The term “postmodernism” is bandied around rather freely in contemporary culture, especially with respect to recent Hollywood movies. And often, postmodern comes to be a descriptor filled with derision, especially among critics seeking to dismiss popular culture, with postmodern “blank parody” and lack of affect viewed as tapping a tired lack of originality and inauthentic pleasures. Fredric Jameson’s seminal essay, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” is the most frequently ransacked to describe “the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” and to confirm that “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture.”

Recent horror movies have trended strongly towards Jamesonian postmodern characteristics, and also have been subject to the negative judgments that can be associated with postmodernism—not least because the films are often slick high-concept packages aimed at the MTV generation, featuring casts of trendy teen actors from popular television shows. But in spite of the (usually “high”-minded) criticism surrounding turns toward postmodernism, these postmodern horror films have been remarkably popular and financially successful. Employing extremes of self-reflexivity with copious intertextual references to earlier horror landmarks, postmodern horror texts revitalized the ailing genre in the mid-1990s and continue to boast commercial success. The most influential of these is Scream (1996), which grossed over $100 million domestically and spawned numerous imitations, including two sequels of its own. Its postmodern conceit is simple: Scream is a slasher movie in which the characters are well versed in the rules and conventions of slasher movies, to the self-referential point of characters talking at length about earlier slasher pics, such as Halloween (1978), Friday the 13th (1980) and Nightmare on
Elm Street (1984)—the latter of which, like Scream, was directed by Wes Craven.

The wake of Scream provoked the postmodern horror boom, with many films coming from Scream-related talent; indeed, Scream’s director Wes Craven and writer Kevin Williamson themselves are something of a cottage industry in postmodern horror. Before Scream, Freddy Krueger received a postmodern makeover with Wes Craven’s New Nightmare (1994), in which Freddy enters “our” world to threaten the real-life makers of the Elm Street series—including Heather Langenkamp (the actress who played the heroine in the original A Nightmare on Elm Street) and Craven himself. Hot from Scream, Williamson has been prominently attached to a number of other postmodern horror movies, including The Faculty (1998) and the successful Halloween H20 (1998) revival of the Halloween series.

Elsewhere, the pop-cultural universe of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino’s From Dusk Till Dawn (1996) features self-conscious casting of cult horror celebrities like Tom Savini and John Saxon. The Bates Motel was renovated in 1998 by Gus Van Sant, who dared a shot-for-shot color remake of Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho (1960), taking Jamesonian imitation of the past to the nth degree. The Blair Witch Project (1999) was staggering successful, and shared its self-reflexive narrative frame (filmmakers lost in the woods searching for supernatural beings) with the earlier The Last Broadcast (1998). Also illustrating postmodern self-reflexivity, the subsequent Scream installments, Tesis (1996), Urban Legends: Final Cut (2000) and Halloween Resurrection (2002) set their plots in different sites of media production (film school and festivals, television and web broadcasts). There have also been “straighter” horror films that each channel distinct versions of the horror format with a glib knowingness, displaying to varying degrees the postmodern self-awareness and irony which seems to be integral to the continued success of these kinds of films, such as Urban Legends (1998), Bats (1999), The In Crowd (2000), Dracula 2000 (2000), Jason X (2001), Ghosts of Mars (2001) and two high-tech William Castle remakes House on Haunted Hill (1999) and Thir13een Ghosts (2001). Most of these postmodern horror movies have even become the subject of parodic imitation themselves in the Scary Movie series (2000-2003).

Still, some old school horror fans and cultural tastemakers position “postmodernism” as negative, reflected in that each Scream installment after the original has been indicted by some critics for its apparent superficiality and derivativeness, suggesting a decline in the genre since it went postmodern. Culture Kiosque titled its Scream 3 review, “The death of the postmodern slasher pic,” while another critic states: “Scream 3 and its spinoffs will make Scream and Scream 2 seem like great masterpieces of postmodern horror. As the tongue in cheek genre again begins to ruin the horror film as an effective meditation on issues which affect society…things will become intolerable.” Such pejorative views, however, risk obscuring important questions about how and why the horror genre has embraced postmodernism with such fervor.

