‘Peter Brook’s *Night of the Living Dead*’: Horror, Cinema and the Post-War Theatre

Abstract:

An examination of the relationship between theatre and film that focuses on the work of figures associated with the post-war British theatre but whose film work was often understood in terms of horror. In particular, it examines the ways in which their work was understood as shocking audiences through a confrontation with repressed materials and as narratively staging conflicts between protagonists that represent conflicting ideas. In other words, these stories were often understood as staging battles between characters that sought to assert domination and control over their adversaries, battles that often featured psychological cruelty and destructiveness.

Introduction

As Steve Neale has stressed, it is strange how many ‘discussions and histories of the horror film omit any mention of the theatre’ (Neale 2000: 87), particularly given the large number of horror films based on theatrical plays. For example, as Neale points out, although Universal’s classic versions of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* (both 1931) are often discussed as literary adaptations, neither was based on the original novels. On the contrary, both were cinematic adaptations of recent theatrical hits, and Bela Lugosi’s appearance in *Dracula* was a recreation of his theatrical performance in the role a few years earlier.

The post war period also saw numerous theatrical adaptations; and even Hammer’s *The Man Who Could Cheat Death* (1959) was an adaption of Barre Lyndon’s *The Man in Half Moon Street* (1939), while Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948) was adapted from a Patrick Hamilton play (1929). Alternatively, Jack Clayton’s *The Innocents* (1961) was not an

adaptation of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), but of a play by William Archibald from 1950. Similarly, when Albert Finney and Karel Reisz collaborated on *Night Must Fall* (1964), the film was adapted from an Emlyn Williams play of 1935. Other horror films that were also based on theatrical hits include *The Bat* (1959), *Wait Until Dark* (1967) and *Child's Play* (1972). Even films that were not explicit theatrical adaptations often borrowed materials from the theatre. For example, Vincent Price had been praised as the disturbed husband of *Angel Street* (aka *Gaslight*, 1938) when it was staged on Broadway in the 1940s and he recreated this performance for *Dragonwyck* (1946), a film specially designed by Paramount to showcase this performance. Alternatively, Anthony Hopkins became a star in the US during the mid 1970s after his appearance on Broadway in *Equus*, on the basis of which he was cast in his first two Hollywood features, both of which were horror films, *Audrey Rose* (1977) and *Magic* (1978).

Consequently, the relationship between horror films and the theatre was not simply one in which plays were adapted into films but also about the ways in which personnel and materials moved between the two media. The following article will therefore explore a series of writers and directors, who were largely associated with highbrow British theatre in the post war period, but who were associated with horror in the context of film, at least by critics in the United States. In other words, this article will not be a close analysis of specific films but of their reception by critics; an examination of some of the ways in which these films were understood. Rather than simply read these reviews as accurate or inaccurate accounts of texts, the article will use reviews to explore discourses through which films were understood. It does not suggest that these understandings reflect the 'true' meanings of these films, or even that these were the *only* understandings of these films at the time. To this end, the article will offer a kind of 'distant' (rather than 'close') reading: it aims to demonstrate a series of

interconnections that form a coherent context within which specific texts can be seen to have operated.

Of course, the article does set limit on these interconnection, such as its focus on the US context of reception, a focus that is motivated by my specific knowledge and interests but also explores the ways in which these filmmakers were understood outside their 'home' country. An examination of the extent to which UK reviews conformed to, or departed from, the context explored here would be fascinating but that is another task. None the less, it should also be stressed that the US context is not simply an arbitrary 'foreign' context: many of these films were explicitly developed with an eye on the US market and this was a time when British cinema was heavily funded by US. In other words, not only were many films clearly designed (at least in part) to appeal to the US but many actually US productions.

This is particularly significant in the area of horror where UK productions at the time are often associated with the explicit gore of Hammer, rather than with supposedly subtle or psychological horror, an association is misleading at best. As will be demonstrated, numerous psychological horror films were made by the British film industry at the time, and even in the US, the psychological horror film was often associated with the UK. In the 1960s, for example, Wise's *The Haunting* is set in the US but features British actors in key roles and seeks to conjure an English atmosphere. Elsewhere, numerous US filmmakers were either involved in British productions, such as Truman Capote, who helped adapt William Archibald's *The Innocents* for the screen; or used the UK as a location for their psychological horrors (*Midnight Lace*, 1960; *The Collector*, 1965; *Bunny Lake is Missing*, 1965).

Finally, it would help to clarify the use of the term 'horror' here. Just as the article does not suggest that the readings offered by US critics represent the 'true' meaning of these films, it does not suggest that any of these films are *really* horror films. Horror is a term that has different meanings in different historical contexts and, even within a specific historical

context, its meanings can be fiercely contested. In other words, rather than claim that these films *were* horror, the aim of the essay is to explore how and why they may have been understood as horror with a specific context, or to simply examine a specific filmmaker's association with horror. Even in the period under discussion, some of these films (*The Pumpkin Eaters*, 1964; and *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, 1969) were clearly not understood as horror and yet still demonstrate the relationships between a filmmaker's cinematic oeuvre and materials strongly associated with horror at the time.

