Beyond the Slasher Film: History, Seriousness and the Problem of the Children's Audience in the Critical Reception of Big Budget Horror in the late 1970s and Early 1980s

Introduction

The Awakening is a horror film from 1980 that was based on Bram Stoker's novel, *The Jewel of the Seven Stars*, which had already been adapted for the cinema, in 1971, when Hammer had filmed it as *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb*. This later version not only starred a major star, Charlton Heston; a young female lead, Stephanie Zimbalist, who would star with Pierce Brosnan in the television series, *Remington Steele*, shortly after; but it was also directed by Mike Newell, who was better known at the time for work on prestigious British television productions and would later direct *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, a major British romantic comedy of the 1990s. In other words, if the early 1980s is usually remembered as a period dominated by low budget slasher films (see, for example, Humphries 2002; Hutchings 2004: Jancovich 1992; Kendrick 2014; Philips 2005; Tudor 1989; Williams 1996; Wood 1986; and Worland 2007), *The Awakening* was one of numerous high budget horror films from the period that most histories of horror either ignore or remember as exceptional cases with little or no relationship to one another. This memory of the period as one dominated by the slasher movie largely derives from Robin Wood, for whom the late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a 'flowering of the [horror] genre' (Wood 1986: 70), in which it became 'the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive' (84). He therefore associates this period with the films of Wes Craven, George Romero and Tobe Hooper, while the late 1970s and early the 1980s are presented as a 'regression' from this earlier period (189) and one that resulted in 'the hideous perversion of its essential meaning' (70).

Consequently, the early 1970s is supposedly distinguished by low budget auteurs, while the latter period is associated with the slasher films, low budget films that Wood largely dismisses as reactionary, formulaic and devoid of the individuality, the inverse of the auteur horror cinema that preceded it.

In this way, Wood's account makes the slasher movie key to understanding the 1980s, and his account is repeated in numerous histories of the genre, even those that want to dispute Wood's reading of the slasher film. For example, in his study of the slasher film, Richard Nowell calls it 'arguably the most high-profile production trend of the time' (Nowell 2010: 137). However, this account ignores (while also cherry picking from) the mid-high budget horror productions from the period. The most obvious example of this trend is *The Shining*, which is often discussed as though it were a slasher film, although budget alone should highlight the inappropriateness of such an association. While *Halloween* cost appropriately $300K, *The Shining* was directed by Stanley Kubrick, one of the most prestigious directors of the period; and starred Jack Nicholson, one of its major stars; but it also had a budget of $19M, around 60 times that of Carpenter's film.[i] Furthermore, as Richard Nowell demonstrates, the slasher film only lasted between 1978 and 1982 and was made up of about 20 films. In contrast, if one looks at the years between 1975 and 1984, there were about 70 mid-high budget horror films and, while *The Shining* might have been one of the most expensive, most were budgeted at between $2 and $10 million, with average budgets increasing across the period so that $10M was common by the early 1980s.

The omission of mid-high budget horror films from histories of the genre is hardly unique and largely due to a preference for low-budget horror films that is central to Wood's account of the genre. For Wood, the genre is distinguished by its 'disreputability', a condition 'that sets it apart from other genres: it is restricted to aficionados and

complemented by total rejection, people tending to go to horror films either obsessively or not at all.' (Wood 1986: 77) Consequently, this presentation would be undermined by an acknowledgement of mid-high budget films targeted at mainstream audiences and Jancovich has therefore explored other periods in which histories have omitted the presence of a flourishing, big budget horror cinema, particularly the 1940s and the early 1960s (Jancovich 2014; and 2017).

But such omissions are not simply inaccuracies: they misrepresent both the broader period *and* even the slasher films that it produced. For example, the low budget films were often explicit responses to developments in big budget films so that, for example, the success of *Jaws* created a series of lower budget imitators. Furthermore, while various critics, such as Wood and Phillips, have examined the ways in which *Halloween* drew on earlier developments in the horror film, they tend to privilege the influence Craven, Romero and Hooper and almost entirely omit any mention of *Jaws*, a text from which Carpenter clearly borrows in various ways. Furthermore, despite continual references to the scale of *Halloween*'s success, this success is only significant when it is compared to the film's budget. *Halloween* took about $50M at the US box office (while *Friday the 13th* took around $40M) but *Jaws* took $260M, or around five times that amount, while a number of other big budget horrors films of the period took around the same amount as *Halloween* and in some cases considerably more: *The Omen*, $60M; Alien, $81M; *The Amityville Horror*, $86M; *The Shining*, $45M; *Poltergeist*, $77. Even "commercial disasters" such *The Exorcist II: The Heretic* and *The Black Hole* took $30M and $35M respectively.

In other words, *Halloween*'s takings are only significant when compared to its budget. *The Exorcist II* was a failure because it cost $14M and only took $30M (roughly double), while *Halloween* was a phenomenon because it cost $300K and took around $50M

(roughly one hundred and fifty times its original budget). It therefore worked as a template for low budget production but it didn't really challenge or disrupt the strategies of high budget filmmakers. While *Halloween* demonstrated that one could make a lot of money for very little outlay, there were also problems with following its led, even for low budget filmmakers. Even Carpenter had brought in a recognizable actor, Donald Pleasance, and a young lead whose name could be exploited: Jamie Leigh Curtis was the daughter of Janet Leigh who had played the victim in the shower sequence of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. In other words, low budget films not only faced the problem of distinguishing themselves within a crowded market but the gamble of high budget productions promised big pay offs (*Jaws* still made three times as much profit as *Halloween*) and the presence of big name stars and directors were often seen as an insurance against loss. Indeed, for many low budget filmmakers, the problem was not about what happened when their film reached the box office, but whether they could even get a distribution deal in the first place.