Rather than seeing this recent wave of horror movies as the “death” of the genre—or even their postmodern hallmarks as representing an entirely new development—I will argue that a certain kinship has existed between postmodernism and horror for quite some time. The interlacing of postmodernism and horror in these recent films affords the opportunity to more clearly examine interconnections between the two, which will not only facilitate a greater understanding of contemporary horror cinema, but also provide a new model through which to view the horror genre as a whole. Both postmodern theory and the horror genre are fundamentally concerned with parallel questions about how we perceive and make sense of the world around us, and as such both offer comparable models for ordering the knowledge we possess about the external world.
Perception and Knowledge in Postmodern Theory

The intersection of postmodern theory with the horror genre occurs most prominently around phenomenological issues. Phenomenologically-oriented postmodern theory, especially the theory that derives from Friedrich Nietzsche, is concerned with the challenging of century-old epistemological assumptions about how we perceive and make sense of phenomena in the world. Tracing phenomenological postmodern thought back to Nietzsche is productive, due to the potent correlations between his writings and the horror genre. An examination of horror’s organization of its visual field, particularly during suspense sequences, allows the teasing out of phenomenological and epistemological presuppositions which underlie those organizational choices, presuppositions akin to many of Nietzsche’s concerns. Returning to Nietzsche is also a strategic gesture in that postmodernism is often thought to be a recent phenomenon, and his work reminds us that the crises associated with postmodernity have been around since the nineteenth century—just as many of the concerns of postmodern horror movies can be traced back throughout the history of the genre.

Many scholars have located Nietzsche’s work as the foundation for much of the twentieth-century emergence of postmodern thought. Jürgen Habermas has referred to Nietzsche as the turning point in the entry into postmodernity, while Cornel West has mapped out Nietzsche’s influence on postmodern American philosophers such as W. V. Quine, Thomas Kuhn and Richard Rorty. West points to three particular areas of influence: the move toward antirealism or conventionalism in ontology (the rejection of a theory-free external world), the move toward antifoundationalism in epistemology (the rejection of any solid foundations for knowledge claims), and the move toward the transcendentalization of the subject or the dismissal of the mind as a sphere of inquiry (the rejection of a Cartesian mind-body split). West also outlines Nietzsche’s influence in the wider field of postmodern thought, through the differently inflected paradigms of such diverse theorists as Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg Gadamer and Jean-Paul Sartre.

The centrality of Nietzsche to the foundations of postmodernism lies in his explicit critique of Plato—what Gilles Deleuze characterizes as the questioning of what it means to “reverse Platonism.” Nietzsche argued that although we believe we know something about the things of the world when we speak of them, all we really possess are metaphors for those things, metaphors which in no way correspond to an original entity or essence, which has particular impact on conceptions of truth:

...to be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors. Thus, to express it morally, this is the duty to lie according to fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding by everyone. Now man of course forgets that this is the way things stand for him. Thus he lies in the manner indicated, unconsciously and in accordance with habits which are centuries old, and precisely by means of this unconsciousness and forgetfulness he arrives at his sense of truth.

Instead of Plato’s position that a truth exists external to senses and cognition, Nietzsche argued that all our knowledge of the world is a “thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point of view which would be ‘true in itself’ or really and universally apart from man.” In other words, our knowledge of the world represents a metamorphosis of the world into man, with the “laws of nature” existing only within our perceptions of them: “all these relations always refer again to others and are thoroughly incomprehensible to us in their essence. All that we actually know about these laws of nature is what we ourselves bring to them.” Nietzsche further argues that the laws of nature as we conceptualize them are founded upon human senses of perception that are fundamentally unreliable and deceptive: our eyes only gliding over the surfaces of things, “they are content to receive stimuli and, as it were, to engage in a groping game on the
backs of things.” Thus, whereas Platonic thought conceived of external laws of nature which can be rationally perceived if one is careful enough, for Nietzsche there are no extrinsic laws of nature, and the laws that we ascribe to nature are not only anthropomorphized, they are founded on deceptive sensory misperceptions.

