

Unmasking the Devil: Comfort and Closure in Horror Film Special Features

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While a viewer or critic may choose to concentrate solely on a film's narrative as representative of what a film says, some scholars note that the inclusion of the supplementary features that often accompany the home release of a film destabilize conceptions of the text of a film through introducing new information and elements that can impact a film's reception and interpretation (Owczarski). Though some special features act as mere advertising for a film's ancillary products or for other film's or merchandise, most of these supplements provide at least some form of behind-the-scenes look into the production of the film. Craig Hight recognizes the prominent "Making of Documentary" (MOD) subgenre of special feature as being especially poised to "serve as a site for explorations of the full diversity of institutional, social, aesthetic, political, and economic factors that shape the development of cinema as a medium and an art form" (6). Additionally, special features provide the average viewer access to the magic of cinema and the Hollywood elite. The gossip or anecdotes shared in interviews and documentaries in special features provide viewers with an "insider identity," that seemingly involves them in their favorite films beyond the level of mere spectator (Klinger 68).

This phenomenon is particularly interesting in relation to horror films, the success of which is often predicated on a sense of mystery or the unknown pervading the narrative so as to draw out visceral affective responses from the audience. The notion of the special feature, which unpacks and reveals the inner workings of the film set and even the film's plot, seems contradictory to the enjoyment of what the horror film sets out to do. Just as everybody knows that there is no quicker way to ruin a joke than to explain it, it seems to follow that exploring

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the background of a film monster or villain would have the same consequence of dispelling the aura of mystery or terror that the film narrative seeks to cultivate, rendering moot the film's overall effect. Yet the horror genre in particular has nurtured an extensive culture of fans who rabidly enjoy any and all background information on a film that they can get, including information that seems to thoroughly spoil the actual experience of viewing the film (Kendrick, *Hollywood Bloodshed* 158-69). How then to reconcile this paradox?

My argument is that horror film special features specifically serve a broader function than simply providing background information about the production of a film. Instead, horror film special features fulfill a unique role in service to the genre by providing the audience comfort and closure for issues that the narrative itself may leave unanswered. In this way, horror film special features are fundamental to the genre's successful functioning. Beginning by examining various ways that the horror genre has been defined and theorized, this article proceeds to look at the development of special features and their relation to the horror genre. Finally, the article analyzes the rhetoric of the special features produced by two horror film distributors to understand how they have worked to construct the context of the film and its production to aid in the psychological and philosophical work of assuaging audience fears.

Why Horror, Indeed

Various philosophers and theorists have set out at various times to answer the question of just why audiences watch horror films. There is seemingly a paradox in the foundational characteristics of the genre: these films feature horrific imagery, gore, and unrelenting tension. None of these are things that most individuals willingly subject themselves to routinely, so why are some seemingly normal people so willing to engage with films that expose them to such sights and put them through deliberate emotional trauma? There are, of course, a wide variety of answers to this question.

Noël Carroll's seminal look at the philosophy of the horror film attributes viewer's' fascination with the genre to fear of the unknown and a fascination with mystery: "horror attracts because anomalies command attention and elicit curiosity" (195). Importantly, Carroll notes that horror's mysteries are so compelling because they are unknowable, refusing to fit into conceptual schemes that might make sense of them. Others have offered more nuanced, psychological

explanations for audience attraction to the genre. Robin Wood sees horror as an expression of surplus repression in society, so that the act of watching a horror film is a way of assuaging one's own anxiety through raising repressed elements to the level of consciousness and then settling them back down into our subconscious via the resolution of the film's narrative, where a happy ending signifies "the restoration of repression" (68). Likewise, Barbara Creed locates in the horror film a cultural obsession with abjection, such that the horror film operates as an artistic expression in which abjection is confronted symbolically and so dealt with as much as it can be via the microcosmic form of the film (1986).