The following article will therefore examine the big budget films of the late 1970s and the early 1980s, a period bracketed by the success of *Jaws* (1975) at one end and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Ghostbusters* and *Gremlins* at the other. Furthermore, it will analyse film reviews in the period, focusing mainly on the *New York Times*, which was still one of the key tastemakers of the period. In the process, the article demonstrates that the genre was not a disreputable one that the *New York Times* rejected out of hand, nor one that was understood as being dominated or defined by the slasher films. The first section therefore demonstrates that figures such as Romeo or Craven were hardly seen as key references points in relation to these films and that reviews demonstrated a more general concern with the relationship between the old and the new Hollywood. In other words, there was a concern that some films had lost the virtues of the

past and that others 'slavishly' imitated that past. As a result, the films that were positively reviewed were those that responded to the past with 'affection and imagination': that respected that past while also being able to offer something fresh and innovative. The next section then moves on to demonstrate that it was not low budget horror films to which the *New York Times* critics objected but rather horror films that took themselves too seriously. Consequently, while 'silly' was rarely used as a negative term, 'solemn' was never used positively and reviews tended to celebrate films that displayed visual 'exuberance and extravagance'. Here, the relationship to the past appears again, and reviews expressed concern about the 'literalness' of many new films, a literalness that was seen as undermining horror, given that the genre was seen as one that worked through metaphor and subtext. Finally, then, the chapter explores the relationship between children and horror in the early 1980s, a relationship that the industry was keen to exploit but which also created a series of problems that both Disney and Spielberg were attempting to resolve during the period, problems that would lead to the creation of the PG13 rating in the mid 1980s.

'Nothing if not Hitchcockian': References, Repetitions and Debasements

Histories of the 1970s Horror film often privilege specific films, which are supposed to represent or even generate significant transformations. For example, Wood sees *Psycho* as the pivotal film that marks the transition from classic horror to modern horror, although he also sees *Night of the Living Dead* as another such film. (Wood 1985; see also Newman 1988) However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, critics rarely mentioned these films as key markers or influences. On the contrary, Romero's films were hardly even mentioned

and, while Hitchcock was a key reference point in the period, his influence was understood in far broader terms. Certainly, some reviews associate *Psycho* with the slasher film but critics generally presented Hitchcock's association with horror and with the psychological as one that ran throughout his career. For example, 'psychotic behaviour' was claimed to be a feature of recent Hitchcock films, such as *Psycho*, *Marine* and *Frenzy* (Canby 1980: 19), but it was also supposed to be a feature of earlier films that also 'dealt with suspicion, guilt, complicity, delusion, vulnerability, irrationality, violence and sexual obsession.' (Flint 1980: D23) Furthermore, these earlier films were also ones in which Hitchcock 'implicated [audiences] in the most despicable acts, including those of a homicidal maniac.' (Flint 1980: D23) His films were therefore repeatedly referred to as 'shockers' (Flint 1980: D23) and were often claimed to feature 'ordinary, down-home folks suddenly caught in a real horror story' (Canby 1980: 19).

Brian De Palma was the key director associated with Hitchcock in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He was even described as 'The Man Who Would Be Hitchcock' (Goodman 1976: D11); but, again, *Psycho* was a fairly marginal reference point here, while *Vertigo* was mentioned far more often (see for example Goodman 1976: D11; Canby 1981: C5; Canby 1984: C8) with other films being associated with *Rear Window* (Kakutani 1981: D22) and or claimed to be more generally 'executed … in the manner of Alfred Hitchcock' (Canby 1980: C10);.

However, De Palma was not alone and the period was one awash with 'Hitchcockian' films (Canby 1980: C1). For example, shortly after making *Kramer Vs. Kramer,* Robert Benson directed *Still of Night*, which was describe as 'nothing if not Hitchcockian' (Canby 1982: C8), a film that was claimed to be and filled with 'inescapable references to such Hitchcock classics as "Vertigo," "Rear Window," "North By Northwest," and "Spellbound,"

among others.' Similarly, Jonathan Demme's *The Last Embrace* was described as 'the sort [of material] that might have been liberated by the imagination of Alfred Hitchcock' (Canby 1979: C16) while even *Poltergeist* is supposedly 'witty in a fashion that Alfred Hitchcock might have appreciated.' (Canby 1982: C16)

In contrast, there were few references to the Universal classics, or even to Hammer, although films associated with the Victorian past were given special mention (see for example Canby 1976: 42; Maslin 1979: C10; Canby 1979: C1. One of the few references to the 1930s classics was in relation to *The Island of Dr Moreau* which shared 'the general outline of the 1933 screen adaption that starred Charles Laughton and was called Island of Lost Souls' (Canby 1977: 12); while another rare reference was made in relation to *The Hand*, which 'recalls the story made familiar by "The Hands of Orlac" and its various spin-offs, including "The Beast with Five Fingers."' (Canby 1981: C8).

Certainly, *Cat People* was contrasted with the original Val Lewton film of 1942, the earlier film being clearly seen as superior, but even here (as we will see later) the terms of reference were actually far broader: the review used the two films to contrast the explicitness of contemporary cinema with the suggestiveness of classic cinema. The only other significance reference is in relation to *Alien* – 'There was also a time when this sort of thing was set in an old dark house, on a moor, in a thunderstorm' (Canby 1979: C16) – but this is not really a reference to the 1930s and 1940s, in which the only significant old dark house films were remakes or parodies of earlier silent films.