Querying what it means to “reverse Platonism,” Nietzsche sustains a tension between our perception of and knowledge about the world, such that we can no longer trust in the knowledge we acquire of the world through our senses. This tension can be seen throughout postmodern thought, particularly in the rejection of a theory-free external world and the rejection of any solid foundations for knowledge claims. For example, Jean Baudrillard’s and others’ ideas of simulation/simulacrum extends Nietzsche’s epistemological and phenomenological concerns: the simulacrum derives from a notion of the world as comprised of surface appearances which lack any inner essence and possess no transcendental meaning outside of those meanings that we place on top of them. In other words, Nietzsche and the postmodern thinkers who followed posit a fundamental phenomenological uncertainty about the apparent, familiar world around us and our perception of it.

Perception and Knowledge in the Horror Genre

Both the thematics and textual organization of horror suggest that the genre is fundamentally engaged with many of the same issues as the phenomenological strain of postmodern theory. The relationship between our perception of and knowledge about the world informs many of the basic tropes of the genre. For example, horror is often described as a genre that taps into our fear of the unknown; that is, the horror of the genre frequently derives from the safety of the familiar, known world being violated by something unknown, something that lies outside of the laws we have ascribed to nature. This is particularly true in the horror tales dealing with monsters or the supernatural, such that Robin Wood has argued most horror movies follow a deceptively simple formula: “normality is threatened by the Monster,” wherein normality means conformity with dominant social norms. Wood’s concerns are primarily ideological and psychoanalytical, but his paradigm could be rearticulated in phenomenological and epistemological terms as, “the known world is threatened by the unknown.”

Throwing our ability to know the familiar, material world into crisis, horror seems based on an understanding that behind the apparent, known world may lie something which evades our ability to metamorphose the world into man, an unknowable sphere that represents a potential fissure in our faith in the apparent, known world. Gothic horror provides an especially potent variation on this in its opposition of the diurnal and nocturnal as dual worlds. Charlene Bunnell has noted of the Gothic novel that the conventional assumptions, embedded in Christian mythologies, that the daylight world corresponds to “good” and the night world to “evil,” are not so simple:

One world is the external one—cultural and institutional; it is “light” because it is familiar and common. The other world is the internal one—primitive and intuitive; it is dark, not because it necessarily signifies evil (although it may), but because it is unfamiliar and unknown.

Noting the unknown in the Gothic novel is coded as dark and the known as light, Bunnell points to a particular significant relationship between knowledge and visibility: the dark and light of the dual worlds directly correlate between the familiarity of the world and our relative ability to see it. Echoing phenomenologically-oriented postmodern theory, our (in)ability to know the world around us in horror is intrinsically linked to the (un)reliability of our senses of perception.

This epistemological tension between knowledge and perception is also alluded to in Tzvetan Todorov’s description of the “uncanny” and the “marvelous,” two possible responses elicited by “fantastic” literature
which positions characters (and the reader) to acknowledge events unexplainable by familiar laws of the natural world, such as the appearance of vampires or devils:

...either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.\(^\text{16}\)

In the case of the uncanny, our knowledge of the world is challenged but remains intact, because we had merely misperceived the event. In the case of the marvelous, our perceptions have in fact been accurate, but our initial knowledge of the world is proven to have been incorrect or incomplete.

Adapting Todorov’s remarks to horror cinema allows us to note that terror and suspense are often generated by keeping the relationship between perception and knowledge in a state of flux, such that we are unsure about the reliability of our senses and/or unsure about the stability of the laws that we have ascribed to nature. Perception’s role is in fact even more significant in horror films, because of cinema’s ability to represent the world by way of actual sensory perceptions, stimulating our visual and aural senses in a much more direct and experiential manner than the written prose of literature. Whereas literature alludes to perception, in film we are able to experience it first-hand, with the camera able to both enable or curtail vision. As such, horror movies’ structuring of the visual field implies certain phenomenological presuppositions about how we perceive and understand the world around us. This is particularly clear in Gothic horror films: the translation of Gothic’s dual worlds to celluloid takes the form of actual night/day filming, or they are alluded to through stylistic devices in the mise-en-scène that either allow or obscure vision. The darkness of the nocturnal world may also be rendered through the use of shadows, chiaroscuro lighting, diffusion, mist and fog, or off-screen space, blocking vision, keeping objects hidden and unknown.