What each of these perspectives have in common seems to be that they recognize that the horror film helps viewers to "deal with" something. For Carroll, the fascination of the horror story is that it helps us to confront the unknown through the unfolding of the narrative's mystery, fascinating viewers by teasing questions and answering some of them, providing some semblance of control even as the horror's fundamental unknowability prevents a total return to stability. For Wood and Creed, horror films help to put repression or abjection back in its place, to comfort viewers amidst troubling times and help them to feel as if they have dealt with something significant even if that subconscious fear is never truly able to be resolved. Looked at this way, it seems to appear that the horror narrative may be characterized as therapeutic, using things like shock and tension to alleviate fears that the audience actually has — or that they might not even know that they have. Stephen Prince summarizes many of the primary theories and paradoxes of horror films by articulating that "the anxiety at the heart of the genre is, indeed, the nature of human being [...] the experience of horror resides in this confrontation with uncertainty, with the 'unnatural,' with a violation of the ontological categories on which being and culture reside" (2). Resolving this confrontation, then, becomes a primary goal in watching horror films.

When put down in plain language, such a perspective seems to make sense, and when explained in these terms, the narratives of horror films can easily be seen to fall into these categories and to function in this way. But as any viewer of horror films knows, these academic and psychological understandings sometimes fall apart when subjected to the irrationality of the real world. Most (if not all) moviegoers likely have some story of a film that scarred them as a child or even as an adult; there are some films whose monsters, gore, and imagery have developed a reach that stretches beyond the confines of the narrative and into the real lives of viewers whether in waking life or in nightmares — or sometimes both. Though a

film's narrative may be constructed in such a way as to lay to rest the fears that it stirs up over the course of its duration, not all viewers are sure to respond to the film in this way and may leave the theater more terrified than they were during the actual film itself.

What this points to is that theories of how audiences deal with forms of psychological and cultural trauma through the horror narrative may be insufficient when placed in a real-world context. Something more may be necessary to aid viewers in dealing with the topics and images to which they have been exposed to. One candidate for fulfilling this requirement is special features. While universal across nearly every genre of film, special features function peculiarly in the horror genre, ultimately helping viewers in ways they might not even know they need.

The Making of Special Features

Though perhaps most prominent and widespread in their digital guise as supplementary content on DVDs and later Blu-Rays, "special features" have a long history in the industry. Studios in the early development of cinema were obsessed with how their stars were perceived in the public eye and would work hard to cultivate particular reputations for their stars through the careful release of publicity materials, including interviews and other materials surrounding the making of certain films (Shingler 140-2). This later evolved into the intentional capturing of behind-the-scenes footage on movie sets to show off the actual production of a film. Some of these were used in theatrical settings to advertise for upcoming films, and still others ended up being shown at odd times on television (Ravenhill).

Initially, it seems that such materials were only produced sporadically, but this changed with the introduction of home video and the development of the LaserDisc format. The format's technical advantages led to the popularity of the format for "special editions" of movies, including some, such as the Star Wars trilogy box set, released by major studios ("LaserDisc Database: Star Wars Trilogy"). Most importantly for cinephiles, the LaserDisc format was the beginning of the Criterion Collection, "the most significant archive of contemporary filmmaking available to the home viewer" ("About Criterion"). Established in 1984, the Criterion Collection was an early innovator in the home video market, recognizing that there was an audience for home editions of films that respected the art of the film through seeking to closely replicate the theatrical experience. The company has often worked alongside directors to give their films the most accurate home video

presentation possible, typically with extensive supplemental features, including “audio commentaries by filmmakers and scholars, restored director’s cuts, deleted scenes, documentaries, shooting scripts, early shorts, and storyboards” (“About Criterion”). It is also noteworthy that Criterion was responsible for pioneering the concept of the audio commentary, a feature that quickly became a mainstream component of most later home DVD releases (Kendrick, “What is the Criterion?” 128, 134).

And while the LaserDisc as a medium did not specifically catch on, many of its innovations were foundational in directing the development of the format and design of DVD’s — including the presence of supplemental special features. The overall success of DVD’s and DVD special features may in turn be connected to several external factors. Barbara Klinger argues that the presence of special features enabled studios to market special editions of their movies in such a way as to elevate them to the realm of high art, cultivating viewers to see themselves as cultured cinephiles (61, 66-8). Additionally, the rise of the DVD coincided with a time of rapid technological growth in the film industry. Although Even as DVD would not break out into wide success until the late 1990s, filmmakers were experimenting with digital technologies in filmmaking in the earlier half of the decade, with new techniques in computer generated imagery (CGI) rising to the fore with films like *Jurassic Park*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. New technologies meant new mysteries for filmgoers who were often curious to know more about the techniques that had brought such incredible imagery to life, an itch that could easily be scratched by the inclusion of special features and MOD’s dedicated to unraveling the mysteries of a new area of cinematic production (Klinger 72-3).