In comparison, the science fiction/horror films of the 1950s were far more insistent reference points, with many films of the late 1970s and early 1980s being seen as explicit attempts to evoke the earlier period. *Jaws*, for example, was seen as 'reminiscent of "Creature from the Black Lagoon," "The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms," and a whole rash of

grade-B movies about giant ants, tarantulas, and rats on the warpath.' (Farber 1975: 11). Similarly, the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was likened to "Don Siegel's 1956 version" and even described as being "a valentine" to the original (Maslin 1978: C14). If these cases were viewed positively in relation to their 1950s precursors, others fared less well in comparison. For example, while *Alien* 'recalls' *The Thing*, the original was supposed to be 'both more imaginatively and more economically dramatized.' (Canby 1979: C16). Furthermore, the same Hawks film was used as a stick to beat John Carpenter's remake. In other words, while the original was claimed to be 'something of a masterpiece of understatement', the remake 'shows too much of "the thing" too soon, so that it has no place to go.' (Canby 1982: C14)

Even more surprisingly, the films of the late 1970s and early 1980s were rarely associated with *The Exorcist*, one of the major horror hits of the early 1970s. In fact, critics were far more likely to mention *Rosemary's Baby*. Certainly, references to *The Exorcist* do appear but, significantly, these are usually in negative reviews where films were dismissed as 'recycled' or 'another knockoff' (Canby 1977: 21; Buckley 1978: 12), while references to *Rosemary's Baby* usually referred to potentially positive creative choices (Eder 1977: 12; Canby 1979: C16).

Maybe surprisingly, television was also used as a positive reference point, with *Magic* being described as 'a fable you may fondly remember … from the … very stylish "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" television show.' (Canby 1978: 17) However, this comparison was not used to compliment *Magic* but rather to demonstrate its inadequacies, a strategy that was also used in relation to *Twilight Zone: The Movie*: 'A lot of money and several lives might have been saved if the producers had just rereleased the original programmes.' (Canby 1983: C15)

In the process, these references were bound up with larger debates about contemporary cinema. As we have seen, some films were claimed to capture the innocence of the past, while others were 'inspired' by that past. However, if these films were generally understood positively, others were seen as lifeless repetitions, 'rip-offs' or even as debasements of that past (see for example Canby 1978: 13; Canby 1978: 15; Canby 1983: C14). Anxieties about the debasement of the classic past can also be seen in the review of *Tron* where it was complained that 'its technical wizardry isn't accompanied by any of the old-fashioned virtues – plot, drama, clarity, emotion – for which other Disney movies, or other films of any kind, are best remembered.' (Maslin 1982: C8). Furthermore, the unspoken anxiety here is made explicit in relation to *Blue Thunder* which, it was claimed, 'comes as close to being a big-screen video game as any movie this year.' (Canby 1983: C17)

'Again, He Goes Too Far, Which is the Reason to See it': Seriousness, Personality and Literalness

Consequently, horror was hardly a disreputable genre within the period, and the mid-high budget horror films were not necessarily seen more positively than the low budget productions. Certainly, many low budget horror films were not even covered by the *New York Times*, while most of the mid-high budget films were reviewed. None the less, while the *New York Times* did not review *Halloween* on its original release, the film received positive comments shortly after, when it was described as 'a model of straight-forward terror and carefully controlled suspense' (Canby 1980: C15).

Alternatively, while some mid-high budget films were claimed to be little more than inflated B-movies, B-movies were not necessarily seen negatively. For example, *The*

Terminator was described as 'a B-movie with flair' (Maslin 1984: C19), while *Jaws* was seen as basically a B-movie:

> 'Jaws' is, at heart, the old standby, a science fiction film. It opens according to the time-honoured tradition of the happy-go-lucky innocent being suddenly ravaged by the mad monster, which in 'Jaws' comes from the depths of inner space – the sea as well as man's nightmares. Thereafter 'Jaws' follows the formula with fidelity. (Canby 1975: 19)

Consequently, the 'only difference' between *Bug* (1975), a William Castle shocker, and *Jaws* was claimed to 'the hype' around the latter (Farber 1975: 11); while *The Swarm* was 'nothing less than the ultimate apotheosis of yesterday's B-movie' (Canby 1978: 13), a comment that was not necessarily meant as a criticism, given that it was one of 'funniest' films of the year with pleasures 'not easy to resist'. Certainly, some films were criticised for disguising sordid material behind a glossy production but, in cases such as *The Swarm*, the high-budget pretentions only added to its ludicrous pleasures while the high-budget of *Jaws* did not impede its B-movie pleasures.

This relationship between the different ends of industry is also conveyed by the review of *The Amityville Horror*, a high budget horror film ($5M) from AIP, which had been a key producer of low budget films since the 1950s. In this case, then, AIP was clearly seen as imitating the strategy of the mid-high budget films not vice versa, but this strategy was also condemned for producing a film without the charm of AIP's low budget productions: 'it's too lifeless to be on a par with the fast, funny, deliberately slapdash movies that have made A.I.P. such as B-movie bastion.' (Maslin 1979: C9) It lacked the 'inadvertent merriment' that might have animated the film.

In other words, reviews of the period tended to like 'mindless fun' like *Jaws* – 'a noisy, busy movie that has less on its mind than any child on a beach might have' but works on 'its own foolishly entertaining terms' (Canby 1975: 19) - much more than cinematic pretentiousness, in which horror films tried to guises themselves as something significant. Consequently, 'silly' was rarely used as a negative term (see for example Eder 1976: 16; Eder, 1977: 12) but often suggested something that could be fun or even 'attractively unpretentious' (Maslin 1979: C16). Conversely, other films were condemned as pretentious exercises that offered neither 'mindless fun' nor something more (Canby 1975: 43; Canby 1980: C6). Consequently, while 'silly"' was often used positively, the word "solemn" was used to damn horror films while other films were condemned for their seriousness or grandiosity (Canby 1975: 43; Maslin 1984: C18; Canby 1977: 10; Canby 1979: C17)

Certainly some serious horror films were positively reviewed. For example, Clint Eastwood's *Tightrope* was commended for spending 'time exploring [its central character's] attitudes towards women' and so adds 'an unexpected element to [its star's] otherwise impenetrable persona' (Maslin 1984: C6). Even more significantly, Polanski's *The Tenant* was not just 'a striking new horror film' but was lauded as 'the most successful and most consistently authentic Polanski film in years' (Canby 1976: 43).