The Val Lewton-produced Gothic chillers of the 1940s are exemplars of this tendency, wherein the ”monster” is almost never revealed to the camera. An archetypal example is Cat People (1942), the story of Irena, a young Serbian woman in America who may (or may not) be afflicted with an ancient curse that turns her into a killer panther upon sexual arousal. The film’s acclaimed suspense sequences illustrate the particular relationships between structures of seeing and the un/know in horror. When jealous Irena follows her rival Alice (who is competing for the affections of Irena’s husband) down a street at night, Irena mysteriously vanishes. Her footsteps suddenly stop, and she is not seen for the rest of the sequence. The lighting design here is carefully organized such that the spots of light on the sidewalk under each streetlamp are separated by stretches of deep darkness. Sensing that something might be following her, Alice begins to walk briskly and nervously through the dark stretches, pausing to look back every time she reaches a bright area under a lamp. When a bus—stable signifier of

\[\text{Last House on the Left} \text{ (Wes Craven) (photo appears courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)}\]
the known world—pulls up beside her, the
suspense of the sequence is dissipated, and
she enters back into the familiar, social world.

In another, similar sequence, in an attempt
to escape from what sounds like a panther,
Alice jumps into a swimming pool for safety.
Again, there is a strong visual and thematic
dialectic between light and dark, known and
unknown, articulated here through editing
between two distinct patterns of mise-en-scène.
The scene cuts back and forth between Alice
waiting at the illuminated center of the pool
and shots from her point-of-view looking to-
wards the dark shadows at the sides of the
pool, which may or may not conceal a killer
cat. Once again, the fear of the unknown is
alleviated when the main lights of the indoor
pool are switched on, returning Alice to
the visible, known world.

These sequences explicitly indicate the
inability of both the character and the camera
to see the unknown threat as a source of
suspense. Light is specifically aligned with
safety and the darkness with threat or danger.
That which is visible to us corresponds to the
known world, which is in turn coded as safe;
that which is beyond visibility is coded as
both unknown and threatening. A clear
demarcation between known and unknown
worlds, represented through a coherent spati-
ality in which the areas of darkness are visibly
distinct from the areas of light, places a de-
gree of faith in visual perception. When we
are able to perceive the world, we can be sure
of its laws; but when our vision is blocked,
we cannot be certain of the laws governing
the unknown. In other words, the Gothic
horror film acknowledges that there are
potentially unknown things in the world,
things to threaten the laws of the world as we
know them, but positions those things as dis-
crete and separate from a known world in
which we can trust.

Other types of horror films are also orga-
nized around the same dialectic of perception
and knowledge, although often with different
inflections. Slasher/splatter movies Last
House on the Left (1972) and The Texas Chain
Saw Massacre (1974) offer reversals of the
Gothic tendencies of Cat People. The majority
of the murders in both films take place not at
night, but in the bright sunlight of the diurnal
world, and they are committed by human
rather than supernatural monsters. Instead of
finding safety in the light, both films make the
visible, known world the primary source of
terror—primarily through grotesquely realis-
tic gore effects. The opening of Texas Chain
Saw is exemplary: a totally black screen is
punctured by flash images (lit by a camera
flashbulb) of corpses that have been illegally
exhumed. The source of shock in the se-
quence stems less from the stretches of
blackness than from what we can see: the brief
images of rotting corpses and the horrific act
of desecration. In other words, the knowledge
of the world we acquire from perception is
posed as threatening, suggesting a fear of the
known as much as a fear of the unknown.

Horror films centered around ESP or mad
scientists offer yet more variations of the
knowledge/perception dialectic. Focusing on
characters with powers of extra-sensory perception implies limitations to our normal sense of perception, and our faith in the laws of nature is reduced correspondingly, as the fact of ESP/telekinesis would go against rational scientific thought. Films with mad scientists offer similar disruptions by bending the “objective” scientific laws of nature to allow for such fantastic creations as the Frankenstein monster, Dr. Moreau’s island, or Ray Milland’s X-Ray vision serum in The Man With the X-Ray Eyes (1963).

