truly basic reason for the success of *Night of the Living Dead*” (qtd. in Kane 84).

²⁶ Robin Wood captures the vacillations that often characterize Romero’s responses. As part of a horror film retrospective for the 1979 Toronto Film Festival, Wood helped organize a series of directors’ seminars featuring five filmmakers: Wes Craven, David Cronenberg, Stephanie Rothman, Brian De Palma, and Romero. Of the five directors, Wood observes, “Romero gave what was at once the most equivocal, guarded, and complex answer. He by no means rejected notions of social engagement, but didn’t think of his work primarily in such terms; the desire to change society might be present but was not a primary, conscious motivation” (129).

²⁷ For example, Romero remarks, “It was 1968, man. Everybody had a ‘message.’ I was just making a horror film, and I think the anger, and the attitude, and all that’s there is there because it was 1968” (qtd. in Gagne 38).

²⁸ Romero has been particularly assertive on these points in several recent popular documentaries that assume the film’s progressively political subtexts, including Adam Simon’s *The American Nightmare* (2000), Stuart Samuels’s *Midnight Movies: From the Margin to Mainstream* (2005), Andrew Monument’s *Nightmares in Red, White, and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film* (2009), and Rob Kuhns’s *The Birth of the Living Dead* (2013). Since Romero is the sole figure associated with *Night* to be interviewed in each, the critical consensus emerging out of this wave of documentaries has gelled around the narrative that Romero-as-*auteur* indeed deliberately coded progressive subtexts into *Night*.

²⁹ Speaking directly to the notion that he was *Night*’s *auteur*, in fact, Romero remarks, “When I made the film, I wasn’t an *auteur* in command; I was a student, and apprentice, learning every day... I had a gut feeling for what worked and what didn’t work” (qtd. in Kane 64). To hear Romero tell it, he “ripped off” Richard Matheson’s 1954 novel *I Am Legend* for *Night*’s script (ibid 22). Even when discussing his celebrated direction and editing of *Night*, Romero has remarked that he “stole” much of it (“sometimes shot for shot”) from earlier films: “Only backhanded credit, if any, is deserved—the sort of credit awarded to a cat burglar” (ibid 64).

³⁰ As Hervey points out: “...*Night* is [Romero’s] film more than anyone else’s, and he ended up doing more than most ‘auteurs.’ Besides conceiving the story, co-scripting and directing, he handled all of the camerawork and editing, acted (briefly), designed make-up and lighting effects and had final say on music and sound” (12).

³¹ While Romero himself downplays his role as *auteur*, it is notable that several of his collaborators insist on describing him in similar terms. Russ Streiner, for example, observes, “I think that one of George’s biggest assets is his creative mind, his ability to think conceptually and in mental pictures... George could see things artistically, which the rest of us didn’t necessarily have the ability to do” (qtd. in Kane 63-4).

³² Accounts differ as to how the group first came to pursue commercial filmmaking. Kane credits Russo, who “suggested they undertake a feature-film project for the drive-in circuit” (20) and followed up later by asking others in the group, “What about a monster movie?” (21). Romero remembers things differently. He recalls that he was working on filming a segment for one of the company’s client shows, *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*—a segment in which the titular host undergoes a (real) tonsillectomy (“possibly the scariest movie I ever made,” he deadpans)—when he was inspired to make a horror film (*Midnight*).

³³ Romero typically gives an account in which he had already written a short story—itsself inspired by George Matheson’s novel *I Am Legend*—that would become the basis for *Night*. Russo claims that it was his idea to include “Ghoulish people or alien creatures” that would feed on human corpses; he added that the film “should start in a cemetery because people find cemeteries spooky” (qtd. in Kane 22). Russo

himself, however, credits Romero for the new breed of zombie (“George had the dead cannibalizing the living”) and for developing a treatment for the film’s script: “He amazed me by coming back with about forty really excellent pages of an exciting, suspenseful story. Everybody in our group loved it. We all decided this had to be it—the movie we would make.” (ibid).

³⁴ Kane’s *Night of the Living Dead: Behind the Scenes of the Most Terrifying Zombie Movie Ever* (2010) provides invaluable information about the film’s modes of production and distribution, including discussions with members of the Image Ten who typically do not receive consideration in critical and scholarly accounts of the film.

³⁵ For example, Bosco brand chocolate syrup was used for the blood and mortician’s wax for the zombies’ makeup. There is one notable exception: the realistic bullet wounds that appear when the zombies are shot are the result of explosive squibs that were used. Production director Vincent Survinski (who also plays Vince) recruited his brother, Regis, a professional fireworks expert, and his business partner, Tony Pantanello, to work on the film’s special effects, and they designed the squibs (Kane 67-8). Unremarkable today (indeed, they have been replaced by safer effects), explosive squibs were a rarity at the time; even in big-budget Hollywood productions an actor would simply mime being shot, with little attention paid to realistically depicting the wound. Arthur Penn had used them in the climatic shootout at the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*, but it had yet to be released when *Night* was being filmed.

³⁶ Ebert’s piece is often the source of derision (Wood, for example, is particularly unkind), and unfairly so, really. His condemnations are not directed at the film or filmmakers, but rather the theater managers who sold tickets to small children, as well as the parents who dropped them off to see a film like *Night* in the first place. In a preface that now appears before the piece online, Ebert writes that he actually enjoyed the film (“I’d give it 3 ½ stars”).

