Horror Films Almost Dare You to Come and Watch Them. An Interview With Kendall Phillips

HANEEN S. GHABRA

About Kendall Phillips

Kendall Phillips is a Professor at the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University. His research and teaching interests include rhetorical theory, criticism, advocacy, monstrosity, controversy, dissent, and public memory. He is the author of *Projected Fears. Horror Films and American Culture, Dark Directions. Romero, Craven, Carpenter, The Modern Horror Film, A Place of Darkness and The Rhetoric of Horror in Early American Cinema*. He is also the editor of *Framing Public Memory*. Phillips has been awarded the Judith Greenberg Seinfeld Distinguished Faculty Fellowship (2009), the University Teacher/Scholar of the Year Award (2008), and the Excellence in Graduate Education Award (2005).

GHABRA. How do you understand the relationship between horror and monstrosity?

PHILLIPS. I would say that the two concepts share a great deal of historical and conceptual ground. Our early conceptions of horror, in terms of folklore and mythology, often seemed wrapped up in supernatural entities. Similarly, some of the most prominent definitions of horror rely on the notion of a monster as in Noël Carroll's famous definition. But, in spite of the overlap, I do think it is important to keep the concepts distinct.

I think of horror as a kind of narrative and affective framework. I have always found it interesting that horror is one of the only genres that takes its name from the feeling we are intended to experience. As others have noted, the horror genre is remarkably elastic. You can have horror films set in the old west, in the future, in urban centers, in rural areas, etc. Horror stories are often based on some

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2 & 3
Copyright © 2018

monstrous entity – sometimes supernaturally monstrous but sometimes the monstrosity is based more in actions or character. But, horror does not necessarily have to have particular monstrous entity. Consider *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or the earlier Australian film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). In both those films, we never really know the cause of the mysterious happenings so there is never an identifiable monster. But, both films successfully craft an atmosphere of dread and evoke a sense of anxiety and fear.

Monsters, of course, are often used in horror narratives as the source of fear. But even here, I think it is important to recognize the often complicated position monsters occupy. While there are certainly numerous films that portray the monster as simply monstrous and something to be feared, many of the most prominent horror narratives craft a much more complicated monster. Think about the seductive nature of Count Dracula in many of the filmic depictions of the vampire. We fear Dracula but also admire his freedom and, perhaps, desire his forbidden kiss. Or, the sympathetic feelings evoked by Anthony Perkins performance in *Psycho* (1960). By the end of the narrative we learn that Norman is the monster but even in those final scenes I think we maintain a level of sympathy for him as a deeply wounded individual.

So, while they are deeply interrelated, I think it is useful to maintain a distinction. Horror does not always use a specific monster to provoke fear and by the same token monsters are not always just entities to be feared. Each narrative of horror and each appearance of the monstrous deserves its own careful reading.

GHABRA. For centuries now, the horror industry, has been able to do two things: Reflect the anxiety of the American public and reveal ideological biases at certain historical junctures. As hegemonic structures are reflected through monsters, it becomes of great necessity to deconstruct and dismantle these assemblages through the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and so forth. Critically studying the horror industry, not only informs us of these anxiety-ridden ideological and historical junctures, but in turn assists the critical thinker in applying these skills to other forms of rhetoric and media. As someone that has been unpacking the histories of horror in the field of rhetorical theory and criticism, I want to start off with first asking you how we can situate horror within both rhetoric and cultural studies?

PHILLIPS. For me, rhetoric and cultural studies are so deeply interrelated that I'm not always sure where one begins and the other ends. I think of films as, first and foremost, an invitation to a complex set of experiences. I borrow this sentiment from the work of Tom Benson and Carolyn Anderson and I think I've quoted or paraphrased this idea in almost every film related piece I've published. Rhetorical studies has helped me learn to focus on these textual invitations and think deeply about the way a particular text draws an audience towards particular meanings, feeling, reactions. What I would add to this idea is that the way elements of a film invite audiences to share an experience is always situated within broader contexts of history, culture, etc. This is where much of the scholarship described as cultural studies, or critical theory, becomes most useful. Cultural studies helps me understand the cultural context and the ways that ideologies, patterns of meaning, and relations of power help to situate our experience of a film.