However, when mid-high budget horror films were praised, it was most often because they were seen as 'stylish' or 'extravagant', films that may have been preposterous but had 'personality' (see for example Maslin 1978: C14; Canby, 1981: C6; Canby 1983: C32). However, the key case here is *The Shining*. On the one hand, it was condemned for "'barely making sense upon examination' and for displaying a moral position that 'is so ill defined' that it is never clear 'whether there is anything wrong with a man's murdering his wife and child.' (Maslin 1980: D1) On the other, it is also claimed to be 'fastidiously beautiful' with an

'extraordinary visual sophistication' and 'a breadth and extravagance no recent film has rivalled'. Consequently, given these virtues, it was argued, the gaffes don't do it much harm.'

This position was most consistently forged in relation to Brian De Palma who was frequently referred to as 'silly' in a positive way (Canby 1976: 13; Canby 1978: 19) and whose films were read as exercises in stylistic flamboyance that demonstrated a cinematic personality. If he was claimed to be a director who 'goes too far,' it was also suggested that this 'may be not only the most consistent quality through all his films but also the most important and, possibly, the most endearing.' (Canby 1984: C8) Furthermore, this excessiveness was seen as both provocative and engaging, even if this divides audiences. For example, it is claimed that, in his remake of *Scarface*, 'he couldn't resist ending it with a comic-book Gotterdammerung that produced helpless laughter in parts of the audience and outrage in everyone else.' (Canby 1984: C8) In other words, his excessiveness is praised for displaying an irrepressible personality that never left the audience cold. As the review of *Body Double* put it: "'again he goes too far, which is the reason to see it. It's sexy and explicitly crude, entertaining and sometimes very funny.' (Canby 1984: C8) Certainly the films were claimed to demonstrates little interest in logic but the reader was warned that plausibility was not the point: 'The fun is not in logic but watching how Mr. De Palma successfully tops himself as he goes along' (Canby 1980: C10) so that, 'if you insist that the story be plausible, you'll miss the enjoyment of the film.' (Canby 1981: C5)

As we can see, then, these reviews placed a high value on humour and *American Werewolf in London* was praised for its 'wonderful start' which is 'equally balanced between comedy and horror' (Maslin 1981: C12), these reviews even demonstrated an appreciation of the 'bad' film. For example, *The Swarm* was supposed to be 'chock-full of the kind of

dialogue that warms the cockles of any movie buff's heart' and made it 'the surprise comedy hit of the season' (Maslin 1978: 8). However, while the bad film is often associated with camp today, the *New York Times* critics often made a distinction between the two. Films could be so bad that they were good, but this needed to be unselfconscious. In other words, *ET* was praised as 'a wise film without being smart-alecky' (Canby 1982: C14), a film that refused to self-consciously distance itself from its materials; but *Psycho II* was dismissed as 'essentially camp entertainment' (Canby 1983: C14), a film that demonstrated that 'being knowing is not the same thing as being intelligent or original'. In other words, while pretentious productions were condemned, so were their opposite: horror films that refused to take themselves seriously to the extent that they simply showed contempt for their materials. In contrast, the *New York Times* critics tended to prefer films such as *The Hunger* that 'reeks with chic, but never, for one minute, takes itself too seriously, nor does it ever slop over into camp.' (Canby 1983: C32)

If the *New York Times* critics saw self-consciousness knowingness as one problem, they were far more vexed by the literalness of films in the period. For example, there was a concern that, in being liberated from censorship, Hollywood films had lost their ability to use suggestion and subtext. Certainly, this was partly about explicit gore but it was also a larger problem: for many critics, horror was fundamentally metaphorical and there was a complaint that the literal handling of horror materials often made them absurd. We have already seen aspects of this problem in relation to Carpenter's remake of *The Thing* (Canby 1982: C14), but it was also made explicit in the review of *The Devil's Rain*, where the literal depiction of the horror was claimed to be counter-productive: the film's 'photography – its sharp, precise colour, meticulous focus, fine grain and zooming close-ups – sabotage the effects' so that it becomes 'evident that we are seeing wax and latex' (Eder 1975: 11).

Consequently, horror films were claimed to be better served by low budget aesthetics: 'If we are returning to the catchup school of scary movies, we would be better off with the grainy, black-and-white, underlit movies they used to make. That way we could imagine the catchup was blood and the exposed brain something more than putty.'

However, the review of *Cat People* articulates other aspects of this problem. Although the film was claimed to have many virtues and to be 'a good deal of fun – beautiful, baroque and blunt' (Canby 1982: C3), the film's bluntness and literalness undermined the aesthetics of the genre: 'the beasts within may still be essentially metaphorical but, through advances made in the art of special effects, they have become so literal as possibly to transform the genre.' In other words, freed of the censorship that required the original film to work through metaphor and subtext, the remake 'has little time for the sort of subtleties – the delicate suggestions, evasions and equivocations – that made the 1942 film so haunting.' (See also Canby 1977: 39).

'As Harmless as a Nightmare': Children, Fantasy and the Problem of Horror

The early 1980s is often seen as a period that witnessed yet another transformation in the genre. For example, Newman is generally sympathetic to the slasher films when compared with the horror films that came after them, films that he largely associates with children (Newman 1988). Alternatively, Phillips retells a familiar account in which the box office success of *E.T.* in 1982, and the corresponding disaster of *The Thing* in the same year, effectively spelled the end of the 1970s horror film: 'the country's mood had changed … The Reagan era was a time for Frank Capra-esque fantasies, not doom-laden Hawkian tales of invasion threats' (Phillips 2005: 143). However, these accounts have two problems. First,

while 1982 might have seen *The Thing* fail at the box office while *E.T.* became a phenomenon, this year also saw another horror film triumph at box office, *Poltergeist* (which took $77M). If this film was, as we will see, a horror film clearly associated with the children's audience, the second problem with the accounts of Newman and Phillips is that the association between children and horror was already well established by 1982. Rather than children's horror emerging at the end of the slasher period, slasher films were largely associated with the children's audience already, an association that is made clear by the review of *Friday the 13th Part II*, which 'imagines' the film's audience 'crouching in drive-ins and neighbourhood theatres all over America, playing "chicken." Who will blink first at a decapitation? Who will turn his head when a machete slices a jugular? It will be a way of measuring machismo.' (Corry 1981: C12) Indeed, by 1984, the third sequel, *Friday the 13th: The Final Chapter* pitted Jason against twelve-year-old Tommy Jarvis.