The democratization of the cinematic medium via DVD not only led to more individual collectors of films, but also paved the way for the rise of independent and specialty film distributors. In addition to the aforementioned Criterion Collection, a smattering of other entities entered the DVD publishing game alongside the major studios. Some of these smaller companies worked to produce or acquire a wide catalog of titles to make their name, while others narrowed their focus to specific niche markets. For some companies, the name of the game was availability of otherwise lost or forgotten titles, simply working to transfer the films to the digital medium for release. Other distributors, however, became known for the quality of their releases, going so far as to give their rather niche, relatively unknown films a treatment not unlike that of the Criterion Collection, with high quality packaging and original supplemental features.

This is particularly interesting given James Kendrick's observation that the aura of quality and authority cultivated by the releases of the Criterion Collection positioned the distributor as "a heuristic for understanding film as culture, rather than simply film as art" (126). Criterion releases, for instance, treat films as more than mere narratives, seeing them instead as providing insight into cultural ideologies and trends no matter the genre, style, or nation of origin. Kendrick elaborates:

The fact that [any film included in the Criterion Collection] was produced in a specific sociohistorical juncture and its textual and extratextual elements allows us to get under the skin of that specific time and place. If a film is important enough to be included in the Criterion Collection, that importance is related only to the extent to which that film offers us a particular viewpoint — a means of knowing something larger than the film itself. Each and every film included in the collection is a piece of culture — that is the Criterion. The culture referred to here is that of the cinema and of the world. ("What is the Criterion?" 138)

Understanding the Criterion Collection in this way begs the question of just what kind of heuristic for understanding or assessing film is offered up by other distributors. Though it includes a diverse array of films, the Criterion Collection is not inherently representative of even all cinematic cultures. For instance, fans of particular genres or niche films are often looking for a different experience of the film than some other viewers might be and seem to care about particular information aiding their appreciation of these films. I.Q. Hunter, for instance, notes that with "offbeat" or "cult" films — a term which applies to many horror films — supplemental features on home releases may be seen as aiding appreciation of the films themselves (486). Backstory to the film's production expands the pleasure horror and cult film fans get from the film, and in some cases can ultimately have more value than the film text itself (488).

Of note is that the horror genre has had a long and more detailed relationship with the idea of special features than many other film genres. A notable milestone is the rise and popularity of the magazine *Fangoria*, first published in 1979. The magazine was known for its in-depth interviews with horror directors, stars, and even makeup artists, with a particular emphasis on the splattered gore of 1980s slasher films. Kendrick argues that these interviews and the accompanying pictorial spreads were fundamental in establishing a culture in horror fandom that treated makeup and effects artists as auteurs in their own right (Kendrick, Hollywood

Bloodshed 159-69), and which showcased the value that horror fans had for special features, a value that transitioned naturally to visual media through LaserDiscs and, later, DVDs.

Unmasking the Devil: Anchor Bay Entertainment and Blue Underground

To explore the prominent place of special features in the history of horror and the functions that such features perform, I examine the rhetoric of special features surrounding horror films released by two home video distributors specializing in horror films: Anchor Bay Entertainment and Blue Underground. I specifically focus on the strategies employed to situate these films within the discourse of horror to show how such discussions philosophically fit into academic dialogue surrounding the genre through reducing audience uncertainty to assuage psychological and cultural fears.

From its founding in 1995 to its closure in 2017, Anchor Bay Entertainment was markedly diverse in terms of the titles it distributed, and the partnerships it had with major studios. While eventually moving into the distribution of mainstream titles like *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) and *Django Unchained* (2012), the label got its start by focusing primarily on horror films, with a particular deference towards cult horror and franchises like *Halloween* (1978) and *Hellraiser* (1987). Though building their reputation on films that many may consider to be disreputable, the company in time became known for its “custom handling” of each and every one of its products, from “auteur pics to fitness videos” (Ault 111).

