

**Media in Transition 2: Globalization and Convergence**  
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**World Horror Cinema and the US:**  
**Bringing it all back home**

*By Steven Jay Schneider*

Until fairly recently, analysis of the horror genre tended to concentrate on entries from the Western world, whether the American horror film, British examples such as Hammer Studios horror, or the Italian *giallo* tradition of Mario Bava and Dario Argento. Although this may appear to reflect Western prejudice (which, to a certain extent, it does) the main reason for this restricted focus has been difficulties accessing films from other parts of the globe, as well as the relative—though hardly total—lack of interest shown by several national cinemas in this genre until the last decade or so. Certainly, up to the mid-1960s it was possible for most critics and scholars to claim a knowledge of world horror cinema based upon the admittedly limited theatrical distribution of various examples in the art or popular entertainment fields (chief among these being George Franju's *Les Yeux sans visage/Eyes Without a Face* [France, 1959], Mario Bava's *La Maschera del demonio/Black Sunday* [Italy, 1960], Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* [UK, 1960], Kaneto Shindo's *Onibaba* [Japan, 1964], Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* [UK, 1965], and of course Germany's silent horror classics, *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1920] and *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens/Nosferatu, a Symphony of Terror* [1922]). Thus it was left to marginal publications such as *Oriental Cinema*, *Video Watchdog*, *Fangoria*, *Cinefantastique*, *Asian Cult Cinema* (formerly *Asian Trash Cinema*), and *Necronomicon*, along with developing video distributors and specialized mail-order houses like Midnight Video, Sinister Cinema, Something Weird Video, and Video Search of Miami to furnish and champion hard-to-come-by examples for those enthusiastic explorers seeking something different from what was then provided by the restricted distribution venues.

Another factor in the critical bias against non-Western cinematic horror has been the tendency of most reviewers and academics to avoid dealing with the disparate nature of popular culture, concentrating instead on those works which qualify as art cinema or else analyzing certain isolated examples within narrowly-defined parameters. In her important and timely book,

*Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde* (2000), Joan Hawkins persuasively argues that “paracinema” fanzines and mail-order companies like the ones listed above “challenge many of our continuing assumptions about the binary opposition of prestige cinema...and popular culture,” highlighting through their categories, selections, and reviews “an aspect of art cinema generally overlooked or repressed in cultural analysis; namely, the degree to which high culture trades on the same images, tropes, and themes that characterize low culture.”<sup>1</sup> (Note: by “paracinema,” Hawkins (following and here quoting Jeff Sconce) has in mind “an extremely elastic textual category [which comprises] less a distinct group of films than a particular reading protocol, a counter-aesthetic turned subcultural sensibility devoted to all manner of cultural detritus.”<sup>2</sup>)

Hawkins goes on to claim, and over the course of her book to show, that “paracinema consumption can be understood...as American art cinema consumption has often been understood, as a reaction against the hegemonic and normalizing practices of mainstream, dominant Hollywood consumption.”<sup>3</sup> However, as much as one might welcome (as I do) Hawkins’ concentrated and largely successful effort at exposing the affinities between high and low culture filmmaking—their common images, themes, politics, even aesthetics—her argument has a disturbing implication. For at the same time as she problematizes the opposition between art cinema and the so-called “trash” film, she effectively recasts it in terms of an ideological and equally misleading dichotomy between Hollywood and non-Hollywood film practice (whether the latter is labeled “alternative,” “experimental,” “underground,” or simply “foreign”). As recent scholarship has endeavored to show, however—see, for example, many of the essays included in Graeme Harper and Xavier Mendik’s 2001 collection, *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and its Critics*—the relationship between Hollywood and its various “Others” is every bit as complex, evolving, and mutually influential as that between trash (cult, psychotronic, etc.) filmmaking and the cinematic avant-garde.<sup>4</sup>

This is especially true when it comes to the horror genre. The dominance of American film production and the ready availability of US films from all periods may have gone a long way towards engendering the disproportionate critical focus on this nation’s cinematic horror. But at the levels of style, technique, and narrative form, the influence of US horror filmmaking practices, formulas, and (sub)generic conventions has by no means been uni-directional. Indeed, more than ever before, the horror traditions of other national and regional cinemas are

engaged in a dynamic process of cross-cultural exchange with American mainstream, independent, and underground horror alike.

