WHEN THE DIFFERENCE CAN'T BE TOLD:
The Subject in Contemporary
Horror and Science Fiction Film

Tassilo Schneider
Horror Politicized: The Monster in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology

Among the body of writing which the rise of theoretical interest in the popular American cinema has produced within the past two decades, the horror and science fiction genres occupy a privileged position. In the case of the horror film, arguably the most influential of those writings have been the ones by Canadian film scholar Robin Wood. Few genre critics have managed to avoid referring to Wood's "Introduction to the American Horror Film" in one way or another, and many have used it as their point of departure to formulate their own theoretical models. Wood's work on the horror genre, elaborated in the late 1970s in a collection of essays and later incorporated in his book Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan (1986), is a rather straightforward application of the Freudian concepts of repression and reaction formation to generic texts. Wood argues that, for an ideology to function, certain elements within a particular culture have to be repressed. Those elements which the dominant ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with, Wood continues, are repressed in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and disowned as the Other.¹

To this ideological challenge, according to Wood:

it is the horror film that responds in the most clear-cut and direct way, because central to it is the actual dramatization of the dual concept of the repressed/the Other, in the figure of the Monster. One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our society represses or oppresses: its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror.²

Wood further elaborates the analogy between the film viewing experience and dreams, arguing that what both situations have in common is that our consciousness is partly switched off. As a result, our "censor" sleeps and what is repressed can return, at least temporarily, to the level of conscious experience. For the film viewing audience—through its being lost in a fantasy experience—dreams, the embodiment of repressed desires, tensions and fears, become possible; for the filmmaker, these "dreams can be dealt with as apparently meaningless fantasies."³ It is on the basis of this analogy that Wood is claiming a significant subversive potential for the American genre cinema in general and the horror film in particular, vis-a-vis an ideology whose repression mechanism the films are supposedly answering to.

In the time since their introduction into the genre-theoretical discourse by Wood, both the dream-film analogy as well as the application of the notion of repression have continuously reappeared in much of the criticism written on the horror film. For Morris Dickstein, the films "excavate archaic fears...and deeply buried wishes."⁴ Bruce Kawin claims that "horror films function as nightmares for the individual viewer, as diagnostic eruptions for repressive societies"⁵ and that their audience "has decided to let its own unconscious desires find as-if expression, with the scariness of the film carrying the dream's anxiety quotient and the killing of the beast appearing to vindicate repression."⁶ What sets critics like Kawin and Dickstein apart from Wood, however, is that they stress the genre's potential for ideological reinforcement rather than subversion. Kawin, for example, claims that the films "are valuable and cathartic, for they may offer the possibility of participating in the acting-out of an unacknowledged wish or fear in a context of resolution."⁷

Indeed, Wood's theoretical propositions are vulnerable to attack at various points. One of the more obvious problems, however, is that Wood theorizes on the basis of a rather exclusive generic corpus. The different political assessment of the genre notwithstanding, what unites this psychoanalytical body of criticism is its relying on a notion of the representation of the Other or the Monster as ambivalent. Excluded from consideration remain films which present the dichotomy normality/the other in a clear-cut unambivalent manner, where the monstrous appears as completely unsympathetic—as is the
case, for example, in *Alien* (1979) and its sequel, *Aliens* (1986), or in the remakes of *The Thing* (1982) and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978). These films either cannot be accounted for by the theoretical model or end up, as in the case of Wood’s writings, theoretically stored away as the genre’s “reactionary wing” whose ideological project is to justify and reinforce repression—a rather problematic claim, (particularly in the case of the latter two texts), considering what figures in these films as the monster’s antagonist, i.e., as “normality”.

Even though Wood’s reading of horror films has been subject to criticism at several specific points of his analysis, outright rejection of his psychologically-based interpretation of the genre has been rare. One exception is an essay by Stephen Prince which tries to limit psychoanalysis’ “explanatory sweep” and replace the psychological model of analysis with what Prince calls “a social theory of the horror film” based on anthropological theory. He accuses the psychoanalytical critics of moving “rather too quickly from the individual to the social” and “collapsing the social into the psychic life of the individual.” Prince argues that

the horror film may be regarded as a visualization of the dialectic between linguistic and socially imposed systems of order and the breakdown of those systems through their own internal contradictions ... Rather than signifying the projection of repressed sexuality or some other psychological process, the monster represents those unmapped areas bordering the familiar configurations of the social world.