To this end, the article will focus on reviews published in the *New York Times*, given its status as one of the most respected reviewers of theatre and films during the period. However, as Rick Altman has pointed out, one problem with the study of genre is that, outside the academy, the explicit 'naming of a genre' is actually quite rare, given that it 'risks alienating' at least as many people as it might interest (Altman 1999: 128). Consequently, marketing and reviews commonly 'imply generic affiliation' through terms that are associated with, and so evoke, specific genres. For example, horror films are often associated with 'chills,' 'terrors' or 'shocks' or with the 'eerie,' 'weird' or 'creepy.' The following essay will therefore identify explicit moments where horror is named as a genre, but it will also explore the ways in which associations with horror are implied through these (and other) associated terms.

Finally, many of the figures examined in this article also had a relationship to the theatre of the absurd, in which the meaningless of the world (or the extent to which it is indifferent to human desire) is supposed to create an experience of terror, and the sense that human beings are merely 'puppets controlled or menaced by invisible forces'. In the process, humans are often presented as players trapped within a game of arbitrary rules and, as will be demonstrated, these themes recurred repeatedly in the films explored in this article. Furthermore, the theatre of the absurd frequently 'attacks the comfortable certainties of

religious or political orthodoxy', and 'aims to shock the audience out of complacency, to bring it face-to-face with the harsh facts of the human situation as the writer see it.' (Esslin 1965: 23) As a result, there is often a celebration of horror and violence, and of heresy and transgression, that will be examined later. However, the theatre of the absurd was also fascinated by black comedy, in which there is a hesitation between, or explicit interaction of, humour and horror. Esslin even quotes a statement by Pinter from 1960, in which he claimed that 'horror and absurdity go together' (Esslin 1969: 242).

Of course, the theatre of the absurd emerged from a French cultural scene that also celebrated surrealism and, like the surrealists, those associated with the absurd were often explicit fans of horror, particularly of its shocking, violent, transgressive and fantastic elements. However, as with others at the time, these fans often understood horror and detective stories as being virtually indistinguishable from one another, given that both concerned investigations into that which seemed to defy rational explanation. Consequently, horror and detective fiction were commonly linked by a larger generic term, 'mystery', a term that referred to stories that staged confrontations between the rational intellect on one hand and the mysterious (and potentially irrational) on the other. For example, in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), Sherlock Holmes investigates apparently supernatural events but eventually provides a rational explanation for them; while, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Van Helsing also investigates mysterious incidents but demonstrates the inverse: that vampires are able to thrive precisely because humans do not believe in them – that rationality denies the existence of such beings. However, both conclusions share something in common: both stress that what is taken to be reality may be an illusion. Both conclusions challenge orthodox interpretations of the world, and ask one to question one's subjective experience of it, a strategy that also raises another problem – both ask who is sane, those who accept

orthodox interpretations of the world, or those who see the world differently and are therefore declared to be mad?

The first section will therefore examine the films of 'working class realism' in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and their relationships to the theatre; but it will also examine the ways in which the key directors of these films quickly moved from 'working class realism' to horror films, which were seen as going beyond a mere description of social reality to explore the psychological processes through which reality is experienced. The next section, then, moves on to examine the films associated with playwright, Harold Pinter, and the ways in which they were associated with horror through their unsettling atmospherics but also through their exploration of control, sadism and psychological breakdown. The third section also explores many of these themes but through an examination of Peter Brook's cinematic experiments, particularly their fascination with cruelty, terror and the descent into chaos. Finally, the last two sections explore the work of the Shaffer brothers, and particularly Peter's confrontations between faith, passion and orthodoxy, and Anthony's obsession with games, in which players try to exert control over their opponents through lures and bluffs. In other words, Peter's output relates to the absurdist sense of people as mere 'puppets controlled and menaced by invisible forces' but it also reveals the violence and chaos that lie beneath the polite formalities of social life.

Beyond Realism: Description, Psychology and Degradation

The British films of 'working class realism' that started in the late 1950s, and that have become some of the most revered examples of British cinema, were heavily associated with the theatre. Certainly, the first major example, *Room at the Top* (1959), which was directed by Jack Clayton, was based on a novel; but the second, *Look Back in Anger* (1959), was

based on John Osborne's play and was directed by Tony Richardson, who made his name in theatre, particularly through his association with the Royal Court. Again, the third film was based on a novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), but starred Albert Finney, whose reputation at that time was largely due to his association with the theatre, where he was a prominent figure in the new generation of actors at the time.