In placing the relationship between our perception and knowledge of the world in a constant state of tension and flux, the horror genre mirrors many of the primary thrusts of postmodern theory, even in those horror films (like Cat People and Texas Chain Saw) not normally categorized as “postmodern.” In its various configurations of the relationship between perception and the laws of nature—such as those outlined by Todorov—the horror genre can be mapped along various points of the spectrum between Plato and Nietzsche. For Plato there was a theory-free external world, and there were solid foundations for knowledge claims about that world; for Nietzsche, neither was the case. In attempting to reverse Platonism, Nietzsche and his descendants grapple with how to overcome centuries of conditioning which have led us to instinctually believe that our senses can be reliable and that we can determine the laws of nature by observing the world. By destabilizing the trust we place in our perceptions or by questioning the laws of nature, horror movies move away from the security and rationality of a Platonic worldview, towards the potentially nihilistic irrationality favored by Nietzsche, wherein we no longer have solid foundations for understanding the world around us. In horror this erosion of the stable framework of perception is manifested as both terrifying and threatening.

The Postmodern Horror Film
When viewed through the rhythms and tensions between the known/unknown and the Nietzschean destabilization of perception that accompanies them, we will be able to see how the formal and thematic strategies of the recent wave of postmodern horror movies amount to more than simply just an “imitation of dead styles” and a new form of superficiality and depthlessness. Rather than marking a break from past manifestations of the genre, the coupling of postmodernism and horror in films such as Scream in fact makes explicit the correlation between the two that had been present all along. Such traits as self-reflexivity and intertextuality merely reframe the terms of the known/unknown dialectic and further reconfigure the relationship between perception of and knowledge about the world. Specifically, by representing the known/unknown dialectic in a particularly self-conscious way, postmodern horror films draw attention to their own textual construction and the rules and conventions through which they operate. The effect of such deconstructive strategies, as we shall see, is the suggestion that the terror and suspense generated by contemporary horror movies stem as much from the concerns about film medium itself as from a fear of the unknown.

The self-reflexivity of postmodern horror movies seems especially purposeful because the horror genre, since its inception, has always relied heavily on language and rhetoric as a means of representing the unknown forces that frighten us. Todorov argues that this consistent use of rhetorical figures is a result of the fantastic emerging from rhetoric:

The supernatural is born of language, it is both its consequence and its proof: not only do the devil and vampires exist only in words, but language alone enables us to conceive what is always absent: the supernatural.17

Rhetorical figures such as vampires, werewolves and zombies all are founded upon sets of “rules” that govern their existence—vampires traditionally drink blood, turn into bats, fear garlic and crosses, and can be killed by sunlight or a stake through the heart. The mythical figure takes form within the boundaries of these rules; without vampire lore and its rules, there would be no vampire. In many horror films, the expert
who is able to destroy the monster (such as Dracula’s nemesis, Van Helsing) is powerful not because of any physical or supernatural strength, but rather because s/he possesses an understanding of the rules that define the monster’s existence. Shadows and darkness in Gothic horror operate as a similar rhetorical devices. The nocturnal realm serves to signify the unknown; the restriction of vision is a rhetorical gesture in its own right.18

Postmodern horror movies’ deployment of self-reflexivity and intertextuality explicitly exposes and demystifies this rhetorical nature of representations of the unknown, encouraging the audience to see the monster/unknown as a fictional construct that can only exist in language. When, for example, the protagonists in From Dusk Till Dawn realize they are battling vampires, rather than turning to a Van Helsing-style expert for advice, they instead discuss how Hammer Horror actor Peter Cushing would slay vampires when he played Van Helsing, reminding us that Tarantino’s vampires are of the same order as those vampires the protagonists refer to from the old horror movies—an effect of rhetoric.19

The Scream trilogy offers similar strategies of rhetorical deconstruction, such as the characters’ self-reflexive discussions of the rules one needs to follow in order to survive a slasher movie, or the killers’ highly self-conscious costumes—the grim reaper black cape and Halloween ghostface mask recalling both Edvard Munch’s The Scream as well as masked slasher-movie killers like Michael Myers (Halloween) and Jason Voorhees (Friday the 13th). In Wes Craven’s New Nightmare, Wes Craven (playing himself) even explains explicitly that Freddy Krueger is a rhetorical symbol of our age-old primal fears about unknown evils, and his form as the supernatural killer with finger-knives is merely “the current version.”