One obvious and oft-cited example of such cross-cultural horror exchange is the impact of German Expressionism on the aesthetic of classic (ironically, produced by “Universal” Pictures) US horror. Somewhat less well-known—certainly less meticulously detailed—is the case of Italian genre expert Mario Bava, whose 1964 *giallo* *Sei donne per l’assassino/Blood and Black Lace*, and whose 1971 “teen kill-pic” *Reazione a catena/A Bay of Blood*, anticipated by some years the key formal and narrative conventions employed in the popular American “stalker cycle” of horror films, a cycle initiated Stateside by John Carpenter’s independently-produced hit, *Halloween*, in 1978.<sup>5</sup> In addition, Bava’s most enduring legacy may well be the kind of relentless tracking shot that was first picked up by his devotee in Italy, soon-to-be horror legend Dario Argento (who would put it to outrageous use in *Suspiria* [1977], for example), and later by such prominent US horror auteurs as Brian DePalma, Sam Ramie, even Martin Scorsese.<sup>6</sup> DePalma’s work especially seems to bear distinct traces of Italian genre cinema, in particular the *giallo* (which is sort of like a detective thriller, only gorier and with less emphasis on narrative coherence than on visual flourish). In a recent interview, Adam Simon (director of a recent British Film Institute documentary about US horror of the 1960s and 70s entitled *The American Nightmare* [2000]), expressed his feeling that “DePalma constantly claimed to be homaging Hitchcock in order to disguise the fact that he was actually stealing from Dario Argento! *Sisters* and *Dressed to Kill*, for example, have much more to do with *Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, *Deep Red*, *Four Flies on Grey Velvet*, and that whole series of early Argento films than they actually have to do with *Psycho* or anything else of Hitchcock’s. I think it’s a very typical thing in American cinema that directors steal from their European contemporaries while claiming to be doing something else.”<sup>7</sup> Such a line of thought of course needs defending, but it is a provocative and intuitively forceful one nonetheless.

Surely the clearest indication of the bi-directional influence of US-foreign horror exchange can be seen in the big-budget Hollywood remakes of such near-contemporaneous European (and now Eastern as well) horror hits as *Spoorloos* (Netherlands/France, 1988; remade as *The Vanishing* in 1993), *Nattevagten* (Denmark, 1994; remade as *Nightwatch* in 1998); *Abre los ojos/Open Your Eyes* (Spain, 1997; remade as *Vanilla Sky* last year); and *Insomnia* (Norway, 1997; the remake, under the same title, is playing at a theater near you this

weekend!). Next up is a Dreamworks version of *Ring/Ring*, the 1998 supernatural horror blockbuster from Japan that stands at the forefront of the genre's current resurgence in Asia (just one year after its release, *Ring* was remade as *Ring Virus* in one of the first-ever joint productions between Japan and Korea).<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the first pair of films on this list—*Spoorloos* and *Nattevagten*—were directed for the second time in the States by their original European directors (George Sluizer and Ole Bornedal, respectively). Perhaps because in both cases the squeaky-clean, utterly predictable, wholly “Hollywoodized” remakes flopped amongst reviewers as well as fans, in the case of both *Insomnia* and *Ring*, the powers that be elected to go with more established (read: “safer”) directorial choices. This seems less like strategy and more like scapegoating, however, when one considers that the jobs of both Sluizer and Bornedal were hampered immeasurably by the unasked for “assistance” of Hollywood script doctors, assigned by the studios to help make the original films more “accessible” to US audiences.<sup>9</sup> The executives in question would have been better off had they taken the relatively negligible financial risk of releasing the original versions of *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch* in American theaters, subtitles and all, and showing just a wee bit of faith in the viewing public to go and see what is worth seeing—no matter what language it's in.