Furthermore, as has been demonstrated elsewhere, all three films were associated with horror in a number of different ways, particularly through their protagonists' disturbed psychologies (Jancovich 2019), but also through the ways in which the directors of these films quickly moved on to projects associated with horror theatre. This move was due to their dissatisfaction with the tension between narration and description, in which 'working class realism' was too dependent on a 'description' of its social world, rather than on the 'narration' of the underlying processes that produce that world. In other words, many filmmakers turned to horror precisely due to its preoccupation with the subjective experiences of its protagonists. For example, Clayton's next film was a cinematic adaptation of William Archibald's *The Innocents*, while Reisz filmed Emlyn Williams's play, *Night Must Fall*. *The Innocents* was overtly identified as a 'horror film' but not 'a first rate' one. (Crowther 1961: 15). Certainly, the film was claimed to send 'some formidable chills down the spine', although aficionados of horror would probably be 'a bit bored'. It was also clearly seen as a psychological drama about a woman's mental breakdown and, as the review put it, the 'focal figure in the tale' is a 'supposedly morbid young woman', who 'would quickly be labelled psychopathic in this more knowing day'. Similarly, *Night Must Fall* was also clearly identified as a psychological horror film and featured Finney as 'a psychopathic murder' (Crowther 1964: 28). Again, while the film 'evidently aimed to be as scary, and Mr. Finney works hard to make it so', it was generally seen as an inferior horror film, even if the bar seems to have been set rather high: it was claimed that the film 'doesn't begin to compare to

Alfred Hitchcock's "Psycho" in its generation of surprises and shocks'.

In contrast, Richardson's relationship to horror was more complex. Like Clayton and Reisz, he also moved quickly onto horror, and made *Sanctuary* (1961) in the US, an adaptation of two William Faulkner stories, *Sanctuary* and *Requiem for a Nun*. The film's associations with horror were various, and it was overtly identified as 'an outright shocker' (Anon 1961), in which it's a Southern belle finds herself 'at the terrifying mercy' of Yves Montand's character, Candyman. (Crowther 1961: 31) It was therefore particularly associated with the Southern Gothic through its focus on a 'corrupted' and 'degenerate' young woman, who becomes the 'willing white slave' of the 'irresistibly masculine' Candyman. If the *New York Times* condemned the film as 'melodrama of the most the most mechanical and meretricious sort' that makes little attempt to understand 'the evil in the Faulkner stories or the social corruption suggested in them', this film was not Richardson's first attempt to tackle the Southern Gothic.

For example, Stuart Laing has discussed Tennessee Williams's influence on Richardson (Laing 1986) – Williams being a playwright simultaneously associated with both realism *and* Gothic horror– and by the time Richardson made *Sanctuary*, he had already directed both Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* and Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending* for the stage in 1957 and 1959 respectively. It should also be noted that the *New York Times*'s description of *Sanctuary*'s perverse central relationship between its Southern belle and her 'irresistibly masculine' lover is reminiscent of another Williams play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

Nor was *Sanctuary* even Richardson's first encounter with this Faulkner material. On the contrary, in 1956, the *New York Times* had reported on a French adaptation of Faulkner's *Requiem for a Nun* (Anon 1956: 23), which critics claimed had 'been ably translated and adapted by Albert Camus', a key figure in the theatre of the absurd. *The New York Times* also

discussed the French reception of the play, which had described the story as 'a literary, social and psychological document'. Then, in 1957, it was reported that Richardson would direct the London production of the play for 'the English Stage Company of the Royal Court Theatre' (Funke 1957: X1), after which it would have 'a Broadway debut during the fall of 1958.'

When it finally reached the New York stage, it was also discussed in terms of both horror and realism, and was described as 'a long dark dialogue that flows endlessly out of some hidden reservoir of the world's evil' and 'unmistakeably represents Mr. Faulkner's brooding over doom and damnation in the Mississippi town of Jefferson, where everything that is pertinent remains beneath the surface' (Atkinson 1959[a]: 13). The story was therefore understood as both an example of the Southern Gothic and as an investigation into the 'chain of evil' that results in the murder of a young child, a situation in which 'no one is without guilt', even the baby's mother - 'Temple Drake of Mr. Faulkner's horrifying "Sanctuary"'. Consequently, while the film version of this story was criticised for being 'shocking', the 'shocking' features of the play were championed by the *New York Times* review. These 'shocking features' were even used as a stick to beat the American theatre and it was claimed: 'If we had an art theatre we would probably have seen William Faulkner's "Requiem for a Nun" several seasons ago.' (Atkinson 1959[b]: X1) In short, the play was praised for the very qualities that had prevented it from reaching the American stage earlier: it's refusal to 'compromise with the theatre world'.

'A Disquieting Dread': Control, Sadism and Psychological Breakdown

Pinter's 'comedies of menace' can also be understood in this context. Consequently, the cinematic adaption of *The Caretaker* (1963), which was released in the US as *The Guest*, was

clearly discussed in terms that evoked the horror genre, and it was described as a 'grotesque intermingling of three mad characters in a cluttered room of a cheap rooming house in London' (Crowther 1964: 25). In addition to these references to the 'grotesque', and to the 'madness' of its characters, the film was also claimed to be one in which the audience was 'menaced by disorder', even if the review claimed that this 'menace' was more intense 'on the stage.' In other words, this sense of 'menace' was deemed central to the play so that its diminution in the film version was a serious failing. Nonetheless, the problem was only a relative one so that the film was still suffused with menace and its characters were referred to as 'eerie' and as provoking 'a disquieting dread.'

