

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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ABSTRACT

In *The Films in My Life*, François Truffaut describes how “cinematic success” results from a fragile, temporary confluence of elements: the director, the film itself, and its audience, but also critical reception, marketing, competition, and the zeitgeist in which the film is released. “When a film achieves a certain amount of success,” Truffaut observes, “it becomes a sociological event.” Accounting for such a sociological event seemingly warrants a sociological approach. Material-semiotic methods have been used in sociology to map relations between people, materials and concepts, and given the similar confluence of elements involved in filmmaking, such methods seem ideal for critical interventions in cinema studies. This thesis offers an example of such a material-semiotic approach to film history and theorization, illustrated through close readings of three films: 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). While each of these films has received renewed critical and scholarly attention since 2000, its success and continued significance too often has been attributed to its director alone. By accounting also for the role of the audience and other collaborators (e.g. producers, actors, art directors) in meaning-making, the mode of exhibition, the specific sociohistorical context, intertextual and paratextual elements, and indeed the texts, themselves, one can recognize a remarkable similarity in the confluence of elements between these films. Together they became a kind of 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*, implicating the spectator in the violence onscreen and tying that violence to the real life horrors outside the theater. By tracing the points of contact and the shared qualities of films, one can posit such larger speculations. The material-semiotic approach employed here arguably offers a richer account of these films, and promises to be a productive approach to film history and theory.