³⁷ For an excellent discussion of the scene and its sociohistorical context—complete with shot analysis by Jewison, himself—see “The Slap Heard Round the World” by Robert Abele at the Directors Guild of America’s website.

³⁸ Rosenbaum specifically points to “the very strong political implications” of the film, including race relations: “you have a lead character who is black and he’s shot at the end” (*Midnight*). Hoberman points to the film’s initial release in the aftermath of the assassinations of Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy, and adds, “living in a country where there’s intense polarization and violence, *Night of the Living Dead* could only be understood... as a movie about the Vietnam War. People got that right away” (ibid).

³⁹ The battle over revenue sharing ultimately proved fruitless when Walter Reade declared bankruptcy (Kane 92). Worse still, when the film quickly fell into public domain theaters simply did not pass on any of their box office earnings. There had been a copyright notice included on the film’s title frame originally, but it was inadvertently removed when the film’s title had to be changed because it was too similar to another film. Bill Quigley, the then film buyer for Walter Reade, attributes the mistake to “some lawyer” in the organization (*Midnight*).

⁴⁰ I am thinking here of war and crime films such as Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), Richard Brooks’s adaptation of *In Cold Blood* (1967), and Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971), which itself debuted during the height of *Night*’s circulation on the midnight circuit, but also fantastical narratives that appeal to *vérité*, such as John Frankenheimer’s *Seconds* (1966).

⁴¹ In the second of his two-volume study of the medium, *The History of Television, 1942 to 2000*, Albert Abramson recounts television’s conversion from black and white to color in the 1960s and early 1970s. By 1967 all three television networks had adopted prime time schedules in which programming was broadcast in color; and the last network program produced in black and white, *Mister Roger’s Neighborhood*—the show Romero was working on when was inspired to make a horror film—began shooting in color the following year, August 1968, just two months before *Night* was released. The year that *Last House on the Left* was released, 1972, color televisions were owned in over fifty percent of television households for the first time.

⁴² Romero insists, “I’d rather have 100 bad shots than ten that are beautiful. You can edit 100 shots in a million different configurations, until you come up with something that’s close to what you intended. A single shot, no matter how perfect, leaves you no options” (ibid).

⁴³ So little, in fact, that some sources (e.g. Ebert, McGuinness, and Hoberman) mistakenly describe Johnny and Barbara as being a romantic couple, rather than siblings, but their sparse dialogue makes it clear that they are the latter.

⁴⁴ The very first lines, in fact, speak to the characters’ contrast. Barbara asserts, somewhat cheerfully even, that “They ought to make the time changes the first day of summer.... it’s eight o’clock and it’s still light.” While she smiles at their good fortune, Johnny turns Barbara’s remark into a chance to complain about having to make the trip: “A lot of good the extra daylight does us. You know we still got a three hour drive back—we’re not going to be home until after midnight.” Barbara replies, “Well if it really bugged you, Johnny, you wouldn’t do it,” perhaps trying to reconcile his apparent callousness. Johnny, however, has none of it, continuing to complain and show disdain—even contempt—for their purpose there.

⁴⁵ Johnny’s appearance is arguably coded to convey just such a reading. Kane gives an interesting description: “[Johnny’s] acceptably longish hair, slightly stylish specs, and driving gloves indicate that the 60s have encroached on him in a distant ‘burb way” (10). Kane further draws a sharp (and sexist) contrast between Johnny’s relatively liberated appearance and demeanor with that of Barbara’s: “with her conservative coat and proper demeanor, [Barbara] is probably a secretary or similar office support person. We determine that she’s somewhat repressed, almost certainly single, and a virgin” (ibid).

⁴⁶ Kane includes an excerpt from the original script that Eastman provided him (the only extant copy) to illustrate the contrast between how Ben was originally written and how Jones’s version of him. When Ben first encounters Barbara, he tries to reassure her that they are safe from the zombie. The original version read

“Don’t you mind the creep outside. I can handle him. There’s probably gonna be lots more of ‘em. Soons they fin’ out about us. Ahm outa gas. Them pumps over there is locked. Is there food here? Ah get us some grub. Then we beat ‘em off and skeddaddle. Ah guess you putzed with the phone.”

Jones’s revision, as it is delivered in the final film:

“Don’t worry about him. I can handle him. Probably be a whole lot more of them when they find out about us. The truck is out of gas. The pump out here is locked—is there a key? We can try to get out of here if we get some gas. Is there a key? (Tries the phone.) ‘Spouse you’ve tried this. I’ll see if I can find some food.”

As Kane puts it succinctly, Ben as originally written “was a stereotype”; Jones’s version of Ben is not (33).

⁴⁷ Jones was a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh who had studied in Norway and Paris; he was fluent in several languages and had “dabbled in writing.” He was finishing a Master’s degree in Communication at New York University when he was cast. As Hardman recalls, “Duane Jones was a very well-educated man... [he] simply refused to do the role as written” (Kane 32-3).

⁴⁸ Jones observes, “[O]ne of the beautiful things about [the Image Ten] is that it was not an issue in their minds. It never occurred to me that I was hired because I was black. But it did occur to me that because I was black it would give a different historic element to the film” (Ferrante 15-16). Romero recalls, “Duane actually thought we should take note of [Ben’s race].... Now I think we probably should have. Not to make a big point, but to refer to it at least. We had written this guy as angry for no reason at all. But that automatic rage that comes out, that would have been an interesting overlay. Duane was the only one who knew this” (qtd. in Kane 35).