If you'll forgive an autobiographical note, my first interest related to film was actually in controversial films. I was initially fascinated by the kind of powerful public reactions that occurred in relation to films that seemed to violate some set of cultural norms or standards. I spent a good deal of time tracing the history of controversial films and examining how people reacted to them, the kinds of arguments they made in condemning and supporting controversial films. It was during this research project that I began to notice how often horror films were promoted as being controversial, even when the particular horror film was not especially provocative. I came to realize that horror was one of the only genres to actively promise to shock and offend audiences. Horror films almost dare you to come and watch them. That was a fascinating rhetorical stance and so I found myself increasingly interested in the genre both in terms of its broad appeal and in terms of the kind of cultural work being done by these films.

In analyzing these kinds of films, I draw heavily on various of bodies of literature. film studies, Gothic studies, feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, etc. Each of these bodies of literature has a valuable perspective on notions of horror and monstrosity. What rhetoric brings to the table, at least in my mind, is a deep investment in the way a given horrific text emerges within a particular context. Rhetoric provides a useful point of view for thinking about this relationship between text and context and recognizing the complex interplay between the two.

GHABRA. In your book, *Dark Directions,* you write about how monsters symbolize deep fractures that are emerging in the American way of life. For example, you write that the features and anxieties of the 1950s was a fear of invasion, while in the 1930s and 1940s it was a threat from within. Can you talk about these fractures and how they have changed over time?

PHILLIPS. I've been thinking a lot about this issue lately. In a more recent essay, I argued that we might think of some popular culture texts as circulating around what I called "affective seams." These are points of disjuncture and rupture within the broader culture that encompass not only symbolic and political meaning but also sentiments and feelings; hence, "affective seams." Some texts of popular culture seem to work to stitch together these points of fracture while others seem to work to represent the fractures or allegorize them. Many horror films seem to me to operate differently. They work to unstitch these ideological and affective seams and to invite us to consider the fracture itself.

I find it interesting that many horror films seem to involve a specific moment of cinematic fracture, often as the monster is revealed. Consider that stunning moment in *Frankenstein* (1931) when the Creature's face is first seen. The Creature walks backward through the doorway and then slowly turns. As he turns the camera makes two awkward jump cuts forward towards the grotesque face. For an instant the Creature's face and lifeless eyes fill the screen. It is an odd moment in which the camera suddenly leaps to life, violating the classical dictum that the camera remain largely invisible and serve only to give us a view of the action. For me, this is a wonderful example of the cinematic fracture within the film that also connects to the violation such a scene would have been for the audience.

Much of my work has been to try to connect the ideological and affective fractures with the cinematic fractures and to inquire as to the kind of cultural work this connection performs. I have tried to understand how the cinematic fractures within horror films resonate with the broader fractures occurring within the culture and considering how these resonances invite audiences to a particular set of experiences.

GHABRA. What about actual horror figures, like the zombie or the alien? How do they represent differences from one another through the interstices of race,

gender, class and so forth? For example, what are some of the psychological, sociological and ideological dimensions behind each figure?

PHILLIPS. For me, the key is historical context. In my mind the vampire or zombie may represent horrific otherness but the way they represent and the cultural significance of these representations differs depending on the context within which they emerge. For example, the vampire consistently represents a sense of chaos and this often entails a sexual element. The drinking of blood suggests a kind of libidinous consumption and the mixing of blood a biological connection. But, when Bela Lugosi played *Dracula* in 1931, this mixing of blood was probably viewed in relation to eugenics and, at least in my reading, an anti-Semitic anxiety over immigrants from eastern Europe. Fast-forward to the 1990s and the AIDS epidemic and the mixing of blood and its relation to sexuality takes on a very different significance. So, in a film like *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) you still have the connection between sexuality and biological but its meaning has shifted in relation to queer sexuality and the broader issues of a public health crisis largely being ignored by the governments of the world.

I think a good example of this is in the late George Romero's brilliant "Living Dead" films. Zombies lie at the center of each of these films but their rhetorical function differs. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) should be understood in relation to racial and political tensions of the late 1960s where the zombies seem to stand in for a nation in conflict with itself. Fast forward to 2005 and *Land of the Dead* is, in my mind at least, a brilliant response to September 11th. The zombies are now cast in a much wider, global context and even presented as sympathetic victims of the imperialist tendencies of the surviving humans.

GHABRA. You have a new book coming out soon titled, *A Place of Darkness. The Rhetoric of Horror in Early Cinema*, and I was particularly fascinated by your idea of the language around horror. You state that within language, the genre of horror came into existence. Why were there no discursive frames for horrific elements prior to the existence of language and is this a way of silencing the discursive?