Another major source of cross-cultural horror exchange can be found in the importation of foreign horror directors to the States, once they have proven their skills—and their ability to draw audiences (not necessarily the same thing)—at home. Of course, this has been going on since at least the 1920s and 30s, with the exodus of German talent (Murnau, Lang, etc.) to Hollywood. Recently, however, the geographic talent pool has opened up like never before. Examples include Spain's Alejandro Amenabar, whose popular pseudo-snuff thriller *Tesis/Thesis* (1996) and science fiction-horror hybrid *Open Your Eyes* still did not lead Hollywood talent scouts to anticipate the phenomenal success that would be *The Others* (2001), which he wrote and scored, as well as directed; New Zealand's Peter Jackson, the one-time splatter auteur whose blood, guts, and alien puppet movies (*Bad Taste* [1987], *Meet the Feebles* [1989], *Braindead/Dead Alive* [1992]) gave way first to the art-house hit *Heavenly Creatures* (1994) and eventually to superstardom as director of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001); France's Jean-Pierre Jeunot, whose idiosyncratic fairytale nightmares *Delicatessen* (1991) and *La Cité des enfants perdus/City of Lost Children* (1995) led to an idiosyncratic fairytale nightmare in outer space—*Alien: Resurrection* (1997)—on a \$70 million budget, no less; and Mexico's Guillermo del Toro, who has thus far successfully broken with convention by moving

back and forth between horror and related productions at home (*Cronos/Chronos* [1993], *El Espinazo del Diablo/The Devil's Backbone* [2001]) and in Hollywood (*Mimic* [1997], *Blade II* [2002]). The mere fact that del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone*, an English subtitled Mexican/Spanish horror co-production, achieved relatively wide theatrical distribution in the States, bodes well for future developments in the genre.

As the brief lists of films and directors offered above should indicate, the situation over the last ten or so years has changed drastically due to the effects of the new global economy, the decline of rigid national boundaries, and the transcultural phenomenon affecting virtually all sectors of cinema, from Hollywood to Hong Kong and beyond. However, even a recent anthology such as *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe* contains a preface by Kim Newman which states that “the dominant strains of any given genre (including horror) are American, with only the martial arts movie providing a non-American alternative to the Western.”<sup>10</sup> To be fair, Newman does mention other traditions, such as Mexican horror, Italian horror, the international vampire movie (which includes entries from Turkey, India, Malaysia, Belgium, Cuba, Greece, The Philippines, Argentina, Australia, and the former Soviet Union), and the 1973 hybrid *The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires*, which combines British Hammer horror with Hong Kong's famous Shaw Brothers via the teaming up of Peter Cushing and David Chiang.<sup>11</sup> But even acknowledging the very few book-length exceptions—*Cutting Edge*, *Fear Without Frontiers*, Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs' *Immoral Tales*<sup>12</sup>—and with a nod to Phil Hardy's broad-based 1993 *Horror Film Encyclopedia*,<sup>13</sup> it is not inaccurate to claim that scholarly interest today remains focused primarily upon the American horror film, as recent studies by Carol Clover, Paul Wells, Rhona Berenstein, Isabel Pinedo, Judith Halberstam, Cynthia Freeland, and Harry Benshoff (among others) reveal.

Although the sporadic work that has appeared in the past decade has helped to rectify this imbalance, a great deal more research needs to be undertaken in the field so as to give the international perspectives and cross-cultural dynamics of world horror cinema its due. In an era defined by the blanket terms “postmodernism” and “global economy,” it is increasingly difficult to distinguish *any* cinema according to exclusive national and sociocultural parameters. Every nation, region, and cultural artifact is now influenced by forces outside its geographic boundaries. But—and this is key—recognizing this undeniable fact does not mean proclaiming the definitive victory of American culture, whether in a cultural imperialist or “end of ideology”

sense of the term. As Toby Miller points out, the 1990s have witnessed the emergence of truly global film distribution cartels, representing “a possible new international division of cultural labour.”<sup>14</sup> In the present case, what it tells us is that characterizations of the nature of horror films (narratively, thematically, stylistically, financially, etc.) from various geographical and cultural locations are more fluid and transitional—more *transnational*—than ever before.