The effect of postmodern horror’s self-reflexivity and intertextuality also alters how we understand the known world; the familiar world itself revealed to be a rhetorical construct, not just the horror of the unknown. Exposing both known and unknown worlds as constructs, the relationship between the two becomes more schizophrenic and fragmentary than in other horror film models, with no clear demarcation between the two. For example, The Blair Witch Project’s pretensions toward documentary reality (both in the film and its promotional materials) presents itself as entirely mediated experience, where every scene in the film is shot from the perspective of the protagonists’ camera lens, insisting on reflexive awareness of filming. Both the mysterious, unknown sphere occupied by the Blair Witch and the familiar, known world of the Maryland backwoods are presented equally as rhetorical constructs. We are offered no possibility of “direct” access to the familiar, known world, suggesting, in accordance with Nietzsche, that we can never actually gain unmediated access to the known world.20

This deconstructing of the known is rendered in particularly extreme ways through the dizzying use of mise-en-abîme in Wes Craven’s New Nightmare. Throughout the film, we are left uncertain whether the scenes we are watching are intended to signify the known, familiar world (one in which there have already been six previous Freddy Krueger films) or a dream world that does not subscribe to the laws of nature as we know them. The film opens with images of a new Freddy glove under construction, in framing that mimics the opening glove-making sequence of the original A Nightmare on Elm Street. In New Nightmare, however, the scene is then revealed to be taking place on a movie set, when Wes Craven yells “cut” and calls for more blood. The stability of “real” as opposed to the fantasy world (here, cinematic fantasy) is undermined yet again, when Freddy’s glove magically comes to life and what we thought was the “real”/known movie set is shown to be one of Heather Langenkamp’s nightmares when she wakes in the (presumably true) “real” world. However, this “real world” is consistently undermined throughout the film, because the film we are watching is (paradoxically) also the same film that Craven is shown writing as part of the story of New Nightmare, the film we paid money to
watch. When Langenkamp visits Craven to discuss his new *Elm Street* screenplay, their dialogue is shown to be in the script he is writing in that very scene; when the script on Craven’s computer screen ends the scene with “Fade to Black”—the film we are watching dutifully follows. Craven’s authorial presence within the film similarly underscores the discursive quality of these experiences, further undermining the stability of the “known.”

Compared to the earlier forms of the genre, these postmodern horror movies pose a significant reformulation of the relationship between perception and knowledge. As we saw, the play between known and unknown in the earlier films put our sensory perceptions and/or the laws of nature as we understand them into crisis. While most postmodern horror films still play upon some of these primal fears, because the known and unknown worlds are both revealed to be rhetorical constructs, the two blur together, erasing any meaningful distinction between them. Trying to untangle the two (or more?) worlds in a film like *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* is to fight a losing battle. The effect is such that these films seem to suggest that distinctions between a “known” and an “unknown” world are somewhat arbitrary, that we can never truly know the world around us to begin with. Moreover, the blurring of these boundaries is accentuated by the role of (filmic) representation itself. In *The Blair Witch Project*, for example, an ambiguity is sustained about whether the Blair Witch exists or not—an ambiguity which derives from the fact that the (ostensibly) documentary footage shot by the missing filmmakers is the only source of evidence we have about what happened to them.

It bears investigation that the recent wave of horror movies continues to draw audiences, apparently providing them with the chills and thrills they expect from the genre. One might think that continually reminding viewers that they are watching a movie and that the monster is a rhetorical device would distance them from the drama and suspense, yet the popularity of films like *Scream* and *Blair Witch* would seem to suggest otherwise. Indeed, the pleasure of suspense in watching *Scream* derives largely from how the rules of the slasher are explicitly and self-reflexively exposed.

Recent horror’s insistent focus on the cinematic medium itself provides the key to understanding the shift away from earlier manifestations of the genre. In their representation of both known and unknown worlds as rhetorical constructs, recent horror movies seem predicated on the belief that knowledge of the world exists only through mediated structures, particularly those of the media itself, reflecting postmodern theorists’ assertion that the world possesses no intrinsic, unmediated essence, and the known world therefore (like the unknown) originates in language. One of the central postmodern turns in recent films, compared to their predecessors, is that the film medium itself becomes more expressly implicated in how we perceive and make sense of the world. The number of recent horror movies focused on the media and its creators underscores this: *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Last Broadcast* and *Urban Legends: Final Cut* all center around filmmakers; the *Scream* series features filmmakers and broadcast journalists as central characters and sets the final installment in Hollywood; *Halloween Resurrection* revolves around a live webcast.