⁴⁹ Streiner acknowledges as much: “We knew there would probably be a bit of controversy, just from the fact that an African-American man and a white woman are holed up in a farmhouse” (qtd. in Kane 34).

⁵⁰ Jones’ reinterpretation of Ben prompted Hardman to adjust his own portrayal of Harry: “Duane played the character so calmly that it was decided I should play Harry Cooper in a frenetic fashion with fist-clinching and that sort of thing, for contrast” (qtd. in Kane 33).

⁵¹ Or a covered wagon, if one thinks too, of the titular party of John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, (also released in 1939), itself arguably a “house movie” about American culture, with archetypal characters (e.g. the crooked banker, the outlaw, the hooker with the heart of gold), and a stagecoach that arguably serves the same function as Kael finds in the European house films, placing these archetypes together in a symbolic space.

⁵² Tom’s “gee whiz” innocence is partially a reflection of Wayne’s relative inexperience with acting. While several critics panned the actors’ performances, here it arguably speaks to how Romero strategically uses the cast’s varying degrees of experience to convey certain elements. As Duane Jones observed, “...interviewers just assumed that we were a bunch of amateur actors. It was an interesting mix of amateurs and professionals, which was even more clever on George’s part” (qtd. in Kane 36).

⁵³ Isabel Cristina Pinedo describes Barbara as “virtually catatonic” (77) and “passive” (n 9, 144). Barry Keith Grant similarly describes Barbara as “near-catatonic” and “a burden on the other living characters” (228). Both Pinedo and Grant contrasts Barbara’s characterization with a more empowered version of the character that appears in the 1990 remake of *Night*, written by Romero and directed by Tom Savini.

⁵⁴ While *The Feminist Mystique* largely articulated what would become second-wave feminism, related developments were playing out in the years immediately before *Night*’s release, including the formation of the National Organization for Women in 1966—which met for the first time in Friedan’s hotel room following the failure of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to pass a resolution to enforce the laws against gender discrimination that already existed. In 1967, the year before *Night*’s release, the New Politics conference in Chicago dropped the feminist agenda completely following widespread internal disagreements. The *radicalization* of feminism that Hervey and other critics lament is absent in *Night* emerged *out of* the frustration with the larger progressive movement, and that radicalization emerged at about the same time as *Night* was being made.

⁵⁵ It is possible that Eastman intended for Helen to be more explicitly liberated: Continental cut ten minutes of the film, mostly “expository dialogue and character development,” much of which involved the Coopers (Kane 77).

⁵⁶ Russo explains that Tom was originally written as a middle-aged gravedigger, but the group decided to make him younger and add Judy “after the fact”(Kane 22). Casting was also most likely done in haste. Ridley was a receptionist at Hardman Associates, and she remembers being “dreadful” when she read for the role of Barbara, for which she was originally considered (in some of the posters for the film Ridley’s face is superimposed onto O’Dea’s body). “I’d never done any acting,” Ridley recalls, “I think they took pity on me. They like[d] me. They made a little spot for me” (qtd. in Kane 42-3).

⁵⁷ Romero echoes the association when he reflects on the assassinations of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy in *The American Nightmare*: “All of a sudden, you really don’t know. It certainly shatters your faith in what’s going on at the top. It gives you a sense of the fragility of things—not just your life, but the nation’s life.”

⁵⁸ The Washington scene was added midway through shooting. A skeleton crew traveled to D.C. to shoot, forgoing permits to do so on the street with the Capitol building in the background. While the scene was added late and largely improvised, Romero (who has a brief cameo as one of the reporters asking questions) now considers it essential: “As far as the people on television not really answering questions and making it more confusing, that’s been a conscious part of zombie films. That’s generally what it’s about— ‘Ladies and gentlemen, there was just a plane crash that took out a small piece of Manhattan, more later.’ It’s never reassuring, it’s always alarming, and that’s been a kind of conscious through-line” (Kane 62).

⁵⁹ While the media's role in opposing the war is often exaggerated, straight reporting of the war's *escalation*—troop counts, new offensives, etc.—as well as the actual *progress* of the war—body counts, ground gained and lost, etc.—had increasingly diverged from the Pentagon's own emphasis on how well the war was going, leading to a "credibility gap," a phrase used as early as 1966, and one that was in wide circulation by the time *Night* was released. A cursory examination of the Johnson archives for 1965 reveals that a major concern was the problem the administration's statements to the press had created ("Highlights"). *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites 1966 for the earliest usage of the term, attributed to the December 28 issue of *The Guardian*: "Official American statements are no longer taken on trust... The phenomenon... is called the 'credibility gap'."

⁶⁰ See Daniel C. Hallin's *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* for a thorough discussion of how the U.S. news media's coverage of wars changed from World War II to the Vietnam War. In the former, reporters typically would rely on military press releases and report on them without attribution, giving the reports an air of factual certainty ("as though the journalist could testify to it all personally"). During the Vietnam War, reports often would appear "typically with attributions, often to unnamed sources not all of whom agreed with one another" calling attention to the lack of consensus and, implicitly, the reporters' own skepticism about the trustworthiness of military assessments (6).