Blue Underground brands itself as “the entertainment company dedicated to guilty pleasures for adventurous movie lovers” (About Blue Underground). The company’s description of itself goes on to emphasize that the films it releases are those likely to appeal to a niche audience, those lured as much by the “reputation of an obscure director, the talents of a notorious star or even the promises made by an amazing poster” as the “psychopaths, cops, robbers, zombies, cannibals, madmen, strange women, and more” who fill such films (About Blue Underground). Unlike Anchor Bay, Blue Underground has elected to remain entrenched in the cult, specializing in making available notorious and obscure of films in editions that are as definitive as possible given the nature of their releases: “These will be definitive discs of some remarkable films, all fully restored, remastered and packed with the most mind-blowing extras in the business” (About

Blue Underground). The films themselves may be a major component of the initial draw to one of the distributor's products, but the special features may be just as intriguing, if not actually the primary interest of some viewers.

Interestingly, with such a statement Blue Underground positions themselves as the equivalent of the Criterion Collection for important cult and trash films that the more respected label would be unlikely to include in their catalog. For Anchor Bay, in contrast, given the newness of the DVD medium at the time of their founding (relative to the history of cinema) and the type of small-budget, seemingly inconsequential films that they were releasing, it is notable that the distributor would work to include any supplemental features at all in their early releases.

For the purposes of this article, I focus on some specific horror releases from each company which demonstrate the common themes and elements that comprise the special features accompanying such releases. From Anchor Bay, this analysis specifically looks to early DVD releases of *The Wicker Man* (1973/2006), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977/2003), *Halloween* (1978/2007), *Hellraiser* (1987/2000), *The Evil Dead* (1983/2002), and a later Blu-Ray release of *Children of the Corn* (1984/2009). Blue Underground is represented here by *Suspiria* (1977/2007), *Opera* (1987/2007), *The Crazies* (1973/2010), and *Zombie* (1980/2011). There is a notably continuity between the format of the features produced between these two companies, which naturally lends itself to a thematic and rhetorical analysis. The common ideas addressed in supplements for both companies reveal specific shared concerns centering around the genre of horror, the producers of horror, the fans of horror, and finally the films themselves.

Across the two distributors, most of the featurettes share a standard format, beginning with opening credits identifying the distributor and the production company responsible for making the feature. These featurettes almost all focus on extended interview segments with cast and crew interspersed with footage from the respective films. "Long interview segments" here means that in most instances interviews with multiple participants are not typically intercut with one another to provide a more comprehensive understanding of one particular topic; instead, each interview participant is focused on individually, providing an extended look into their perspective before moving on to someone else (e.g. *Zombie*'s "All in the Family"), though there are deviations from this formula in some longer form featurettes (e.g. *Zombie*'s "Zombie Wasteland").

In this way, these features may be looked at more as parts of an oral history of the making of the film than an all-inclusive look into its creation. The form of these

small documentaries supports such a claim in that most of the non-interview footage shown in them is from the film they are talking about, hardly ever including any behind-the-scenes footage, with only a rare photographic glimpse into the production. This has the consequence of elevating the status of the memories of making these movies above any kind of archival or documentary evidence. That this is so may not be particularly surprising — given that the films under discussion were low-budget productions to begin with (a fact many interview participants acknowledge), it is likely that no behind-the-scenes footage or photographs were shot in the first place, necessitating a concentration on the reminiscences of prominent cast and crew members.