The cinematic adaptation of *The Birthday Party* (1968) was also reviewed in the same way, although its associations with horror were even more pronounced. It was not only directed by William Friedkin, who would direct *The Exorcist* a few years later (see, Zinoman, 2012, for a discussion of Pinter's influence on this later film), but it was produced by Milton Subotsky. Subotsky had been associated with Hammer's original move into Gothic horror back in 1957, when it made *Curse of Frankenstein*; and, by the late 1960s, he was producing a string of portmanteau horror films that started with *Dr Terror's House of Horrors* (1965) and *The Torture Garden* (1967).

Again, the word 'menace' was central to descriptions of both the original play and its cinematic adaptation. Furthermore, the film was supposedly distinguished by 'the suggestion of the dislocation of familiar things', a dislocation that was both 'funny' and 'terrifying' (Canby 1968: 54). Nor was this use of the term 'terrifying' a casual one. On the contrary, the film (and the play on which it was based) was explicitly identified as 'a horror story'; and while *The Guest* had been unfavourably compared with the original play, the film of *The Birthday Party* was seen as being 'pure Pinter'. Nonetheless, the film was still unfavourably compared with other Pinter projects, such as *The Servant* (1963) and *The Pumpkin Eaters*

(1964), although this comparison was acknowledged to be simply a matter of preference. In other words, the superiority of these Pinter projects was, it was claimed, that they moved *away* from the absurd and took 'place in worlds that are at least outwardly recognizable'.

The review also made special mention of Patrick Magee's appearance, which was significant given Magee's association with Samuel Beckett on the one hand, and horror on the other. Not only had Magee worked with Beckett on a number of plays but Beckett had specifically written *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) with Magee in mind. Furthermore, by 1968, Magee was already established as a regular in horror films such as *Dementia 13* (1963), *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964) and *The Skull* (1965). He would even make several portmanteau horror films for Subotsky such as *Tales from the Crypt* (1972) and *Asylum* (1972).

Magee also had an established relationship with Pinter and had already appeared in *The Servant*, which was not an adaptation of a Pinter play but had been specially adapted for the screen by Pinter from a novel by Robert Maugham. It was also explicitly discussed as an upmarket horror film in reviews at the time. For example, the *New York Times* described it as a 'shocking' film that depicted the 'crumbling of the British upper crust' (Crowther 1964: 30). However, the affiliation with the horror film was not just conveyed through this reference but through its description as 'a flesh-creeping demonstration of human destructiveness' that was made 'all the more horrifying by the genteel surroundings in which it occurs'. In addition, the film was described as 'shattering' and to feature characters motivated 'by a destructive sadism and vengefulness.'

Conversely, *The Pumpkin Eaters* was *not* associated with horror but it was seen as the study of a woman undergoing a mental breakdown that 'makes her a ripe case for a nosy psychiatrist.' (Crowther 1964: 58) However, despite the lack of references to horror, there were clear links both with Pinter's other studies of mental breakdown at the time and with

another play about a women's psychological disintegration, *The Innocents*. *The Pumpkin Eaters* was not only directed by Jack Clayton, who had directed the film version of *The Innocents* but, a decade later, Pinter would direct a revival of *The Innocents* on Broadway, a decision that demonstrates his continued relation to, and fascination with, the horror genre, particularly psychological horror. Nonetheless, the *New York Times* found Pinter's choice of materials to be largely inexplicable and concluded its review of the revival by stating:

> The question remains why it was thought interesting enough to revive the play. The taste with which the revival was accomplished is unquestionable, but when you have talents of the nature of Miss Bloom and Mr. Pinter on hand, merely to resuscitate a pedestrian stage adaptation of a great novel seems to savor something of folly. (Barnes 1976: C3)

In other words, it did not see the play as 'worth such attention', particularly given its difference from the original story. While it was claimed that 'James was able to suggest the presence of ghosts without making them tangible', the ghosts were 'given all too solid flesh' in Archibald's adaptation so that they end up 'tramping through the play's atmosphere with a needless realism.' However, despite this objection to Pinter's choice of material, there was no doubt about the play's status as horror or about Pinter's fascination with his material. He was therefore praised for the extent to which he had 'staged the piece with a meticulous Gothic sensibility' and for his dedication in making 'the horror all the more horrific by stressing its commonplace core.'