Furthermore, recognition of this fact does not mean denying the existence of national features which affect and are reflected in particular horror films, whether from an artistic or reception standpoint. Instead, we must respect and attempt to identify the diversity of factors bearing on specific works, as well as draw attention to neglected social, cultural, and ideological aspects of the horror genre’s appearance in its various national cinematic contexts. While Italian, Japanese, Mexican, Australian, and Hong Kong horror films have been accorded a modicum of critical recognition in recent times, the areas of Egyptian, Singaporean, Belgian, South Korean, African, Dutch, Greek, Canadian (that is, besides David Cronenberg), and Thai horror all still need—in fact, demand—more historical and theoretical investigation than they have thus far received.

Having said all this, I will just close here with an open call for new studies that not only examine previously unaccounted-for foreign horror film texts, but ones that focus upon different conditions of audience reception for even well-known and highly-regarded foreign examples of the genre, thereby stimulating (at least potentially) fresh readings. These in turn may shed new light on the original cultural production of many horror films, as well as their subsequent “translations” and meanings in different national contexts. The realities of the present era may complicate any attempts to read examples of cinematic horror from around the world exclusively against their original historical and cultural background. But at the same time, such realities can hopefully spark efforts to analyze the disparate nature of multicultural factors, resulting in a new wave of diverse and illuminating findings.<sup>15</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-garde* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Sconce continues: “the explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic ‘trash’ whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture” (quoted in Hawkins, 14). See Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” *Screen* 36.4 (Winter 1995): 372.

<sup>3</sup> Hawkins, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and Its Critics*, ed. Graeme Harper and Xavier Mendik (Guildford: FAB Press, 2001). See also *Underground USA: Filmmaking Beyond the Hollywood Canon*, ed. Xavier Mendik and Steven Jay Schneider (London: Wallflower Press, forthcoming 2002).

<sup>5</sup> See Ian Conrich, “La Mort n’est pas une fin: La série des *Vendredi 13* et la fonction culturelle d’un grand guignol moderne,” in *Cauchemars Américains: Fantastique et Horreur dans le Cinéma Moderne*, ed. Frank Lafond (Liege, Belgium: Les Editions du CEFAL, forthcoming 2002); and Reynold Humphries, “Just another fashion victim: Mario Bava’s *Sei donne per l’assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace*, 1964),” *Kinoeye: A Fortnightly Journal of Film in the New Europe* 1.7 (26 November 2001): <http://www.kinoeye.org/01/07/humphries07.html>.

<sup>6</sup> This point has been made by Adam Simon in his entry on *Suspiria* in *Understanding Film Genres: Film Through Genres, Genre Through Films*, ed. Sara Pendergast, Tom Pendergast, and Steven Jay Schneider (New York: McGraw-Hill & Co., forthcoming 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Steven Jay Schneider, “(Adam) Simon says... *Paradoxa* interview with the Director of *The American Nightmare*,” *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 16, forthcoming 2002.

<sup>8</sup> See Ramie Tateishi, “The Contemporary Japanese Horror Film Series: *Ring* and *Eko Eko Azarak*,” in *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (Guildford: FAB Press, forthcoming 2002).

<sup>9</sup> See Steven Jay Schneider, “Repackaging Rage: *The Vanishing* and *Nightwatch*,” *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* 17, Spring 2002: 47-66.

<sup>10</sup> Kim Newman, “Preface,” in *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe*, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> For more on this film, see I.Q. Hunter, “*The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires*.” In *Postcolonial Studies* 3.1, April 2000: 81-87.

<sup>12</sup> Pete Tombs and Cathal Tohill, *Immoral Tales: European Sex & Horror Movies 1956-1984* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995). Tombs also authored the bulk of *Mondo Macabro: Weird & Wonderful Cinema Around the World* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), although this popular read includes under its purview (as the subtitle implies) “action pics...sex exploiters and monster movies” (7) along with horror films-‘proper’.

<sup>13</sup> Phil Hardy, *The Overlook Film Encyclopedia of Horror* (New York: Overlook Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> Toby Miller, “Hollywood and the World,” in *Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 377.

<sup>15</sup> An alternative version of this essay, co-authored by Tony Williams—to whom I am indebted—will serve as the introduction to *Horror International*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, forthcoming 2003).