The content of these interviews revolves around several standard themes. First is the origin point of the film and people's involvement in the projects, establishing a timeline and narrative for the film's development: for instance, *Children of the Corn* producer Donald Borches talks about his appointment as the vice president of a production house and his love of Stephen King; director Fritz Kiersch elaborates on how Borches brought him into the fold of the production, and star Linda Hamilton then discusses what considerations drew her to the project and how and why she was cast (Felsher, *Stephen King on a Shoestring*; Martin, *Harvesting Horror*; Felsher, *It Was the Eighties!*). Likewise, interviews with the cast and crew of *Zombie* paint a comprehensive picture of the state of the Italian film industry at the time of the film's production and, illuminates how each star was recruited into the picture, and what each crew member or technician brought to the table (*Zombie Wasteland*; *Deadtime Stories*; *World of the Dead*; *Zombi Italiano*). *Suspiria* co-writer Daria Nicolodi pinpoints the beginnings of that film with director Argento's boredom with the thriller genre and a desire to transition into the horror genre. Nicolodi notes that "I had this story ready which I thought fell between a thriller, a detective story and the 'fantastique.' So, we thought, 'Why not go for it'" (Hertz). Argento himself notes that the film's style emerged from travels taken for other film projects, which took him through the "European Capitals of Magic" associated with academies founded by the purported Satanist Rudolf Steiner (*Suspiria 25th Anniversary*, 2001). Such stories ground these film texts in the larger narrative of the economics and machinations of their respective national systems of film production. Even though these horror films are smaller and independent, the notion of setting up a production company or doing preproduction or casting is still a foreign process to the average viewer, such that even discussing such terms

provides these independent films with an aura of legitimacy as products of Hollywood or some other foreign cinematic entity.

Second, the working relationships between prominent cast and crew members are given some attention, with smaller nods to other members of the production team and (in the case of *Children of the Corn*) the communities in which the shoots were occurring. Most often these discussions center around the enjoyable nature of the production, such as when actress Ashley Laurence, who played Kirsty in *Hellraiser*, notes the connection that she felt between herself and the director, Clive Barker, which gave her creative freedom in her role (Levatino and Mendoza). Likewise, *Halloween*'s Jamie Lee Curtis praises the production of that film as a whole:

I wear my Halloween pin with great pride. [...] I always say that it was the best experience I ever had, up until *True Lies* it was the best part I ever had. [...] I always try to point out the irony that in these exploitation movies I was intelligent, forthright, fought back against adversity, and was the lead in these movies for that role. (Cerulli)

Other times actors or even crew members rather plainly discuss their dislike of certain other members of the production, such as when *Zombie* star Ian McCulloch rather frankly calls out director Lucio Fulci for misogynistic and abusive practices, while also condescendingly commenting on the sex, drugs, and rock and roll attitude of the set as a whole (*Zombie Wasteland*). Additional comments are typically made about the difficulties associated with making these films, including working around budget limitations and tough schedules. Participants in interviews for the MOD *The Wicker Man Enigma* spend a significant amount of time decrying the film's recutting by the studio and the shoddy effect this had on distribution. Actor Edward Woodward notes that the studio "fiddled about with it like mad and took it out of the director's hands," which was "sort of a kick in the teeth to everybody, really" (Gregory, *The Wicker Man Enigma*). Eventually, the film's cult success is what brings these issues into a kind of perspective that helped to make the film the unique experience that it was. Screenwriter Anthony Shaffer notes that

Business, as you know, are mostly run by zombies who are overpaid and are so timid that all they can do is reproduce something that's already been done a billion times, and so we were very fortunate that this picture, which had not been done a billion times — had only been done once — succeeded. (Gregory, *The Wicker Man Enigma*)

Star Christopher Lee concurs, stating, that “I have said over the years that I think it’s probably the best film I’ve ever been in,” which is emblematic of a tinge of nostalgia that seems present throughout the special features of these different films, even when recalling difficult moments and circumstances. Though most participants are happy to have moved on from these low-budget horror films, they still recall the experience of making them with fondness, if only for how these films opened doors and pushed careers in new directions.

Third, these special features give extended consideration to some of the more prominent or even infamous moments of gore and violence in these films. Features included in Blue Underground’s release of *Zombie* here serves as a helpful example. Stuntman Ottaviano Dell’Acqua is celebrated for his role as the iconic “zombie with worms in his eyes” in that film and provides details regarding what it was like to be buried up to his neck at times for different takes, and some of the hilarious and disgusting consequences of working with real worms that he could not always see crawling on his makeup (*Zombie Wasteland*). Another major moment that gets a fair amount of screen time is a rather shocking moment early in the film when an actress’s eye is impaled on the splinters of a doorframe in a nearly unbearable close-up shot; the cinematographer and make-up effects designer both discuss how this was done through the use of multiple cameras for quick-cut editing to hide mistakes, and a hastily-compiled model of an eye made with clay, latex, and egg whites (*Zombi Italiano*).

Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, consideration of a film’s reputation and legacy is given in the case of each film looked at here. Linda Hamilton finds it incredible that people are still talking about *Children of the Corn* after all these years, and even notes her surprise at having been asked to give an interview about a film from so early in her career (Felsher, *It Was the Eighties!*). Such comments are not uncommon in these types of features. Dee Wallace from *The Hills Have Eyes* mentions that what the film meant to her was “a big break,” and her costar Susan Lanier later remarks that the film only “got a better response as the years went on and it became a cult, somewhat, classic” (Martin, *Looking Back at “The Hills Have Eyes”*). Film director Bill Condon notes that there are only a few films that touch you each decade, and he puts *Hellraiser* alongside Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* as one of the defining films of the 1980s (Levatino and Mendoza). The cast of *Zombie* are interviewed for the DVD mostly in conjunction with their participation in a horror convention in Ohio, and many express that they had some initial hesitations in coming but were surprised and warmly welcomed by

the fans; some even express shock that anyone still knew about these films, or cared about them (*Zombie Wasteland*). While not explicitly focusing on her role in George A. Romero's *The Crazies*, actress Lynn Lowry is asked in her interview to reflect on a career spent in cult and exploitation films, and notes her surprise that such films are now considered "classics" when she and many other actresses and filmmakers were wondering at the time whether they should even be making them (Gregory, *The Cult Film Legacy of Lynn Lowry*). Jessica Harper's reflection on *Suspiria* attributes its longevity to its importance as "a very unique and high quality film [...] that a lot of filmmakers have been influenced by over the past 20 years," leading her to also determine that "I think it'll be with us for a long time" (Hertz). Reflections such as these emphasized the renewed interest that is being shown in older, cult films, as well as surprise at the level of care and attention afforded such films by the community of fans perpetuating their legacy. Though such comments on the part of cast and crew members can be seen as inflating a sense of self-importance surrounding a film text, more often they come across as humbly surprised at their legacy, prompting speculation relating to what has given these films such longevity.

Collectively, these four primary themes of the special features from Anchor Bay and Blue Underground — the history of the film's production, cast and crew relationships, gore, and a film's legacy — work to argue for each of these films as an artifact of a particular time and place in culture and history. The difference between what is done here and what is aimed at with features from the Criterion Collection is subtle but important. Films chosen for inclusion in the Criterion Collection are picked for their iconic, special status, oftentimes being considered illustrative and indicative of the film culture or trends of a particular time and place, director, or genre. The focus is on contextualizing these films as objects that are representative of specific cultural or historical trends. The emphasis in the catalogs of distributors like Anchor Bay and Blue Underground, however, are far more insular, considering the films themselves with little consideration of their place in history, or how cultural trends led to their production. Instead, these films are positioned simply as artifacts of the cultural and historical trends that Criterion releases and features illuminate in detail. If *Night of the Living Dead* is held up by the Criterion Collection as a "claustrophobic vision of a late-1960s America literally tearing itself apart," then Blue Underground's release of *The Crazies* provides viewers with simply another opportunity to see what kind of art that cultural climate produced ("Night of the Living Dead").

While acknowledging that such films are never created in a vacuum, none of the features for releases by Anchor Bay or Blue Underground ever look to distinguish their subjects as high art or significant pieces of cultural capital, but rather showcase them for being exactly what they are: horror films that are considered cult or kitsch yet cherished by many fans. These documentaries position producers and actors as industrial producers knowingly involved in the creation of products intended to be consumed and enjoyed by audiences. The horror genre itself is sometimes given intellectual reflection, but is more often spoken of in affective terms, with filmmakers and actors speaking extensively about the fear they hoped audiences would have, or the translation of the intense experience of making the film to the tension of the final product.