⁶¹ Hervey contends that "*Night's* perceived racial subtext becomes pronounced here. There are Molotov cocktails, indelibly associated with the 1960s ghetto riots" (83). It is an interesting connection to make. While I am not sure if it is totally convincing, Hervey points out, too, that "Over two thousand buildings burned in Detroit's 12th Street riot in July '67, while the Image Ten filmed *Night*," and I recall, too, Romero's aforementioned comment about wanting to capture the kinds of images he was seeing "from Watts, from 'Nam" (*Midnight*).

⁶² Art historian Juan José Junquera has disputed that Goya, in fact, composed the *Black Paintings*, of which *Saturn Devouring His Son* is part; Junquera speculates that Goya's son Javier painted them (see Arthur Lubow's "The Secret of the Black Paintings" in the *New York Times Magazine* for a detailed discussion). This question of authenticity has only arisen in the past fifteen years, however, so here I will presume their authenticity, as Romero would have if indeed he had the painting in mind, consciously or subconsciously, when composing the shot.

⁶³ For example, Grant's assessment of Barbara refers to her as "one of the film's three *female* characters," referring only to Barbara, Helen and Judy (emphasis mine). Hervey, too, neglects to include Karen when he discusses how "The treatment of female characters attracted criticism from feminist scholars and critics," and then enumerates only how Barbara, Judy, and Helen are portrayed (67).

⁶⁴ In France the Revolutionary Feminists (*Les Feministes révolutionnaires*), the *Psychanalyse et politique* (*Psych et po*) and the Class Struggle Strand (*La tendance Lutte de Classes*) emerged largely around the "Events" of May 1968 and articulated much of what would become feminist theory in American universities. In the United States the 1968 Miss America pageant drew large protests that were covered by national news broadcasts, bringing the term "Women's Liberation" into the national discourse the year of *Night's* release.

⁶⁵ Ebert, for example, gives an expanded account elsewhere in the same review. Marriott and Newman include it as a singular example of the how the film is "willing to break taboo" in a groundbreaking way, declaring "After that *Night*, things really changed." R. H. W. Dillard similarly declares that the film's success stems from "the detailing of human taboos, murder, and cannibalism" before singling out the scene, as well, by asking "What girl has not, at one time or another, wished to kill her mother?" Dillard then adds that *Night* "offers a particularly vivid opportunity to commit [a] forbidden deed vicariously" (15). Hervey, who himself pays extended attention to the scene, also notes that "Hip reviewers like Stein took barely disguised glee in the Coopers' deaths" at the time (104).

⁶⁶ Kane notes that Schon herself has developed a cult following that surpasses any of the other actors from *Night* based solely on her limited role (43), and Hervey describes how even shortly after the film's release the writers from Warhol's *Interview* magazine asked Romero "star-struck questions about Schon" and named her the star of the film (104). On her website (www.ghoulnextdoor.com), Schon includes dozens of *Night*-related and a personal database of photographs that fans have sent her of *Night*-related art, figurines, and other items that she has received. The "face" image, as she herself calls it, is by far the most popular image used.

⁶⁷ Happenstance aided in the posse itself largely being coded as "stereotypical backwater conservatives, the police's natural allies," as Hervey describes them (109). The extras playing the posse members were all locals—many of whom brought their own guns—and, as Russo explains, "American society was much more stratified at that time, and so most of the people closely associated with [the film] happened to be white... it was pure accident that no longhairs showed up" (qtd. in Kane 50-1). While many scholars and critics single out the helicopter as a signifier of the war in the film, it was only included because a local television news crew wanted to do a report about the making of a film in Pittsburgh; the Image Ten asked the crew if they would be willing to use the helicopter for the sequence (*Birth*). For a discussion of the film's evocations of the war, see Sumiko Higashi's "*Night of the Living Dead: A Horror Film about the Horrors of the Vietnam Era.*"

⁶⁸ See Louis Harris's *The Anguish of Change* (esp. 168-74) for a discussion of the radical erosion of Americans' confidence in existing social structures starting in 1968 and continuing on into the early 1970s.

⁶⁹ Those very words were spoken by Second Lieutenant Calley, Leader of 1st Platoon, to Warrant Officer One Hugh Thompson, Jr., who intervened to save fifteen civilians who had survived the massacre and who went on to testify to what he had witnessed. ("Peers Inquiry").

⁷⁰ This is how the designer of the experiment, Stanford psychology professor Philip Zimbardo, describes the "Lucifer Effect," a term he coined in discussing his findings (211). The in/famous experiment involved volunteers being divided into two groups—prisoners and guards—to create a mock prison, with roughly one-third of the guards exhibiting "genuinely" sadistic behaviors, while prisoners reported feeling traumatized (see Zimbardo, esp. 195-228).

⁷¹ Ellsberg leaked the documents to reporter Neil Sheehan of the *New York Times*, which began to publish them on June 13, 1971. Ellsberg describes the Pentagon Papers as "7,000 pages of top secret documents that demonstrated unconstitutional behavior by a succession of presidents [Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and, especially, Johnson], the violation of their oath and the violation of the oath of every one of their subordinates—I, for one—who had participated in that terrible, indecent fraud over the years in Vietnam, lying us into a hopeless war... a wrongful war" (Goodman et al.).