Furthermore, the studios were also well aware of Stephen King's phenomenal literary success, and that his books featured many young protagonists as their central characters and had a huge readership of children. Carrie and her classmates are only 16 and therefore on the line between the young teens and the late teens. If this is also true of the characters and themes of *Christine*, many other novels featured even younger children. Mark Petrie in *Salem's Lot* (a novel that had already been adapted for television in 1979) is only eleven while both *The Shining* and *Firestarter* feature child protagonists whose ages are not even in double digits while Tad Trento in *Cujo* is as young as four.

However, as the review of *Friday the 13th Part II* demonstrates, the association with children also raised a number of anxieties that, as Filipa Antunes has demonstrated, resulted in the creation of the PG13 rating in the mid 1980s (Antunes 2020). Consequently, the fantasy films that emerged after *Star Wars* were one way in which the industry sought

to manage these anxieties and, in 1981, Disney collaborated with Paramount on *Dragonslayer*, a film that managed its horror through an association with 'fairy-tale innocence' (Maslin 1981: C10). Consequently, despite being 'part monster movie', and one with 'considerable violence', these features were supposedly justified through their combination with other elements, so that the film was also 'part love story, part magical fable'. The result was therefore praised for having 'a sweetness and conviction that amount to a kind of magic'. Another indication of these tension can be found in the reviews of Terry Gillian's early films. For example, *Jabberwocky* is another fantasy story that evokes the world of 'fairy stories', although it is also described as 'a monster film with a heart' (Canby 1977: 14). Consequently, while Canby praised the film, he was also a bit about confused whether, or how, to recommend it. Despite its numerous virtues, *Jabberwocky* still had 'more blood and gore than Sam Peckinpah would dare use to dramatize the decline and fall of the entire West' and, as a result, readers were warned that 'some audiences may find the blood and scatology difficult to take'. Similarly, *Time Bandits* was described as 'a cheerfully irreverent lark' that 'means to appeal as much to very young moviegoers as to their parents' (Canby 1981: C8). But again audiences were warned that, while it was 'very, very good', its horror elements 'might scare hell out of small children'.

If these films experimented with horror for the children's market but clearly sought to present their horror within contexts more familiar to children – or which might minimize the anxieties of their parents – Disney also embarked on an explicit attempt at children's horror in 1980, *The Watcher in the Woods*. This film was 'clubbed to death by the critics' (Harmetz 1981: C9), in response to which the studio took 'the unprecedented gamble of withdrawing [it] to invent and shoot a new end'. This 'gamble' was not only because 'the ending confused people' – the studio 'had tried to blend science-fiction with a ghost story,

and it didn't work' – but also due to the film's importance for the studio, which wanted a movie that was 'tense and scary enough to appeal to the teen-age audience that the studio has been trying to woo for the last four or five years.'

For Disney, then, the importance of horror was that a distinction was emerging between young and older children and more particularly about the kinds of films that each group were prepared to watch. As one executive told the *New York Times*: 'The only way to get to the point where the audience for a Disney film is wider is to consistently make movies with more bite … We may not get the audience we want with our first, second even our third picture. But we will get it.' Addressing the teenage (or older child) audience was clearly a major issue for the studio, and explained their perseverance with this material, despite several highly expensive box office failures in the early 1980s.

For example, undaunted, Disney followed *Watcher in the Woods* with yet another big budget horror movie, even if it was one clearly aimed at the older child and used a respected literary source, Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked this Way Comes*. This was another disaster at the box office, but it received a more positive critical reception. Janet Maslin even described it as an 'entertaining tale combining boyishness and grown-up horror in equal measures.' (Maslin 1983: C8) Also, while the horror was explicit, it was supposed underpin a story from which children will benefit: 'The horror here, which involves some elaborate special effects, is very much in the service of the story about a father and son who rediscover each other, which gives it an added dimension.' However, this review still felt the need to warn parents about the horror, while also convincing them that this was a film that was appropriate for children in other ways: 'its fancifulness makes it a film best suited to children, though it might scare them at times.'

In contrast to Disney's troubled efforts with the children's horror film, Spielberg seemed to have solved the problem and engaged in a series of films that proved both commercially successful and industrially transformative. For example, he brought in the director of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to make a film for children, *Poltergeist*, although the *New York Times* reassured its readers that Spielberg was firmly in control and may even have directed much of the film: 'There's some controversy about the individual contributions to the film made by Mr. Spielberg and Mr. Hooper.' (Canby 1982: C16) Again, the relationship between the film's horror materials and its address to children was a key concern in the review but, in this instance, the recommendation was much less ambivalent. *Poltergeist* was described as 'a marvellously spooky ghost story that may scare the wits out of very small children and offend those parents who believe that kids should be protected from their own, sometimes savage imaginations.' However, the review also stressed that these responses were inappropriate and that children loved this sort of thing: 'there's a vast audience of teen-agers and others who'll love this film'. As a result, the film was ultimately claimed to be 'harmless' although this harmlessness was the harmlessness of fantasy: 'Though it's as harmless as a nightmare, it could prompt some.' In this way, parents were given fair warning about the film's effectiveness as a horror picture while they were also assured that horror was a normal part of a child's fantasy life.