Prince continues, defining the horror genre as “a compulsive symbolic exchange in which members of a social order, of a class or a subgroup, nervously affirm the importance of their cultural inheritance,” and, in contrast to Wood, ascribes to it “a profoundly conserving, rather than radical, function,” arguing that
by preserving the question in its negative form, by dealing with the loss of the human, the doubts informing human identity may be for the moment exorcised, and the validity and arrangement of the established social categories may be affirmed.\textsuperscript{14}

As one might expect, this kind of analysis fails to mention any of the films that Wood and his critical epigones use as their cases in point, and while the anthropological mode of thought might hold up to an interpretation of the 1982 version of \textit{The Thing} (Prince's test case), one would seem to have a rather difficult time trying to account with it for, say, \textit{Night of the Living Dead} (1968). In other words, the ambivalence informing the conflict normality-monstrosity which is so crucial for the psychological criticism formulated by Wood, Kawin or Dickstein, can have no place in a theory which considers the texts in question to reaffirm the validity and importance of exactly this dichotomy.

What seems problematic about both the psychoanalytical and anthropological approaches is that neither ultimately comes to terms with the question of what kind of "difference" is referred to when discussing "normality" (Wood) or "established social categories" (Prince) on the one hand and the Other or the Monster on the other. While Wood's notion of repression ("in the interests of alienated labor and the patriarchal family")\textsuperscript{15} is ideologically more specific than Prince's "internal contradictions which every social order, based upon a classifying operation, must generate,"\textsuperscript{16} both writers eventually rely on evasive and problematic categories of "human identity," "human uniqueness" (Prince) or "our human-ness" (Wood).

**The Monster Sexualized: The Terror of Sexual Difference and the Horror of It Disappearance**

Stephen Neale, in his book-length study on the question of genre, has identified "the facts and the effects of difference" as the theme the horror film is "centrally concerned with."\textsuperscript{17} For Neale, the dichotomy normality/the Monster eventually functions as a displacement for the problematic of sexual difference:

The production of the definition of the monstrous always takes place within the context of the construction of definitions of masculinity and femininity...Since the category of "the human" is inscribed as a homogenous one, the construction of categories of sexual difference must inevitably tend to fracture it. The monster, of course, is never totally non-human: it is monstrous precisely because it does possess human traits. It, too, is the site of heterogeneity that threatens the homogeneity of the human. It may, therefore, potentially at least, be read as the product of a displacement of the one instance of heterogeneity on to the other.\textsuperscript{18}

Several critics associated with the American feminist film journal \textit{Camera Obscura} have
echoed Neale’s hypothesis that the human/monster conflict is really a displacement of the problematic of sexual difference and applied it to a body of films commonly grouped within the generic corpus of science fiction. Interestingly, two analyses, both informed by the same theoretical framework and both dealing with the same body of films (portraying cyborgs or androids in, among others, Blade Runner [1982] and The Terminator [1984]) arrive at strikingly different conclusions. Constance Penley makes out the science fiction genre as Hollywood’s (i.e., the dominant ideology’s) last resort to reestablish the fact of sexual difference:

It is by now well known that the narrative logic of classical film is powered by the desire to establish, by the end of the film, the nature of masculinity, the nature of femininity, and the way in which those two can be complimentary rather than antagonistic. But in film and television, as elsewhere, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell the difference...Ironically, it is science fiction film...that alone remains capable of supplying the configurations of sexual difference required by the classical cinema...In these films the question of sexual difference—a question whose answer is no longer “self-evident—is displaced onto the more remarkable difference between the human and the other.¹⁹

Janet Bergstrom, on the other hand, claims to recognize a replacement process functioning exactly the other way around:

In [the] disturbance between categories normally kept distinct (human/nonhuman), another dimension is added to the standard representation of differentiation by gender in mainstream fiction film. Where the basic fact of identity as a human is suspect and subject to transformation into its opposite, the representation of sexual identity carries a potentially heightened significance, because it can be used as the primary marker of difference in a world otherwise beyond our norms.²⁰

This body of criticism—psychoanalytic in nature but distinguished from Wood’s work by its reliance on a Lacanian rereading of Freud rather than on a straightforward application of the latter—signals an advancement over the kind of analysis introduced before. It replaces the rather ambiguous category of “the human” (which leaves intact the long-since problematized concept of an autonomous and unified subject) with a more precise and analytic terminology, but it does so at a price. In its exclusive emphasis on the classifying category of gender, it turns a blind eye on any other differentiating operation constructed in and by the generic text—such as race and, especially, class (a negligence, I would argue, which inevitably results in leaving large aspects of Blade Runner unaccounted for).