⁷² I will only briefly touch on parallels and key departures between the two films. For a more thorough discussion, see Michael Brashinsky, "The Spring, Defiled: Ingmar Bergman's *Virgin Spring* and Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left*." For a discussion of the two films as art film vs. exploitation film, see Wood's discussion in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (121-24) and Adam Lowenstein's discussion in *Shocking Representations* (136-143).

⁷³ Most accounts of *Last House* simplify matters by focusing on Craven as its auteur. Lowenstein, for example, only refers to Cunningham once, does not do so until the antepenultimate page of his thirty-three page chapter about the film, and then it is only in passing; Craven is included in the chapter's very first sentence and his name regularly appears. Wood does not mention Cunningham at all. Craven, himself, however, often refers to Cunningham as an equal partner (Cunningham, incidentally, would go on to direct and produce *Friday the 13th* in 1980). The accompanying commentary that they recorded together for the 2002 MGM DVD release often reveals how essential Cunningham's role was. While the scope of this paper limits the ability to discuss Cunningham's role thoroughly, I will try to point out ways in which *Last House* was a more collaborative effort than most accounts convey.

⁷⁴ Craven gives a powerful account of how Hess “kept that distance,” especially with Cassel, so that scenes in which the Stillos molest Mari and Phyllis were “real,” even for the actors, and Craven credits Grantham, who was “more experienced in the world, in general” than Cassel, just as Phyllis was more worldly than the Mari, with improvising her lines (“It’s just us. Just ignore everybody else”) during the harrowing scene in which the Stillos force Mari and Phyllis to disrobe, as Cassel was genuinely upset during filming (Craven and Cunningham). It is just one example of how something like the input of actors is important, yet often overlooked in critical commentaries.

⁷⁵ Chapin’s son, Steve, himself an accomplished musician, helped David Hess arrange the film’s score (Craven and Cunningham).

⁷⁶ Szulkin’s *Wes Craven’s Last House on the Left: The Making of a Cult Classic*, has proved to be an indispensable resource in facilitating my own discussion of the film’s modes of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. See especially 119-51.

⁷⁷ Wood recounts a similar experience in helping organize the aforementioned retrospective for the 1979 Toronto Film Festival. The retrospective’s very focus was on transgressive horror films, yet after the screening of *Last House* a number of audience members gathered together in the lobby and complained to the theater’s management about the film (125).

⁷⁸ As Schneider notes, “Everyone from the Motion Picture Association of America to community censorship boards to individual projectionists had a hand in cutting down the film... to the point where nobody knows for certain whether a wholly intact print even exists” (Schneider 80-81). The 2002 MGM DVD release that I am using for this analysis includes an optional introduction that can be played before the film in which Craven explains, “What you’re about to see is the most complete version of *Last House on the Left* that has been released to this date since the original theatrical release that was done previous to any cuts, and all materials that were removed for reasons of community standards or protests of censors or everything else has been restored.”

⁷⁹ To put that figure in context, the independent, regionally-distributed *Last House* grossed just a million less than major studio release *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* the year before—it earned \$4 million for Paramount during its initial 1971 initial release (Stuart and Young 105). *Westworld*, released a year before *Last House*, also earned \$4 million during its initial release, becoming the biggest box office success for MGM that year, according to *Variety* (“Big Rentals”).

⁸⁰ Craven and Cunningham had actually wanted to make an even more graphic—and explicitly political—film and one that more explicitly tied the filmic violence to the real horror of the war. As originally written, Phyllis’s hand was to be severed after she is killed—with her fingers making a peace sign—in the final shot of the film (Szulkin 204). Krug and Weasel were going to be Vietnam veterans, as well (ibid 16). Such a backstory would make their violence in the film much more of a direct analog for the war.

⁸¹ As Craven notes, documentary techniques “signaled subconsciously to you that this is real because it’s not smooth, it’s not polished” (Craven and Cunningham).

⁸² Marriott and Newman, for example, dismiss the film largely because of its “misguidedly played for straight comic relief” which they find leaves the film without “any remaining shred of credibility” (160-1). Lowenstein similarly finds that “Craven’s use of ‘comic relief’ demonstrates the limitations of *Last House’s* engagement with contemporary national trauma” (136).

⁸³ A strictly psychoanalytic reading here would ostensibly render a very different interpretation. Mari repeatedly refers to her parents as “mother” and the less formal “daddy.” Mari and Estelle have pointed exchanges while Mari and John show nothing but affection for one another. The family dynamic thus readily lends itself to a reading focused on the Electra complex, but I personally do not have much to say in that regard. I instead find that the stark contrast provides a bit of characterization with which the spectator

can both differentiate the parents early on and identify with them as more rounded characters. The interesting subtext for me is how the film goes on to offer critiques of both John and Estelle in terms of their engagement of Mari and her interests. Estelle, in some ways, is too judgmental, while John is likewise too permissive.

⁸⁴ In the same Harris survey from 1971, the year before *Last House* opened, over half of the respondents reported installing extra locks on doors and bars on windows; a majority also reported that they felt unsafe on public streets and that they would watch out their windows for “suspicious strangers.”

⁸⁵ As the “Letter from the Publisher” notes, the “Silent Majority” that elected Richard Nixon was made up mostly of “Middle Americans”—older and conservative voters on one hand, but also younger Americans in the West, Midwest, and South, as well as voters with a mixture of socioeconomic backgrounds, including especially blue collar whites and middle class voters in the suburbs and in rural areas. While many of the latter may have been conservative, there were also those who weren’t politically engaged at all other than in their fear of (or resentment towards) the counterculture and what they saw as an attack on American values and institutions. They were unified, however, in feeling “threatened by the attacks on traditional values” (ibid).