'Moving Towards an Exhausted End': Cruelty, Terror and Murder

Another key theatrical presence from the period – Peter Brook – was also associated with horror in various ways, particularly in the context of his cinematic work. This association can

even be detected in his first major film project, when in 1953, he filmed John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) with Laurence Olivier. The play not only concerned the exploits of a psychopathic criminal, Macheath, but it had also been used as the basis for Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), where Macheath's association with horror was even more emphatic. On the one hand, as Esslin has pointed out, Brecht 'achieved the currency of a cultural symbol to be reckoned with' within the world of post war British theatre, where he operated as 'an example of the potential of a theatre artist working effectively and experimentally within the framework of a wholly state-subsidized institution.' (Esslin, 1966: 64). On the other, Brecht's theatre was rooted in Weimar Germany, where theatre, cinema and the visual arts were obsessed with horror materials, and particularly their concerns with violence and domination. In other words, *The Threepenny Opera* not only featured Macheath as a figure of psychopathic cruelty but his signature song has become a musical standard, 'Mack the Knife'. It is also worth noting that Brecht's favourite actor during this period was Peter Lorre, whose international film career took off after he starred in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), where he played another sexual predator.

If the associations with horror were implicit in Brook's filming of *The Beggar's Opera*, they were overt in his next film, an adaptation of *Lord of the Flies* (1963) that was not only described as a 'shocking story' (Crowther 1963: 37) but one in which the horror was central. Consequently, while the *New York Times* expressed disappointment about the production, it also claimed that the film comes alive 'when the drama reaches the melodramatic point of throwing a large group of youngsters into savage ritualism and ecstasies', given that this point was the one at which 'the meaning and horror of [the story] come to brief clarity, and the terror of their turning on their old friends is momentarily caught.'

In fact, Brook's association with horror continued throughout most of his films. For example, his next film was an adaptation of *Marat/Sade*, which the *New York Times* had explicitly described as a 'horror play' when it had reviewed an earlier production that Brook had done for the stage (Young 1964: 14), a production that had a 'horrifying atmosphere' and 'conjured up revolutionary scenes of searing horror'. These associations were also present in the review of his film, which was described as both 'eerie' and 'macabre' (Crowther 1967: 41). Furthermore, *Marat/Sade* was a play within a play, so that the actors played the inmates of Charenton asylum, inmates that were also acting in a play about the French Revolution. Consequently, the film's actors were praised for their performances as the inmates, and their performances were described as 'terrifyingly correct in their maniacal shrieks'. Furthermore, Brook's use of the camera was praised for the ways in which it added to the horror: 'it's mightily eerie to be so close to them.' Finally, the asylum was also described as a 'ghastly' setting and one in which 'which ghostly bats appear'.

However, it was Brook's adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear* that was most strongly associated with horror. Pauline Kael even condemned the film as 'Peter Brook's *Night of the Living Dead*', directly associating it with Romero's notorious zombie film of 1968 (Kael 1971). In contrast, the *New York Times* was more positive and described it as 'a "King Lear" of splendour and shock' that the director had 'filmed in a kind of primeval black-and-while' (Canby 1971: 54). This use of the term 'primeval' was meant to convey a larger meaning, so that the black and white photography was also related to a depiction of a world that was moving from the light of reason into a dark age of irrationality, violence and chaos: in the world of the film, 'the sun seems to be receding not because of any seasonal course but because the entire universe is moving towards an exhausted end.' The film was therefore described as representing Brook at 'his manic best', and as heavily indebted to 'the Polish critic, Jan Kott, who sees "Lear" as a Shakespearean tragedy of the grotesque'.

Consequently, the film was claimed to depict of ‘a universe that is quite cold and terrifying’: a universe that ‘collapses into a pile of corpses’ and in which ‘Lear dies grotesquely’.

‘Emotionally Lobotomized’: Faith, Passion and Madness

The Shaffer brothers are also relevant here. Again they were related to the theatre of the absurd and again their work was seen as having both implicit and explicit relationships to horror. In fact, the closeness of these brothers’ interests, and particularly the shared fascination with popular genres, can be seen in their decision, in the early 1950s, to co-write mystery novels under the pseudonym Peter Anthony.

Their first association with film was in the 1962, when Peter Shaffer’s play, *Five Finger Exercise*, was adapted for the screen. The film was not explicitly associated with horror but still features ‘a woman who is a serious, sinister influence in her own home.’ (Crowther 1962: 20) The film was not well reviewed, largely due to Rosalind Russell’s performance in this central role, in which she ‘should obviously be subtle, beguilingly devious and restrained, so that the emanations of evil that flows from her is strong but elusive or undefinable’. In addition to being described as ‘sinister’ and ‘evil’, this character was also directly associated with Gothic horror through the claim that ‘any woman who behaved as [Russell] does in a real American home would run the risk of being locked up in the attic by her disgusted husband and kids.’ The mad woman in the attic is a staple of Gothic horror and can be found in countless examples such as *Jane Eyre* (1847), *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) and films such as *Kings Row* (1942) and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964).