It is clear that the approaches taken to special features in general by the Criterion Collection and Anchor Bay and Blue Underground are fundamentally different. Important for this study, however, is that these features are specifically related to horror films. In this article's final section, I return to considerations of the definition and purpose of the genre to illustrate how even though these distinct kinds of special features differ in their execution and depiction of culture and history, both are necessary in supplying — for good or for ill — the psychological comfort that audiences need in the real-life aftermath of the horror film experience.

Restoring the Repressed

Special features are by no means a popular component of movie-watching for most audiences. They are a niche product, designed, as Barbara Klinger has pointed out, for the specialist consumer, a distinction that has only increased as home media has matured and subsequently declined with the advent of online distribution platforms. In the era of Netflix, RedBox, and shrinking DVD and Blu-Ray sales, it seems that special features may become a product of a bygone era, reserved for specialty releases or, in many cases, simply not produced at all (Singer; Stamm). Given that watching special features is predicated on having already purchased a disc, studios are turning their attention to the production of materials more explicitly dedicated to marketing films prior to release, something that has become easier and easier with the distribution mechanisms of the internet. For some, the death of the special feature may go by unnoticed; for others, the decline of such a readily available archive of production details is a huge loss to film history. Such a loss would also be of particular interest to horror fans and scholars, who have a long fascination

with background details and the making of notable films within the genre. Worth considering, then, is what reduced exposure or availability of such features does to the genre by examining their function in relation to the theories that have already been explored regarding horror's cultural and psychological functions.

Noël Carroll's consideration of the horror film as fundamentally a mystery provides a useful starting point. Horror films, he argues, are predicated on the fear and fascination that we as viewers have with the unknown. The most obvious way in which any film's special features alter the experience of a film is through the revelation of the artifice of the constructed narrative. Behind the scenes footage can showcase the complexity involved in making even "simple" shots look or work right in a film, and interviews with cast members in particular force viewers to recontextualize the actor in relation to their character within a given film. Horror special features directly dispel the horror of a particular film or scene through depicting the making of the moment, showing that there is nothing to be scared of because none of it is real.

This was, in fact, the justification that *Fangoria* editor Bob Martin offered for the magazine's publication of graphic images:

Our pictures, however grisly, are accompanied by articles that stress the men behind the scenes — screenwriters who conceive the horrors, the makeup men who produce the illusion, and the directors whose job is to convince us — just for a moment — that the illusion is real. Our message is that even the most terrifying film is only color, light and sound. (quoted in Kendrick 163)

James Kendrick notes that this tendency to reduce the significance or impact of screen violence and gore resulted in *Fangoria* adopting a lighthearted, "jokey" tone in their reporting and captioning of gory photos. Thus, Kendrick argues, "*Fangoria* strove to disassociate the affect of horror film violence from the kind of psychological, mythical, or social work attributed to it by film scholars like Carol J. Clover and Robin Wood. [...] [These photos] were actually performing the conservative function of downplaying any social significance of horror violence by focusing on the 'magic' of its production and insisting that it's all just 'good fun'" (Kendrick, *Hollywood Bloodshed* 164-5). In considering the relationship between the horror film text and the real world, such photos and the eventual special features accompanying home video releases of horror films also performing this conservative function, but not entirely in opposition to the psychological work suggested by Clover, Wood, or Creed. Instead, special features and revelatory

information, both serious and humorous, are actually a significant part of putting the repressed and abject back in their place in a way that the horror narrative alone cannot.

Wood's understanding of the horror film as relating to societal surplus repression is perhaps the clearest illustration of this concept. In *The American Nightmare*, Wood argues that the basic structure of the horror film is normality threatened by the monster, with the monster being considered Other and so threatening. These Others signify the return of repressed elements or ideas that characterize a certain society, so the hero's battle against the Other and the ostensible happy ending function to return the repressed to its accepted cultural state of oppression (Wood 68). This explanation is conceptually sound and may be seen demonstrated in a number of ways in various films, but also ignores at least two typical features of the horror film. First is the tendency of many films to lean towards an ambiguous ending that thus thwarts attempts to reinstate oppression (*Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*). Second, Wood's explanation rests entirely on the symbols and structure of a film's narrative while ignoring the audience's affective reactions. As argued previously, horror films do not merely exist on the screen, but also often follow viewers home through images and ideas that leave significant marks on people's minds. As long as this is true, the repressed has not been entirely dealt with.