Moreover, a complete reduction of the question of subject construction (which, I will argue, lies at the center of the horror and science fiction genres—particularly in their contemporary manifestations) to the problem of sexual difference not only inevitably entails the exclusion of a number of films from the generic corpus under consideration, but also leaves many questions posed by the texts actually included in that corpus unanswered. The cases in point are the remakes of The Thing as well as Invasions of the Body Snatchers (although many of the same problems actually apply in almost equal measure to their original versions). Both films present a “monster” which is shapeless, appears in many forms at the same time or can assume different forms at different times—a monster which, in any case, has no visible identity—in fact, no identity of any perceptible kind at all. The films’ protagonists are confronted with an adversary force whose threat lies exactly in its plasticity. By means of this particular quality, the “Thing”, as well as the “Body Snatchers”, I would argue, elude the definition of the Other as a manifestation of the return of the repressed, and their significance is not grasped by the concept of
sexual differentiation. (What eludes any classifying operation conducted on the basis of perception must necessarily also elude that of gender, and it is only consequent when Neale states about his notion of the horror genre that, "whatever strategy is used to stage the monster's mode of presence, it is a rule in mainstream cinema that whenever any kind of monster is involved, it must appear visibly at some point"—exactly what neither the "Thing" nor the "Body Snatchers" ever do.)

The theorizing of "human identity" i.e., that of the subject, which is processed on the most obvious level in the films mentioned, also pertains in a significant way to those discussed by Penley and Bergstrom. Contrary to their opinion, I would argue that the narrative of Blade Runner and The Terminator (as well as—to name two other examples—Westworld (1973) or The Stepford Wives (1975)—all films dealing with the motif of human replicants of some sort), rather than "offering the reassurance of difference itself," as Penley claims, instead are playing with an increasing sense of the processes at work in the construction of that "difference" (that of "the human"). (Especially in Westworld, this sense is informed by an interesting self-reflexive look at the contributions which various forms of cultural representation—and particularly the cinema itself—are making to these processes.)

The Horror of Non-Difference: The Abjectionable Monster

In Powers of Horror, a study of horror in literature, Julia Kristeva arrives at the conclusion that

on close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject.
"Abject," the last of the qualities ascribed to identities as they are represented by the genre, is defined by Kristeva earlier on: it is "that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything," "what disturbs identity, system, order; what does not respect borders, positions, rules; the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," "a crossing over of dichotomous categories."²⁴

These qualities accurately describe the Other as it is represented in the films mentioned earlier on (Westworld, The Stepford Wives, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, The Thing, Blade Runner, The Terminator,—but also, more recently, Robocop, Hellraiser [1987], They Live [1988], Total Recall and Robocop 2 [1990]). It is, of course, above all a violation of the constituting barrier between subject and object, which is the result of the presence of a "monster" that is able to occupy any available position within that order, transgressing—and, as a consequence, rendering meaningless—any dichotomous system. When Kristeva explains how "the non-constitution of the (outside) object as such renders unstable the ego's identity, which could not be precisely established without having been differentiated from an other, from its object,"²⁵ she is indeed describing what seems to be the central concern of much of contemporary horror and science fiction cinema.

In fact, in a more recent article in Screen, Barbara Creed has attempted to apply Kristeva's notion of "abjection" to a theory of the horror film genre. Creed identifies "abjection" as "the central ideological project of the popular horror film,"²⁶ based on the perception that

the concept of a border is central to a construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the "border" is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same—to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability.²⁷

Like Prince, Creed ascribes a conservative rather than subversive function to the genre. She identifies it as a "modern defilement rite" functioning by bringing about "a confrontation with the abject … and redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human."²⁸ What renders this analysis problematic, however, is that it once again prematurely claims an increasingly diverse body of texts for a single ideological position. The claim is based on an understanding of Kristeva's concept which may in itself remain unchallenged:

Although the subject must exclude the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic.²⁹

What cannot go unchallenged, however, is the hypothesis, implicit in Creed's argument, that the contemporary horror film does, in fact, constitute, or represent, such an "activity of exclusion." On the contrary, many of the texts in question deal, if not with the impossibility, at least with the problematic quality of such an activity (or of its success). Neither The Thing nor Invasion of the Body Snatchers can legitimately be said to "redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human;" at most, these films mourn the loss of that boundary. Penley is correct about The Terminator, concluding that "while the film addresses an ultimate battle between human and machines, it nonetheless accepts the impossibility of clearly distinguishing between them."³⁰ The narrative of Blade Runner as well unambiguously states that the "replicants" fit better into established categories of "the human" than their originators. What all these films seem to have in common, then, is an expression of profound uncertainty about the question of how "other" the Other really is, and thus about the classifying operations (linguistic and social) that are so fundamental to the construction of subjectivity.
Dana Polan has observed a thematic shift in the horror genre from the 1950s to the present which strongly supports this view. About the films of the fifties, Polan says that “everything conspires to assert the Otherness of the monster—its complete and irrevocable difference...and it consequently suggests that this bar is of necessity inevitable, eternal, and unbreakable.” He notes about more recent examples of the genre that “they reject or problematize this simple binary opposition” by implying “that the very act of constituting another is ultimately a refusal to recognize something about the self.” All of the contemporary horror and science fiction films which I have mentioned in the course of this essay and which deal with the duplication of the human form fit into this second group as it is exactly the destruction of the notion that the category of “the human” (and its “difference”) is “of necessity inevitable, eternal, and unbreakable” that they are enacting.