PHILLIPS. This project arose out of a question I had been ignoring for almost a decade. If the term "horror film" did not emerge into public parlance until 1931, what were all the films that used horrific images prior to 1931. So the genesis of

the project was mainly about the discourse – what language did people use to talk about Edison's version of *Frankenstein* in 1910 or even Méliès *La Manoir du Diable* in 1896. What I found, however, was much more interesting. In America at least, there seemed to be a concerted effort to constrain and discipline the depictions of the horrific, supernatural, and monstrous. From about 1912, American filmmakers crafted what I have labeled the "American uncanny." In this cinematic frame, what appears to be supernatural or monstrous is almost always a hoax or mistake. So, think of the classic *Scooby Doo* cartoons in which the monster was always unmasked and revealed to be some local swindler. The framing of the supernatural and horrific as always a hoax helped inculcate a particular Western, progressive, and pragmatic viewing perspective. Reinforcing this perspective was the way these films depicted characters who were fooled into actually being frightened by the fake monster or ghost. These were almost always women, people of color, or foreigners. So, the framework reinforced a sense of American exceptionalism, American men were not credulous enough to fall for superstitious nonsense. This framework lasted, more or less, until 1931 when the horror film emerged with *Dracula* and *Frankenstein.*

Of course, with the emergence of the horror genre, filmmakers were freer to engage in depictions of the horrific and monstrous. But, it is also worth noting that the language of horror and the idea of it as being a formal genre of film also constitutes a kind of disciplining; a containing of the horrific and monstrous within a particular set of cultural expectations.

GHABRA. You also state in your book, that you are not only interested in the rhetorical dimensions surrounding films, but also the discourses surrounding audience reception and promotion of films. Can you speak more to this?

PHILLIPS. I think this question really gets at the heart of this new book project. Prior to the emergence of a stable language of horror, the films that engaged with the horrific were less clearly defined. Of course, audiences, critics, and producers talked about these films but the language was much less predetermined. There was almost a kind of search for the right way to talk about films that depicted the horrific and also how to justify them. For me, the archives of film producers and of audience and critical responses provide a rich resource of the struggles to find the right language to frame horrific films.

From a methodological perspective, I also think that these discourses are useful in understanding the context in which films initially circulated and avoiding the potential of anachronistically projecting our perspective onto films from the past.

GHABRA. Where do you see horror studies or the industry in general heading in the next few years, especially now with a change in the political climate? How do you see the industry revealing from within, but also from without, for example the Middle East or other regions?

PHILLIPS. This is the million-dollar question and if I could really answer it, I'd be living in Hollywood and making lots of money! But, on a serious note, I do think that horror, as with all genres, is moving in an increasingly transnational and global direction. We've seen this happening most dramatically in the big-budget action films where there is more and more pressure to appeal to a global audience. Horror, like drama, is not always so amenable to transcultural translations. I mean, a giant robot attacking a city is more or less universal. But ghosts have very particular cultural significance. But, even with this cultural limitation, we are seeing more and more movement of horror across national and cultural lines. There seems to be a new generation of filmmakers who are pushing traditional national and cultural boundaries. So foreign directors like Ana Lily Amirpour, Alexandre Aja, Guillermo del Toro, Andrés Muschietti, and James Wan have produced some of the most impressive horror films of the past decade. I suspect this trend will continue as the global media culture gives us more and more common grounds for thinking about fear, monstrosity, and horror.

GHABRA. What do see as the new directions that we need to take in our scholarly approaches to horror and monstrosity?

PHILLIPS. Well, I really love the growth in transnational and postcolonial readings of the genre. I am also learning much from the incredible queer theorists who are interrogating notions of monstrosity in various media texts. I think the great thing about horror studies is that there are endless fascinating intersections with other theoretical perspectives. I've found the work on eco-horror to be really provocative and look forward to seeing more integration of posthuman theory and object-oriented ontology into horror studies.

For me, the next area is to focus more on affect theory. I'm interested in the ways that horror films resonate not only with the issues of cultural anxiety but also with the frameworks of feeling. So, at the moment, I'm trying to puzzle through the way that horror films craft structures of sentiment that resonate with the broader cultural moments in which they exist. I'm not sure whether this will be a useful direction for anyone, but it will keep me busy for a while.