The next two horror related projects associated with Spielberg caused more concern. For example, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* was described as 'exuberantly tasteless and entertaining' (Canby 1983: C21), which captures the review's profound sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, the problem is supposed to be that the film 'never quite transcends the schlocky B-movie manners that inspired it', but Canby had championed other films with the same failing. His real concern was therefore that 'the movie, in addition

to being endearingly disgusting, is violent in ways that may scare the wits out of some small patrons.' Here the violence is less 'harmless' and the film became part of a more general call for the censors to develop a new classificatory system that distinguished between children and young teenagers, these teenagers being precisely the demographic that Disney had been seeking to target with its horror films: 'Mr. Spielberg added that he would favour creating a new classification that he called PG-2. No child under age 13 would be admitted to a PG-2 film without a parent.' (Hermetz 1984: C12) The problem was, as the chairperson of Paramount put it: 'The Rating Code has not had a change in more than 15 years and things are different from 1968 … To believe that a 16-year-old male today would need to be restricted from seeing a movie to the same degree as a 10-year-old male is stupid.' (Harmetz 1984: C12)

There were also concerns about *Gremlins*, with which the *New York Times* had two problems. First, it was uncertain about how to respond to Dante's filmmaking which, while not exactly camp, was a bit too close for the critic's taste so that *Gremlins* was described as 'being a wiseacre mixture of movie-buff jokes, movie genres and movie sensibilities.' (Canby 1984: C10) If this irritated the review, who doubted whether it was appropriate for children, the film's humour was seen as even more questionable given that the film was 'funniest when being most nasty.' Consequently, the review expressed confusion about whom the film was really supposed to be addressing and asserted that it will 'scare the wits out of very small children for whom, I assume, the movie was made.' In conclusion, it decided that *Gremlins* 'may not be ideal entertainment for younger children.'

If this judgement proved wrong, *Ghostbusters* was also dismissed as 'another of the messy, near-miss films in which [Murray] seems to specialize' (Maslin 1985: C5), although the film went on to be a phenomenal hit that gave considerable impetus to the comedy-

horror films that Newman and others claim to have dominated the late 1980s. In other words, these comedy-horror films were a crucial way of targeting older children, without raising too many anxieties from parents. However, despite its dismissal, *Ghostbusters* was seen as a 'perfect' vehicle for Bill Murray's dead pan persona: 'the systematic pursuit and apprehension of any spooks, vapors or phantasms to be found in a metropolitan area' is precisely the 'kind of work calls for the kind of sang-froid that, coming from Mr. Murray, amounts to facetiousness of the highest order.' Furthermore, as a 'full-fledged horror parody', the film is not seen as problem for children, despite its '"Exorcist"-like setting'.

Conclusion

Of course, the *New York Times* was very wrong in its estimations of both *Gremlins* and *Ghostbusters*, which went on to earn $153M and $242.5M respectively. Consequently, these films would strongly shape horror productions across the rest of the decade, and the period from *Jaws* to *Gremlins* can therefore be read as a story about the resurgence of the family audience, and of a corresponding shift from a cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which older teenagers had become a key market to one increasingly geared to younger teenagers, and the family audience that they might bring with them.

This process of transition might also explain why reviewers were concerned with the relationship between the old and the new Hollywood, and more particularly why, on the one hand, they championed films that recaptured the 'innocence' of the classical Hollywood and condemned films that 'slavishly imitated' the past; and why, on the other hand, they celebrated films that demonstrated innovation but objected to those that simply treated the past with contempt. Certainly some horror films were therefore seen as serious and

significant films but these were, inevitably, rare; and in this context, horror films that offered 'mindless fun' were far more positively received than those that were seen as pretentious: films that were not supposed to offer either the pleasures of low brow horror or the genuine seriousness of cinematic art. Furthermore, there was a clear preference for films whose exuberant and extravagant visuals demonstrated 'personality', while elsewhere there was a concern that the literalness of many horror films might be at odds with genre, a genre that was understood as working through metaphor and subtext. Consequently, while critics today are often scathing about the children's horror of the 1980s, the *New York Times* critics were far more indulgent. Certainly, there were some anxieties about these films, but they were also seen as displaying the very imagination (visual and otherwise) that was supposedly absent from more literal horror films.

References

Antunes, F. (2020), *Children, Beware! Childhood, Horror and the PG-13 Rating*, Jefferson: McFarland.

Buckley, T. (1978), 'Film: Return of the Native: Bad Vibrations', *New York Times*, 28 April, p 12.

Canby, V. (1975), '"Screen: "Stepford Wives" Assays Suburbia's Detergent Set', *New York Times*, 13 February, p. 43.

Canby, V. (1975), 'Screen: Entrapped by "Jaws" of Fear', *New York Times*, 21 June, p. 19.

Canby, V. (1976), 'William Girdler's Not-Quite-So-Toothsome "Grizzly"', *New York Times*, 13 May, p. 41.

Canby, V. (1976), 'The Screen: Roman Polanski's "The Tenant" Arrives', *New York Times*, 21 June, p. 43.

Canby, V. (1976), '"Seven-Per-Cent Solution" Movie An Exhilarating Collector's Item', *New York Times*, 25 October, p. 42.

Canby, V. (1976), 'The Unscariest Horror', *New York Times*, 5 December, p. 13.

Canby, V. (1976), '"King Kong" Bigger, Not Better', *New York Times*, 18 December, p. 16.

Canby V. (1977), 'Film: The Devil Fumbles a Passing Soul', *New York Times*, 7 April, p. 21.

Canby, V. (1977), '"Jabberwocky" Monster Film With Heart', *New York Times*, 16 April, p. 14.

Canby, V. (1977) 'Film: "Exorcist II: The Heretic" Is Heavy Stuff', *New York Times*, 18 June, p. 10.

Canby, V. (1977), '"Dr Moreau" Film is Creepily Good', *New York Times*, 14 July: 12.