Similarly, the cinematic adaptation of Peter Shaffer’s *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1969) was predominantly understood as a historical drama, rather than as horror; but it was also seen as a story of guilt, self-doubt and violence, being the ‘ironic story of Christianity’s

rape of supposedly innocent empires, in the name of God and in the interests of gold' (Canby 1969: 41). Like later plays, it therefore centred of a protagonist who is caught between belief systems and is forced to confront the horror of his actions, actions that are either done in the name of God or are heresies of violence *against* God. It was explicitly *not* a horror film but it was still seen as featuring materials strongly associated with horror, associations made more explicit in the reception later Shaffer plays and their cinematic adaptations. In the process, the film centred on 'a series of verbal confrontations' between 'Pizarro, the aging, lame, agnostic Conquistador, and Atahualpa, the last ruler of the Incas, a patient graceful man who, confident that he is divine, was seldom bothered by self-doubts.' In these exchanges, Pizarro is a cynic, who justifies his 'rape' of the Inca civilization on the basis of a church in which he does not believe (and for which he seems to have nothing but contempt). But this cynic still longs for faith and 'finds himself wanting to believe in the divinity of his Inca prisoner.' The film was therefore about violence and guilt, which are dramatically visualised in a vivid sequence of horrific violence where 'huge, magnificent, unarmed retinue [of Incas] is massacred by a handful of Spaniards in a swirl of slow-motion, color photography'.

The Public Eye (1972, aka *Follow Me!*) was the next Shaffer adaptation and, although it was clearly reviewed as 'comedy' about an 'eccentric private detective who falls in love' with a young woman that he has been hired to follow (Canby 1972: 22), it was also a film that demonstrated Shaffer's fascination with horror. The play was another confrontation between opposing forces: the 'stuffiness' of the young woman's husband 'is certified by his profession (accountant)' while the young wife is a champion 'instinctive pleasures'. Furthermore, these pleasures were supposedly prioritised within the film 'more or less in the order of love, horror films, sunsets, dolphins, ice cream and Franco Zefferilli's "Romeo and Juliet"'. In other words, Shaffer explicitly identified horror films with vitality and opposed them to the deadening world of rationality, routine and orthodoxy.

These oppositions can also be seen in the next adaptation of a Peter Shaffer play, *Equus* (1977), which also had a more explicit relation to horror. This 'psychological mystery' is about a 'troubled psychiatrist' who is tasked with bringing 'back to sanity a young man who, in a fit of furious passion, has blinded six horses' (Canby 1977: 39), a horrific act of violence rooted in religious mania. Once again, the film revolves around the psychiatrist's self-doubt: he suffers from the 'terrible suspicion' that, by 'removing [the boy's] demons, by returning him to "normal" life, he has removed the boy's passion forever, emotionally lobotomized him.' In this way, the play not only repeats the concern with guilt and violence from earlier Shaffer plays but also their concern with religion and jealousy. If Pizarro massacres the Incas in the name of a God that he does not believe in, Dysart imagines himself as a priest who is condemned to sacrifice the young on an altar of normality. Furthermore, both protagonists find themselves fascinated by, and jealous of, the religious faith of their victims, a faith that seem to offer the believer that which Pizarro and Dysart feel that they lack.

These themes were also seen as central to the next adaptation, *Amadeus* (1984), which was concerned with the relationship between Salieri and Mozart, a relationship in which Salieri was claimed to be Mozart's 'most ferocious adversary as well as the only person in Vienna to comprehend the magnificence of Mozart's gifts.' (Canby 1984: C23) Again, Salieri was seen as a man riddled with self-doubt and guilt: it is claimed that he hates God, who 'gave me the desire' to 'praise him with music' but not the ability. Consequently, Salieri then projects this hatred onto Mozart, whose music Salieri regards as 'the voice of God'. The story was therefore supposed to detail Salieri's 'murder of the "obscene child" [Mozart] whom God had chosen to be his magic flute on earth', during which Salieri becomes 'increasingly lunatic as he plots Mozart's downfall' and plunges both himself and his victim into 'hallucinatory' madness. Like many horror stories, then, the film was not only seen as the

story of a man who is driven into madness and murder by his passions; but one in which the murderous madman seeks to destroy his victim psychologically. As Kracauer puts it, horror films are often distinguished by 'the theme of psychological destruction', in which their villains do not simply perform physical violence on their victims but 'systematically try to drive them insane' (Kracauer 1946: 133).

'Shivers by Shaffer': Games of Domination

However, it was in relation to the work Peter Shaffer's brother, Anthony, that the relationship to horror was most explicit. His 'mystery play', *Sleuth* (1970), was adapted for the cinema in 1972, (and again in 2007 by Pinter) and featured a 'rich snobbish author of mystery fiction that has apparently outsold both S. S. Van Dine and Agatha Christie' (Canby 1972: 53), both of whom were products of a period in which horror, detection and mystery were virtually identical categories (Jancovich and Brown, forthcoming). *Sleuth*'s story is one of deception, trickery and games, in which the protagonists not only try to outwit and dominate one another but in which the film 'goes to rather great lengths to play tricks on the audience'.