⁸⁶ When Mari and her parents refer to the various markers of counterculture that she exhibits, there is no mention of politics or the war. The coding is largely done in terms of commodities (e.g. the posters of Jimi Hendrix, Mick Jagger, and a dove and peace sign on her bedroom wall, as well as the peace symbol necklace).

⁸⁷ A bit of exposition reveals that Bloodlust has a reputation for biting the heads off of chickens, recalling Alice Cooper’s infamous “chicken incident” at a concert in 1969. The Altamont Speedway Free Festival, featuring the Rolling Stones, was held in 1969, as well, and it stood in grotesque contrast with Woodstock, which had been held just four months earlier. Woodstock, as historian Bruce Schulman describes, had “seemed idyllic, the birthplace of a new culture,” but Altamont “swept into the open all the ugly features of the counterculture—the greed, the hype, the hustle’.... At Altmont, the Woodstock generation learned that its fondest hopes, its most ambitious objectives would not be easily met; it would have to confront the darker realities of the age” (19). A rumor soon circulated that “Sympathy for the Devil” was the song the Rolling Stones were playing when Meredith Hunter was stabbed to death by members of the Hells Angels (they were playing “Under My Thumb”). While Woodstock represented “peace and love,” Altamont came to be viewed as the *de facto* conclusion to the American counterculture. As historian Mark Lytle asserts, “Altamont became, whether fairly or not, a symbol for the end of the Woodstock Nation” (336).

⁸⁸ The largely middle and upper class youths who could avoid the draft and thus take part in the counterculture often took pains to distinguish themselves from the lower class youths who largely made up the ranks of draftees shipped off to war. Also, while there are gestures toward the Stillos being products of their social situation, the construction of Phyllis gives the lie to such a defense. She, too, has had limited Weberian life chances, and yet she serves as a contrast to them, as well as to Mari.

⁸⁹ While both are arguably naïve, Phyllis recognizes right away the trap the two of the have walked into at the Stillos’ hideout, while Mari appears befuddled several minutes into the ordeal. During their torture in the woods, Phyllis remains much calmer—she even comforts Mari—and, crucially, Phyllis flees the Stillos in order to create a diversion for Mari to actually escape.

⁹⁰ Lowenstein adds two items that I did not identify, myself: the Stillos “defy conventional notions of sexual morality” and hide out in downtown New York, “an area... synonymous with the counterculture” (118).

⁹¹ Craven describes how he “did explore the idea of the scary father” with Krug, basing the character partially on his own father and, he adds, Junior was a “in the back of [his] mind, a bit of [him]” (Craven and Cunningham).

⁹² Lowenstein, for example, asserts that the Stillos “expose the bleak underside of certain countercultural impulses taken to their limit, where the outcome is not progressive social change and self-awakening but addiction, rape, and murder,” but then only mentions the Manson Family; he does not elaborate further except to note parenthetically that Sadie’s name “duplicates that of Manson Family member Susan ‘Sadie Mae Glutz’ Atkins” (118).

⁹³ Schneider describes Sadie as “bisexual, proto-feminist” (81). Lowenstein finds that her “bisexuality is coded as excessive, monstrous desire” but that her “proto-feminist consciousness” works to disrupt “a wholesale demonization of the Stillos” (135).

⁹⁴ While most commentaries on *Last House* emphasize Krug’s later raping of Mari and remark on the torture both she and Phyllis receive (noting, in particular, the humiliation that Phyllis endures), they also tend to neglect that Phyllis is also raped. Perhaps it is not as salient because it occurs off-camera. The rape itself begins on camera, however. Also, even in those accounts that do recognize what is portrayed, Sadie is often omitted, with only Krug and Weasel implicated in the assault.

⁹⁵ I have also not encountered any discussion in the critical literature about the sequence that follows it, punctuating the cross-cutting: Estelle makes a toast to Mari, their “princess,” to which John toasts, “To her queen” as Estelle falls into his lap. If the sequence exhibits the Collingwoods’ bourgeois patriarchy, these last shots would seemingly put a fine point on the matter.

⁹⁶ Wood, for example, sees in the Stillos a class-coded “return of the repressed” who seek vengeance against the representatives of patriarchal capitalism, the Collingwoods. Lowenstein goes even further as part of his larger project regarding the mastery of trauma through repetition. His reading of the film centers around how “vengeful affect is exactly what the film brutally and repeatedly arouses in the viewer” The Stillos, he asserts, “enact viewer desire for vengeance against the Collingwoods and their smug, privileged insularity,” and the Collingwoods, in turn, “enact audience wishes for reciprocal vengeance against the murderous Stillos” (127).

⁹⁷ Wood apparently had never seen the sequence, saying that “it must have been the most disturbing moment in this most disturbing of films” and that it “may have been cut from all prints” (113). While often cut for exhibition, the sequence has reappeared in recent releases of the film, including the 2002 release through MGM that I am using.

⁹⁸ The fact that Craven is a former humanities professor who taught drama is the only admittedly thin evidence that I have, other than the deliberate way Mari’s body twists around and comes to rest in this exact position, floating face-up and with palms upwards, rather than say, falling forward as one might expect her to.