Canby, V. (1977), '"Equus": Film of a Different Color', *New York Times*, 17 October, p. 39.

Canby, V. (1978), 'Screen: "Coma," Hospital Mystery: Snooping in the O.R.', *New York Times*, 2 February, p. 15.

Canby, V. (1978), 'Film: De Palma Mixes Genres in "Fury": Psyching a Spy', *New York Times*, 15 March, p. 19.

Canby, V. (1978), '"The Swarm" – A Bumbling "B"', *New York Times*, 23 July, p. 13.

Canby, V. (1978), 'Film: Dummy Takes Over in "Magic": Wooden Handed', *New York Times*, 8 November, p. 17.

Canby, V. (1979), 'Film: "Murder by Decree" in Foggy Old London: Ripper Redux', *New York Times*, 9 February, p. C1.

Canby, V. (1979), 'Movie: "Last Embrace," A Hero-Besieged Thriller: The Game is Deadly', *New York Times*, 4 May, p. C16.

Canby, V. (1979), 'Screen: "Alien" Brings Chill From the Far Galaxy: A Gothic Set in Space', *New York Times*, 25 May, p. C16.

Canby, V. (1979), 'Screen: Frankenheimer's "Prophecy"', *New York Times*, 15 June, p. C17.

Canby, V. (1980), 'Screen: Pacino Stars in Friedkin's "Cruising"', *New York Times*, 15 February, p. C6.

Canby, V. (1980), '"Fog" Comes it at 3 Theaters: Revenge From the Past', New York Times, 29 February, p. C15.

Canby, V. (1980) 'Alfred Hitchcock Was the Poet of Civilized Suspense', *New York Times*, 11 May, pp. C1 and C19.

Canby, V. (1980), '"Dressed to Kill," De Palma Mystery', *New York Times*, 25 July, p. C10.

Canby, V. (1981), '"The Hand," Clever Horror Tale', *New York Times*, 24 April, p. C8.

Canby, V. (1981), 'Travolta Stars in De Palma's "Blow Out"', *New York Times*, 24 July, p. C5.

Canby, V. (1981), '"Wolfen" With Finney', *New York Times*, 24 July, p. C6.

Canby, V. (1981), '"Time Bandits," A Lark Through the Eons', *New York Times*, 6 November, p. C8.

Canby, V. (1982), 'Movie: A Baroque New "Cat People"', *New York Times*, 2 April, p. C3.

Canby, V. (1982), '"Poltergeist" From Spielberg', *New York Times*, 4 June, p. C16.

Canby, V. (1982), '"E.T.," Fantasy from Spielberg', *New York Times*, 11 June, p. C14.

Canby, V. (1982), '"The Thing," Horror and Science Fiction', *New York Times*, 25 June, p. C14.

Canby, V. (1982), '"Still of the Night," in Hitchcock manner', *New York Times*, 19 November, p. C8.

Canby, V. (1983), 'Vampires and Chic', *New York Times*, 29 April, p. C32.

Canby, V. (1983), '"Blue Thunder," A Helicopter', *New York Times*, 13 May, p. C17.

Canby, V. (1983), '"Twilight Zone" Is Adapted to the Big Screen', *New York Times*, 24 June, p. C15.

Canby, V. (1983), 'Screen: "Indiana Jones," Directed by Spielberg', *New York Times*, 23 May, p. C21.

Canby, V. (1983), 'Sequel to "Psycho"', *New York Times*, 3 June, p. C14.

Canby V. (1984), 'Screen: "Gremlins," Kiddie Gore', *New York Times*, 8 June, p. C10.

Canby, V. (1984), 'Film: De Palma Evokes "Vertigo" in "Body Double"', *New York Times*, 26 October, p. C8.

Corry, J. (1981), '"Friday the 13th Part II"', *New York Times*, 4 May, p. C12.

Eder, R. (1975), 'Film: "The Devil's Rain"', *New York Times*, 8 August, p. 11

Eder, R. (1976), 'The Screen: "Omen" Is Nobody's Baby', *New York Times*, 26 June, p. 16.

Eder, R. (1977), '"Sentinel," Less a Horror Film Than Dull', *New York Times*, 12 February, p. 12.

Farber, S. (1975), '"Jaws" and "Bug" – The Only Difference is the Hype', *New York Times*, 24 August, p. 11.

Flint, P. B. (1980), 'Alfred Hitchcock Dies; A Master of Suspense', New York Times, 30 April, pp. A1 and D23.

Goodman, W. (1976), 'The Man Who Would Be Hitchcock', *New York Times*, 8 August, p. D11.

Harmetz, A. (1981), '"Watcher in the Woods," Revised $1 Million Worth, Tries Again', *New York Times*, 20 October, p. C9.

Harmetz, A. (1984), '"Indiana Jones" Stirs Ratings Debate', *New York Times*, 21 May, p. C12.

Humphries, R. (2002), *The American Horror Film: An Introduction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Hutchings, P. (2004), *The Horror Film*, London: Longman.

Jancovich, M. (1992), *Horror*, London: Batsford.

Jancovich, M. (2014) 'Horror in the 1940s' in Harry M. Benshoff, ed., *A Companion to the Horror Film*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwells, pp. 237-254.

Jancovich, M. (2017), 'Beyond Hammer: The First Run Market and the Prestige Horror Film in the Early 1960s', *Palgrave Communications* 3 (Special Issue on Horror and the Gothic), Open Access at https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms201728

Kendrick, J. (2014), 'Slasher Films and Gore in the 1980s' in Harry M. Benshoff, ed., *A Companion to the Horror Film*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwells, pp. 310-328.

Kakutani, M. (1981), 'De Palma: "I'm Much More a Romantic Than Hitchcock"', *New York Times*, 19 July, p. D22.

Klemesrud, J. (1975), 'Feminists Recoil at Film Designed to Relate to Them', *New York Times*, 26 February, p. 29.