Like his brother's plays, the story is essentially a confrontation between two characters, a confrontation that demonstrates the close relation between the theatre of the absurd and the mystery play. *Sleuth* is preoccupied with the figure of the 'fool', someone manipulated by others into performing a predetermined role, even as the 'fool' believes that they are resisting manipulation. In other words, the fool not only represents the theatre of the absurd's presentation of human beings as 'puppets controlled and menaced by invisible forces' but the kind of horror victim that Kracauer discusses, a victim in games of psychological domination and destruction. Indeed, this fool was a key figure in many horror

and mystery stories of the period, including one of the period's most influential horror films, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968).

The association with horror became even more pronounced in the next two films associated with Anthony Shaffer: Hitchcock's *Frenzy* (1972) and *The Wicker Man* (1973). For example, in an article 'Shivers by Shaffer', Anthony was not only associated with 'shivers' but was also claimed to have given 'Alfred Hitchcock a large hand in chilling us' with *Frenzy* (Weiler 1972: D17). This article also made reference to *Sleuth*, which, like *Frenzy*, was supposed to have been 'determined to have us biting our nail' with nerves. The article even quoted Anthony Shaffer, who was supposed to have 'devilishly' declared that he was 'happy to say' that *The Wicker Man* was 'a pretty nasty film about a policeman who is forced to live on an island in a pagan way.'

The *New York Times* review of *Frenzy* also stressed these horror elements and described it as 'a suspense melodrama about a homicidal maniac, known as the Necktie Killer, who is terrorizing London' (Canby 1972: D1). The review spent most of its energies objecting to critics who 'over-analyse' Hitchcock, but it also claimed that the film 'treats us to one murder almost as brutal as the shower killing in "Psycho"' and that watching 'Frenzy is like riding a roller coaster in total darkness. You can never be quite sure when you're going to start a terrifying new descent or take a sudden turn to the left or right. The agony is exquisite.'

The Wicker Man does not seem to have been reviewed by the *New York Times* until 1980, when it was largely dismissed as 'the story of a mysterious island' that is inhabited by 'strange' inhabitants with an 'obsession with sexuality' (Maslin 1980: C22). Furthermore, although the reviewer tried 'to be nice' about the film, given that 'it seems to have been made in all seriousness and because a film journal somewhere has proclaimed it as a classic of its kind', the film was largely dismissed as a preposterous and pretentious story that pits

'Christian values against pagan ones' and finally 'ends in human sacrifice'. *Variety*, on the other hand, which reviewed the film on its initial release, was far more generous. It even described the film as an 'outstanding British import' that was 'one of the most unusual films to come out of Britain in years' (Whit. 1974: 24). Shaffer was also given special mention both as the writer of *Sleuth* and for his screenplay for *The Wicker Man*, which 'for sheer imagination and near-terror, has seldom been equalled.' It was therefore claimed to be a film, in which the 'frightening aspects build one upon the other', although it was not seen as a departure from Shaffer's earlier work. On the contrary, like *Sleuth*, and like many of his brother's plays, *The Wicker Man* was largely read as a confrontation between two men of conflicting religious beliefs. One is 'a Scottish police sergeant' who comes to the island in search of a missing girl and the other is 'the cultured feudal Lord Summerisle', who rules the island. Furthermore, although both reviews felt obliged not 'to reveal where this all ends' (Maslin 1980: C22), the figure of the fool was again central to the story, the policeman being manipulated and controlled into obeying his adversary's will, even as the policeman believes that he is doing the opposite.

After this, it was reported that Shaffer would be involved with another project, *Absolution* (1978), which was a collaboration with 'the eminent French director, Claude Chabrol' and described as 'a Gothic thriller that centres on the confrontation between the head of a Catholic boys' school and one of his students.' (Weiler 1974: 54) However, although the film finally appeared with another director at the helm, it was not given an American release until the late 1980s, when it was first reviewed by the *New York Times* (Jones 1988: C8).

By this point, however, Shaffer had largely turned his attentions to a series of Agatha Christie adaptations that followed the success of *Murder of the Orient Express* (1974).[i] As has been demonstrated elsewhere, Christie had been associated with horror since the 1920s

(Jancovich and Brown, forthcoming) and, when Christie's most commercially successful novel, *And Then There Were None* (1939), was made into a film in 1945, the film was explicitly reviewed as part of the horror genre (Jancovich, 2010). Even the theatrical version, *Ten Little Indians*, was claimed to have 'chilling spines' as its 'aim', while 'mystery fans' were also assured it would certainly satisfy the most bloodthirsty, who 'will be delighted to know that no less than eight of the eleven characters are done away with, each with a different method.' (Zolotow 1944:24). Furthermore, as late as 1974, Christie had been referred to as 'the old frightener' (Hayman 1972) in a review of yet another cinematic adaptation of her work, *Endless Night* (1972).