**Horror and the Body: The Monstrous Subject**

Another characteristic observed by critics of more recent horror films contributes additional evidence to the validity of a reading which privileges a notion of the monster as problematizing the category of the human: the discourse of bodily destruction. Philip Brophy has identified the “destruction of the Body” as the “most prolific trend” in contemporary horror cinema which “tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the
fear of one’s own body, of how one controls and relates to it.” Pete Boss has noted “the contemporary horror film’s unquestionable obsession with the physical constitution and destruction of the human body.” Boss goes on to explain that “the uncompromised or privileged detail of human carnage” presented by a film like *The Thing* is functioning to depict anatomical parts as recognizable signifiers of the subject’s demonstrable physical limitations, being indicative not of a widespread interest in human physiology but of a closing-off or reduction of identity to its corporal horizons. A concern with the self as body.

If we subscribe to the psychoanalytical concepts put forward by Jaques Lacan in his observations on the “Mirror Stage,” which attach utmost importance to the role that the subject’s identification with the visual image of a unified and autonomous body plays in the construction of the self, it becomes clear what implications the representation of disaster visited at the level of the body itself must have.

This interrelation between the deconstruction of bodily integrity and the throwing into crisis of the subject has been elaborated on in a different context by Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard, in his study on the impact of a network of communication systems in a postmodern culture, describes an individual who is prey to

the absolute proximity, the total instantaneousness of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat. It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the open exposure and transparence of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.

Although I am not suggesting that we view the contemporary horror and science fiction film as an allegory of a particular socio-cultural condition, Baudrillard’s terminology seems to describe the narratives of many of the films in question more precisely than any of the methods of analysis discussed in the first half of this essay. The “Thing’s,” the “Body Snatchers’” or “Frank’s” (in *Hellraiser*) total disregard for the human body and their transgression of its physical limits/borders (the skin), the synthetic characters in *Westworld, The Stepford Wives or Total Recall*, the humanoid aliens in *They Live*, the “replicants” in *Blade Runner* and the combinations of man and machine in *The Terminator* or *Robocop* whose presence alone threatens the collapse any system of identification—they all toy with the notion and images of a breakdown in the distinction between the subject and an object-world.

It is far from the intention of this essay to displace the models of analysis which have been suggested during the past two decades in an attempt to theoretically conceptualize the notion of the “monstrous” as it figures in horror and science fiction cinema. They have yielded useful and highly fascinating insights into ideological functions of the generic system and have greatly contributed to our understanding of the particular texts in question. However, it seems to me that the time span during which these theoretical approaches were formulated and put into practice (by way of application)—the 1970s and 1980s—overlapped with a period of generic development which witnessed a proliferation of films that render the explanatory sweep of these assumptions increasingly problematic. It is in respect to these films—referred to throughout this essay—that I have tried to hint at what I perceive to be some of the problems and limitations of theoretical propositions whose applicability has been largely taken for granted and which have so far left uncharted significant areas of the generic corpus under consideration.

If it is true, as Louis Althusser claims, that the construction of the subject is the primary objective of the dominant ideology (‘all ideology has the function of ‘constituting’ concrete indi-
iduals as subjects”46) and that, in turn, ideology itself is a function of material practices (“an ideology exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices”47), the American genre cinema is undoubtedly a major player in this ideological project. American horror and science fiction films which continuously supply images and representation of “subjects”, rather than playing an active role in this endeavor—reinforcing or subverting, depending on how the particular analyst would have it—function as a symptom. The continuous processes through which the dominant ideology’s images of the “normal”, the “human,” or the “real” are created and altered, reproduced and modified, defined and redefined, have generated a textual surplus—an excess of images which has resulted in a body of generic texts that, by illustrating the mechanics (discursive, cultural, social, and ideological) at work in this construction, inadvertently expose the unstable nature of the construct.

2Wood 10.
3Wood 13.
6Kawin 10.
7Kawin 13.
8Wood 11.
10Prince 19.
11Prince 20.