Maslin, J. (1978), '"The Swarm," By Allen, Flies Onto Screens', *New York Times*, 15 July, p. 8.

Maslin J. (1978), 'Screen: "Body Snatchers" Return in All their Creepy Glory', *New York Times*, 22 December, p. C14.

Maslin, J. (1979), 'Film: Devil's Legacy in "Amityville Horror": A Family in Peril', *New York Times*, 27 July, p. C9.

Maslin, J. (1979), 'Screen: H. G. Wells Trails Jack the Ripper into 1979', *New York Times*, 28 September, p. C10.

Maslin, J. (1979), 'Screen: "Black Hole" By Disney: Ultimate Knowledge', *New York Times*, 21 December, p. C16.

Maslin, J. (1980), 'Flaws Don't Dim "The Shining"', *New York Times*, 8 June, p. D1.

Maslin, J. (1981), 'Sorcery and Immortality in "Dragonslayer"', *New York Times*, 26 June, p. C10.

Maslin, J. (1981), '"American Werewolf," Horror Plus Laughs', *New York Times*, 21 August, p. C12.

Maslin, J. (1982), 'Disney "Tron"', *New York Times*, 9 July, p. C8.

Maslin, J. (1983), 'Disney's Bradbury', *New York Times*, 29 April, p. C8.

Maslin, J. (1984), 'Film: "Ghostbusters," With Murray and Aykroyd', *New York Times*, 8 June, p. C5.

Maslin, J. (1984), 'Film: "Tightrope," New Clint Eastwood Thriller', *New York Times*, 17 August, p. C6.

Maslin, J. (1984), 'The Screen: "Terminator," Suspense Tale', *New York Times*, 26 October, p. C19.

Maslin, J. (1984), 'Science Fiction Epic, "Dune"', *New York Times*, 14 December, p. C18.

Newman, K. (1988), *Nightmare Movies: A Critical History of the Horror Movie from 1968*, London: Bloomsbury

Nowell, R. (2010), *Blood Money: A History of the First Teen Slasher Film Cycle*, London: Bloomsbury.

Phillips, K. R. (2005), *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture*, Westport: Praeger.

Tudor, A. (1989), *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Film*, Oxford: Blackwells.

Van Gelder, L. (1977), 'Film: Squid Pro Quo', *New York Times*, 4 August, p. C14.

Williams, T. (1996), *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, Madison, p. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

Wood, R. (1986), *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Worland, R. (2007), *The Horror Film: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwells.

[i] Other examples include *Jaws* (dir. Stephen Spielberg) starring Robert Shaw and Roy Scheider ($9M); *The Omen* (dir. Richard Donner) starring Gregory Peck and Lee Remick ($2.8M); *The Exorcist II: The Heretic* (dir. John Boorman) starring Richard Burton and Louise Fletcher ($14M); *The Fury* (dir. Brian De Palma) starring Kirk Douglas and John Cassavettes

($7.5M); *Damien: Omen II* (dir. Don Taylor) starring William Holden, Lee Grant ($6.8M); *The Eyes of Laura Mars* (dir. Irwin *Kerschner*) starring Faye Dunaway (but originally developed as a project for Barbara Steisand, $7M); *Magic* (dir. Richard Attenborough) starring Antony Hopkins and Ann Margaret ($7M); *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (dir. Philip Kaufman) starring Donald Sunderland and Brooke Adams ($3.5M); *Alien* (dir. Ridley Scott) starring Tom Skerritt and Sigourney Weaver ($11M); *Prophecy* (dir. John Frankenheimer) starring Robert Foxworth and Talia Shire ($12M); *Dracula* (dir. John Badham) starring Frank Langella and Lawrence Olivier ($12M); *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg) starring James Brolin and Margot Kidder ($5M); *Saturn 3* (dir. Stanley Donan) starring Kirk Douglas, Farah Fawett Majors and Harvey Keitel ($10M); *Cruising* (dir. William Friedkin) starring Al Pancino and Nancy Allen ($11M); *Dressed to Kill* (dir. Brian De Palma) starring Michael Caine and Angie Dickinson ($7M); *The Island* (dir. Michael Ritchie) starring Michael Caine and David Warner ($22M); *The Awakening* (dir. Mike Newell) starring Charlton Heston and Stephanie Zimbalist ($2.7M); *Blow Out* (dir. Brain De Palma) starring John Travolta, Nancy Allen and John Lithgow ($18M); *Wolfen* (dir. Michael Wadleigh) starring Albert Finney and Gregory Hines ($17M); *An American Werewolf in London* (dir. John Landis) starring David Naughton and Jenny Agutter ($6M); *Ghost Story* (dir. John Irvin) starring Fred Astaire, Melvyn Douglas, John Houseman and Douglas Fairbanks ($13.5M); *Cat People* (dir. Paul Schrader) starring Nastasia Kinski, Malcolm McDowell and John Heard ($13M); *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper) starring Craig T. Nelson and JoBeth Williams ($11M); *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (dir. Jack Clayton) starring Jonathan Pryce and Jason Robards ($19M); *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (dir. Joe Dante, John Landis, George Miller and Stephen Spielberg) starring Dan Aykroyd, Kathleen Quinlan and John Lithgow ($10M); *The Dead Zone* (dir. David Cronenberg) Christopher Walken, Brooke Adams and Martin Sheen ($10M); *Firestarter* (dir. Mark L. Lester) starring Drew Barrymore, George C. Scott and Martin Sheen ($12M); *Cujo* (dir. Lewis Teague) starring Dee Wallace ($5M); *Christine* (dir. John Carpenter) starring Keith Gordon, Alexandra Paul and Harry Dean Stanton ($10M); *Gremlins* (dir. Joe Dante) starring Zach Galligan and Phoebe Cates ($11M). All figures are from IMDB.