Consequently, while *Death on the Nile* (1978) was 'a so-called murder mystery' (Kramer 1978: 54), in which 'Bellylaughs will also be the object' (Flatley 1977: C6), there was still an association with horror through the claim that it was one of a number of 'chillers' being released at the time. Similarly, *Evil Under the Sun* (1982) was described as a 'conventional whodunit', although its grisly elements were stressed through a description of its victim, who 'was found on the beach in untimely death, strangled and, for good measure, bashed about the head' (Canby 1982: C8). The film also featured several horror-identified actors such as Roddy McDowell, James Mason and Denis Quilley, the latter having recently starred in the Stephen Sondheim and Hugo Wheeler horror musical, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, on the London stage (1980). Finally, while *Appointment with Death* (1988) was not supposed to have been 'up to the stylish standards of the earlier all-star, Hercule Poirot mysteries' (Canby 1988: C4), it was also stressed that, when 'compared to nearly everything else in this dreary movie season', the film was 'like a month in the sun with old friends who, though traveling economy class, keep their good humor.' In this particular case, there is no mention of any gore within the film, but the film was still filled with monstrous characters, including a central figure played by Piper Laurie, who had also played

Carrie's mother in the film version of the Stephen King novel, and who once again appeared as a 'hideously tyrannical mother whose children wish her quickly dead.'

If Christie is often seen as a very polite and genteel writer today, whose work is both highly formulaic and squeamish about the unpleasant realities of social life, this was clearly not how these films were seen as interpreting them. Just as *Sleuth*'s games were supposed to mask vicious battles for domination and control, so Christie's stories were understood as demonstrating the violence and chaos that not only lay beneath the surface of their polite social worlds, but which these polite social worlds were intended to disguise. As the review of *Evil Under the Sun* put it:

> THE setting is an island in the Adriatic and a small, exquisite, extremely expensive resort hotel that once was the summer palace of the reigning king of Tyrania. It's the late 1930's, just about the time of the Anschluss, though no one at the hotel could care less about Hitler, National Socialism, Austria's sovereignty or an era's imminent end. They're all too busy with their intramural assaults on friendship, marriage, reputation, character and, when pushed to the limits, life itself. (Canby 1982: C8)

It is a world in which 'style is everything - the weapon as well as a defense.' In other words, these mysteries were seen as demonstrating that, in this society, politeness, style and proper form are ways of masking the chaos that lies beneath the surfaces of reality – the viciousness, the violence and the battles for domination.

Conclusion

As we have seen, then, explicit connections were made between horror films and the threatre, particularly the theatre of the absurd. Like horror, the theatre of the absurd was often concerned to shock it audience through a confrontation with realities repressed by orthodoxy.

If these repressed materials were frequently associated with violence and chaos, they were also associated with the psychology, sexuality and madness. The theatre of the absurd as therefore preoccupied with the conflicts between opposed forces and their games of domination and destruction, games that often resulted in stories of mental breakdown and/or situations in which their protagonists find themselves being manipulated and controlled by others.

Nor were these preoccupations simply found in the theatre of the absurd, and then transferred to the cinema. On the contrary, these preoccupations were also central to popular horror films of the post war period, which is why so many reviews discussed the cinematic work of those associated with the theatre of the absurd *as* horror films. For example, shortly after his success with *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), Roman Polanski decided to make a horrific film version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, on which he collaborated with one of the key figures of the British post war theatre, Kenneth Tynan. The film was even released in the US one month after Brook's film version of *King Lear*, and the *New York Times* praised its 'unsettling environments', in which Macbeth is another protagonist manipulated by shadowy forces into self-destruction (Greenspun 1971: 51).

But these concerns also feature in Polanski's earlier work, before his association with Tynan. *Repulsion* was explicitly read as a film that would force its audiences to confront shocking realities and the *New York Times* warned viewers to prepare themselves 'to be demolished when you go to see it.' (Crowther 1965: 7) It was also a story of a woman's mental breakdown, like both *The Innocents* and *The Pumpkin Eaters*, so that it offers 'a detailed and gruesome account of the crumbling of her mind.'

Conversely, *Cul-de-Sac* left the *New York Times* bemused by its 'surrealistic' horror story so that it simply stated: 'I sure don't get it.' (Crowther 1966: 44) However, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* clearly identified the film as 'genuinely Pinteresque', an attempted to imitate

his ‘comedies of menace’ that was ‘especially reminiscent of *The Dumb Waiter*’ (D. W. 1966: 103). Furthermore, *Rosemary’s Baby*, Polanski’s most mainstream and commercial horror film, explicitly depicts its heroine as not only undergoing a mental breakdown but as a ‘puppet controlled and menaced by invisible forces’. Furthermore, it was produced by William Castle and written by Ira Levin, both of whom were strongly associated with the American theatre.

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[i] It should also be noted that Anthony Shaffer's IMDB entry attributes him with an uncredited contribution to *Murder on the Orient Express*, too.