This suspicion that the world cannot be known outside of mediated structures provides the primary source of horror and suspense in these films, linking them closely to Nietzsche’s belief that nature has no laws of its own. Indeed, postmodern horror films seem less interested in questioning the laws of nature than the “laws” through which the genre constructs its world. *Scream* literalizes this, as a command of its world demands not so much knowledge of the laws of nature as a mastery of the laws of the slasher film; knowledge of the textual conventions of the slasher film is crucial to the characters’ survival. The film also invites the audience to mobilize its slasher rhetorical savvy, with much of the suspense in the film stemming
from watching the characters being placed in jeopardy because they failed to heed the rules, as evidenced in the prologue where Drew Barrymore is terrorized by threatening phone calls that focus on the subject of scary movies. The sequence self-consciously plays upon many genre clichés, such as Barrymore continually walking backwards into poorly lit areas that might conceal the killer. Whereas the play between light and dark in Gothic horror movies like Cat People established a certain relationship between perception and knowledge, in Scream’s prologue we are encouraged to read such plays on perception more in terms of the rhetorical conventions of the slasher genre. Concern about the known world being threatened by the unknown plays second fiddle to manipulation and subversion of how slasher movies construct both worlds. Indeed, at the level of narrative unfolding and viewer comprehension, Scream operates as textual game.

By usurping the laws of nature with the laws of the genre, postmodern horror movies reflect the media-saturated culture from which they sprang. Most of our knowledge of the world derives from what we glean from the media’s representations of the world; how we perceive and make sense of experience, then, is in significant measures controlled and conditioned by the media. The possibility that the world is actually quite different from its media representation is now a common social concern; postmodern horror taps into these fears. The media steps into the space between our sensory perceptions and the world of appearances, and the notion of the known world itself being nothing more than a rhetorical construct is presented as something quite troubling and destabilizing. One of the primal thrusts of the horror genre is, after all, the fear of losing control, of being a helpless victim. In earlier manifestations of the genre, that pertained mostly to the threat attached to loss of control over sensory perceptions or loss of control over the laws of nature. In the postmodern horror film, loss of control pertains also to the power of the media over how we perceive and make sense of the world, the power of the media to fabricate reality. As such, to become an expert in these films requires not so much knowledge of the laws of nature as textual mastery of the genre’s rules and conventions—mastery over how the genre constructs its world. To control the media is to control the world.

When Craven’s Last House on the Left opened in 1972, the poster instructed patrons to keep repeating to themselves that “it’s only a movie” if they got too scared, suggesting that the knowledge of the film as film was reassuring. By the time of Craven’s Scream, however, the notion of “it’s only a movie” is as much a source of tension as it is relief. If all perceptions are unreliable and the laws of nature little more than a fiction—or, as Nietzsche put it, “everything which is knowable is illusion”—is there a difference between reality and the movies? That this is becoming increasingly difficult to answer is, it seems, a true source of anxiety and horror.

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NOTES

2 Ibid, 65.
KNOWING THE RULES

7 Ibid., 265-66.
10 Ibid., 85.
11 Ibid., 87.
12 Ibid., 80.
17 Ibid., 82.
18 One could even argue that horror movies dealing with human monsters follow certain rhetorical patterns, given that most of us have only ever encountered serial killers and their like on a movie screen. That movie serial killers have acquired certain recognizable characteristics and have even become clichés (e.g. Hannibal Lecter) suggests that one could draw up a set of “rules” governing the behavior of serial killers in horror cinema.
19 Several earlier movies do the same for werewolves: in both The Howling (1980) and An American Werewolf in London (1981), characters turn to The Wolf Man (1940) to figure out the rules pertaining to lycanthropes. Similarly, the characters in The Return of the Living Dead (1985) rely on their recollections of Night of the Living Dead (1968) to learn how to kill the brain-eating zombies.
20 In a not dissimilar manner, when watching Van Sant’s Psycho remake we are continuously encouraged to compare the film to Hitchcock’s version of the same story, revealing Van Sant’s film to be more concerned with textual comparisons than the creation of a transparent known world. Every aspect of the film is explicitly placed in quotation marks.
21 Nietzsche, 97.
Freddy Krueger from the Nightmare on Elm Street series: rhetorical figure of evil.
(photo appears courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences)
FORTHCOMING ISSUES OF SPECTATOR

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