A similar claim may be made of the abject, à la Creed. Abjection is the notion that there are things which are in total opposition to the way that we have ordered and defined our lives in polite or even popular culture. Things like corpses, disrespect for the law, or monstrous maternal figures make viewers uncomfortable in that they are aspects of life and society that are seemingly omnipresent, never able to be gotten rid of. Though we can confront the abject and its symbolic constructs, we can never be fully cleansed of our struggle to understand and reconcile the abject with the fact that it effectively exists within us, unable to be separated from ourselves at some fundamental level (Creed). The same problems that exist with Wood's psychological understanding of horror exists here: ambiguity in narrative may bring the abject back to the fore, as can the lingering images and affective reactions viewers may have had to a particular film.

Much like Carroll's argument for the horror film to be defined by mystery and the presence of a monster, my argument for the role of special features in horror films is rather simple. Because special features offer explicit explanations for the events that occur in a film, and often give new perspectives on images that may

have been considered to be particularly haunting or shocking, these special features are the actual mechanism by which the abject is (by definition temporarily) laid to rest, and the repressed returned to its oppressed state. There are surely some who are not truly afraid of the things that they witness in horror films, for whom the narratives themselves complete the necessary cycle of raising the viewer's levels of fear or anxiety and then returning them to a level of stasis or stability. For others, however, an extratextual understanding of the film may be necessary to remind them — as in the tagline for *The Last House on the Left* — “It's only a movie, only a movie, only a movie” (Craven).

I have already articulated that the Criterion Collection and specialty distributors like Anchor Bay and Blue Underground offer two distinct approaches to this therapeutic practice, but ultimately both have the effect of reducing the uncertainty that the horror film introduces to audiences, both in terms of plot and the relationship between the film and the viewer's real life. With this in mind, though, it is worth asking whether one of these approaches is better than the other. Ultimately, I think not. Both supply viewers with significant and helpful extratextual information that can significantly reduce uncertainty and strain in the relationship between the film, the viewer, and reality. No matter which way these special features assuage fear and provide comfort, they are effectively and importantly fulfilling their function of returning the repressed to its oppressed state, and temporarily abating our objections to the abject. Whether or not this is a good thing is debatable — but I do believe this phenomenon is occurring nonetheless, and as such special features in horror may be seen as a fundamental part of the process of psychologically unpacking and dealing with cultural insecurities as expressed via the horror film.

One final question remains: if horror special features disappear alongside most other special features, what happens to this mechanism of comfort? Some may in fact see the ostensible death of special features as a good thing, as it would force viewers to remain uncertain and insecure, with no chance of calming down or fully understanding their fears. Interestingly, another perspective may be found in the contemporary horror film's “incessant desire to explain” (Kendrick 251; emphasis in original). Kendrick goes on to note that, “While many horror films of the '70s and '80s were content with ambiguity and mystery, especially as it pertained to their depictions of monstrosity and evil, post-9/11 horror, despite its despair and sometimes outright nihilism, is frequently consumed with showing us how and why” (251). Connecting this to our culture's desire to know more about the

terrorists following the attacks perpetrated on September 11th, Kendrick's argument suggests that modern horror actually tends to assuage uncertainty within the details of the narrative, not merely in the narrative's overall form as suggested by Wood. What this suggests for my argument here is that the burden of assuaging uncertainty that special features may have previously shouldered has been consequently shifted off of the extratextual material and onto the texts themselves.

Though pure theories relating to horror films may hold a significant and essential place for ambiguity, it seems that in everyday life such uncertainty is, in many instances, untenable. As such, the various ways that horror film special features present and explain horror may be seen as an essential final step in the process of reducing uncertainty, re-oppressing the repressed, and tamping down our objections to the abject, ultimately enabling audiences to receive comfort and achieve closure.

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