⁹⁹ Both are based on medieval source material that is Scandinavian in origin: *The Virgin Spring* was in turn based on the Swedish ballad “Töres döttrar i Wänge” (Töre’s daughters in Wänge), while *Hamlet* was based on a Danish legend: as Stephen Greenblatt explains, “The legendary tale of Hamlet (Amleth) was already recounted at length in the late-twelfth-century *Danish History* compiled in Latin by Sax the Grammarian” (1661).

¹⁰⁰ I am thinking here of the association between sleep and death in the prayer, as well as the prayer’s specific lines (“If I die before I wake/I pray the Lord my soul to take”). For her to recite a children’s bedtime prayer as opposed to, say, the more sophisticated “Lord’s Prayer,” with its additional emphasis on petitioning God for guidance and protection, is telling. Critical commentaries that confuse the two arguably miss the subtext and instead insert other subtext mistakenly. Lowenstein, for example, states, “Mari’s utterance of the Lord’s Prayer underscores her kinship with Bergman’s heroine Karin (Birgitta Pettersson), who is assaulted on her way to church” (137).

¹⁰¹ In Act 4, Scene 5, Ophelia sings, “Tomorrow is St. Valentine’s day,/All in the morning bedtime/And I a maid at your window/To be your Valentine./Then up a rose, and donned his clothes,/And duped the

chamber door;/Let in the maid, that out a maid/Never departed more” and then “By Gis, and by Saint Charity,/Alack, and fie for shame!/Young men will do’t if they come to’t,/By Cock, they are to blame./Quoth she ‘Before you tumble me,/You promised me to wed.’/So would I’ a’ done, by yonder sun, An thou hadst not come to my bed” (1731).

¹⁰² Ophelia also hands out rosemary (“for remembrance) and pansies (“for thoughts”). Greenblat et. al provide the symbolic context for the other three flowers that she hands out: fennel signifies flattery and columbines signify ingratitude or infidelity (1734, n1), while daisies signify faithfulness or, in this context, “dissembling seduction” (1734, n 3). There are no stage directions to indicate to whom Ophelia gives which flower, but Greenblatt et al. offer that Laertes potentially received the rosemary and pansies and Gertrude the fennel and columbines; Claudius, they speculate, received the daisies and rue, which Ophelia also kept for herself (1734, n 9). Some critics argue that Claudius is thus implicated as the one who has seduced—or raped—Ophelia; others make a case that it is Hamlet.

¹⁰³ In “By the Way, Ophelia is Pregnant,” screenwriter Alex Epstein makes an interesting case that Ophelia has been seduced offstage by Hamlet. Nigel Alexander states plainly that Ophelia “describes herself as seduced, made pregnant, and abandoned” (360). Some marginal commentaries point to Ophelia’s description of Hamlet to Polonius in Act 2, Scene 2, as an indication that she had feared that Hamlet might rape her. She recounts how he came to her private chambers already partially undressed, his pants around his ankles (“My lord, as I was sewing in my chamber,/Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,/No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,/Ungartered, and down-gyved to his ankle”), and how he became violent towards her (“He took me by the wrist and held me hard”). When Polonius asks if Hamlet was “Mad for thy love?” Ophelia replies, “My lord, I do not know,/But truly I do fear it.” (Shakespeare 1690). Most commentaries, however, focus on Ophelia’s descriptions in terms of how they speak to Polonius’s inference that Hamlet is madly *in love with* Ophelia, or that they speak to Hamlet’s madness.

¹⁰⁴ In the audio commentary for the 2002 DVD, Craven and Cunningham explain that budget limitations meant that they had no location to shoot the scene, so they simply put up a black backdrop (paper, “the cheapest stuff” they could find) to hide that fact that they had no set. The scene nonetheless recalls for me the surreal “Last Supper” sequence from Buñuel’s *Viridiana* (1961), and along with *cinema vérité*, Craven cites Buñuel (and Fellini) as an early influence (Greenberg).

¹⁰⁵ Craven explains the impetus for this scene also came from the same anthropology PhD that had told him about how anxiety dreams involving broken teeth when she described for him the cross-cultural fear of *vagina dentata*, (Craven and Cunningham).

¹⁰⁶ The reelection of Richard Nixon himself had been supremely demoralizing for many—including Hooper—and it reflected, too, what was an already listless, disaffected political left, as Nixon defeated Democratic challenger George McGovern handedly and in an election with the lowest voter turnout—only fifty-five percent—since 1948.

¹⁰⁷ Several factors support such a statement. First, looking at the average annual rate of inflation alone, the figure is 2.5% for the entire century leading up to 1970. After 1970, the average rate rose to 6% and hit a ceiling of 13.3% by 1979. This rapid inflation combined with high unemployment to create “stagflation,” in which inflation and recession—once thought of as mutually exclusive—combine, leading to an unusually high Misery Index (the sum of the unemployment rate and the inflation rate). Measures which would have usually been taken to lower inflation could have led to less economic growth and conversely, efforts to boost the economy could have led to higher interest rates. Interest rates, in fact, rose to over 12% per year and hit an all-time high of 21.5% in 1980 (Frum 292-3).

¹⁰⁸ In 1980 *Kramer vs. Kramer*, a film that focuses on a couple’s divorce and its impact, won five Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director (Robert Benton), Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actor (Dustin Hoffman), and Best Supporting Actress (Meryl Street) at the Academy Awards.

¹⁰⁹ The final quotation is attributed to Hooper by Gunnar Hansen, who plays the monstrous Leatherface in the film. Hansen discounts that *any* subtexts are present in the film, and he disputes that there was any

authorial intent to include subtexts deliberately: “[T]he movie is about scaring the audience as much as possible... [Hooper and Henkel] weren’t thinking of some other deep, deep interpretation” (qtd. in Jaworzyn 96).

¹¹⁰ Estimates of the exact amount vary. I am using the figure cited by Jaworzyn (45) and also David Gregory’s *The Shocking Truth* documentary, as they both include detailed discussions of the costs of the film, including interviews with key members of the production in which they use the figure \$125,000 to discuss the film’s cost. Other sources cite figures as high as \$300,000.

¹¹¹For example, after viewing David Gregory’s *Shocking Truth* documentary, one would be forgiven for assuming that the film had been universally praised upon release, whereas Bryan Curtis’s retrospective in *Slate* magazine from 2003 (“The Best Little Chophouse in Town”) states plainly, “In 1974, the critics were particularly unkind.” Neither extreme is seemingly true.

¹¹² As Margie Burns points out, there is a “striking homology” between the increasingly horrific transgressions of the Southern Other in late 1960s and 1970s American cinema and the depiction of American Indians in captivity narratives: “as colonization proceeded, and the Indians’ land became progressively more valuable and more in demand, atrocities represented in captivity narratives became progressively more fiendish” (54).

¹¹³ For a detailed history of how exploitation films have long used truth claims to draw audiences and circumvent censorship, see Eric Schaefer’s *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A History of Exploitation Films: 1919-1959* (1999).

¹¹⁴ Henkel observes, “There’s a sense of something along the lines of *cinéma vérité*, and Tobe had come out of that school of film-making, doing documentaries where there’s a lot of hand-held camera work” (Jaworzyn 90).

¹¹⁵ In anticipation of a possible objection here that it might be the authorities behind both shovel and camera—the digging being dirt put back on graves, perhaps—let me note again that initially there is a sound like a shovel breaking earth, and that the shoveling and heavy breathing are punctuated by what sounds like metal splitting wood, suggesting the shovel is being used to break into a coffin.

¹¹⁶ This interpretation is supported later in the film, in fact, when it is *explicitly* established that the Hitchhiker both has a camera (he takes a photograph of Franklin) and that he was responsible for defiling the graves (the Old Man, having heard news reports about the transgression, berates him for it).

¹¹⁷ Robert A. Burns supports the reading, explaining, “The script was shortened considerably. The original had many pages of the kids driving around, with much late-hippie banter. Much of it was rewritten day-by-day during shooting” (qtd. in Jaworzyn 42).

¹¹⁸ Hooper had the actors who play the youths spend a lot of time together outside of shooting in order to bond, but had them stay away from Paul Partain to lend truth to Franklin’s alienation (*Shocking*).

¹¹⁹ Hooper himself notes that when he made *Eggshells*—which “was about a commune house for the subculture”—he had already observed how “Guys were coming back from Vietnam, and the subculture was beginning to split apart and go back out into the mainstream, even though they didn’t know it” (qtd. in Phipps).

¹²⁰ In a comparison of *Deliverance* and *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), Maggie Burns observes that both films respond to the question, “What happened to ‘the spirit of the sixties?’” with the answer “It died, done in by evil rednecks, in the South” (44). Lowenstein finds that such “reductive cinematic logic makes a certain amount of symbolic ‘sense,’” noting the South’s “violent resistance” of the Civil Rights Movement and, by extension, the New Left, which was “perhaps most constitutive of the ‘spirit of the sixties’” (129).

¹²¹ The Hitchhiker emphasizes the difference between the disposable culture of late capitalism and the cannibal family's traditional economy—with its conservation of resources—when he describes approvingly how the slaughterhouse would use every part of the animal possible: “They use everything—they don't throw nothing away!” The family similarly seems to use every part of the humans and other animals that they kill for either food or to adorn their home.

¹²² Several commentaries state that Leatherface's name appears only in the credits, but late in the film the Hitchhiker calls him by name. Of his creation's habit of wearing masks made from human skin, Hooper explains that he wanted to focus on his realization that “man was the real monster... just wearing a different face” (qtd. in Bowen 17).

¹²³ Hooper points out that Kirk's convulsions are another appeal to verisimilitude, as the depictions of death in *Texas* contrast with how in most films at the time “death scenes were portrayed as someone fires a gun, and someone would fall over” (*Shocking*).

¹²⁴ The Old Man's name, advanced age, and behavior towards the Hitchhiker and Leatherface have left the impression on many viewers that he is the father to the other two. Hansen, however, explains how, “We always thought of the family as three brothers: the Cook is the older brother... our intention was that he was the eldest of the three brothers...” (qtd. in Jaworzyn 43). The relationship is clarified in the film's far inferior sequel.

¹²⁵ Hooper offers yet another, related intertextual reference—*The Wizard of Oz*. He credits Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* with most likely being the music that he was listening to when he thought of the narrative for *Texas*: “the music came on, and in a matter of literally seconds, literally under 30 seconds, I thought about that song and everything came to me” (qtd. in Baumgarten).

¹²⁶ Hooper has also commented, however, on how the film's humor, in general, was not immediately recognized by all audiences due to the film's confrontational violence (Hooper).