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Introduction – ‘I Have to Return Some Videotapes’: The Long 1980s and Horror Culture

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Abstract

This introduction to the special issue on 1980s Horror Culture examines the influence of technology, fan cultures, repeat viewing and nostalgia for the 1980s in twenty-first century popular culture. Furthermore, it introduces the featured articles as challenging conventional readings of the ‘known’ 1980s to re-evaluate, reorientate, and advance new understandings about this rich and complex ‘long decade’ in contemporary Horror studies.

Keywords: ‘Long 1980s’, Cultural Decades, Horror Culture, Nostalgia, video.

We have, in many ways, been living in the digital and consumer afterlife of a ‘long 1980s’ for some time. This special issue concerns the rich thread of horror history that emerged from the 1980s and continues to inform horror studies today. Aptly described by historian Philip Jenkins as the ‘decade of nightmares’ (2008), the 1980s endures in the popular imagination due to its profound contribution to horror culture. The contradictions of the 1980s – the economic boom in the UK and the USA, the abject cost of neoliberal ideology, the amplification of economic inequality, the backlash against second-wave feminism, the iconic (and occasionally terrible) fashion, the explosion in video game and home entertainment, and the culture wars - all lie at the heart of its undead persistence. Recent studies on the 1980s by critics including David Sirota (2011) and Thomas Fahy (2019) critique the decade’s clichéd glossy projections and probe its nasty consumerist impulses, unearthing deep socio-cultural uncertainties beyond its image of rampant consumerism alone.

The 1980s introduced new modes of communication, including the expansion of VHS culture and, with it, an influx of new commercial appreciation for horror texts. Horror scholars and critics today are deeply indebted to the video store as a curated space and marketplace in attaining their generic fluency, as well as benefitting from a wide distribution of titles that may have otherwise been forgotten or consigned to mere footnotes in film history. The explosion of VHS culture and its particular traction in horror fan circles (to rewatch or collect) bestowed an economic afterlife to titles presumed to have a limited shelf life and also gave rise to further offspring; many 1980s horror sequels owe much the fiscal circulatory systems that kept their series or franchise economically viable in the booming age of VCR ownership and home-viewing (Benson-Allott 2013). And while the physical space of the video store has been largely supplanted by streaming and on-demand services in the 2010s and 2020s, the legacy of 1980s horror culture continues to endure. Its influence can be traced through remakes, sequels, special edition re-releases (4K restorations, anniversary re-releases, and physical format editions) of now classic titles and TV series, curated specialist seasons in independent cinemas, fan publications and conventions, and in retro-stylised nostalgic returns via television shows and films (including Netflix’s global hit series *Stranger Things* [2016 -] and Prano Bailey Bond’s art-house triumph, *Censor* [2021]).

Many of the seeds of discontent in our contentious and precarious present were sown in the 1980s. It is the decade of *Threads*, *The Terminator*, and *Ghostbusters* (all 1984) and the fear

of a precarious future that could be snuffed out at any given moment by nuclear fire or the threat of annihilation. It is the decade of ‘stranger danger campaigns’, missing milk carton kids, and the terror of child-centred ‘myths of harm’ (Cleary, 2022) that gave rise to the Satanic Panic crisis. In the US, media spectacles, legal trials, and special investigative reports for prime-time television audiences (the most infamous being Geraldo Rivera’s ‘Exploring Satan’s Underground’ [1988]) reinforced this paranoia and panic. Daycare centres, heavy metal music, mass entertainment programming and fantasy games all fell under suspicion. In entertainment, explicit special FX in film and the popularity of both excessive and increasingly explicit body cultures tore youthful bodies asunder: also note the coeval increase in ‘body beautiful’ transformations, plastic surgery, and the stretchy sublime nature of ‘plastic reality’ (Turnock 2014: 2), a term that underpins the tactile yet malleable ability through make-up and prosthetic trickery to produce imaginative, and occasionally disgusting, transformations and spectacles. The decade witnessed the rise of film and music censorship, the establishment of the PG13 certificate, the Parental Advisory sticker, ‘the list of 72’ during the ‘video nasties’ scandal in the UK (see Egan 2007; Petley 2012), and with it, legislation to classify videos under the 1984 Video Recordings Act. The 1980s was the last decade of the analogue era before the global advent of the internet.

Each of the articles herein (alongside its sister research project in *Gothic Studies* [Vol 24:2, 2022], on the ‘Gothic 1980s’) offers timely and compelling re-assessments and reconsiderations of horror culture during this fascinating ‘long decade’. I explicitly term the decade ‘long’ as its expression is not bound by mere chronometry but rather in its evident impulses, aesthetics, and cultural effervescence. As part of my wider research project on the Gothic and Horror in the long 1980s, this special issue seeks to work through familiar and forgotten debates, query existing beliefs and (mis)conceptions, ideological tensions, and technological turns that emerged or took on a new distinctive shape. In the historiographical spirit of historian Eric Hobsbawm’s own framing of cultural centuries in *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth-Century 1914 - 1991* (1994), decades, as with centuries, are similarly messy and ‘highly malleable’ and ‘rarely begin or end at neat or precise points’ (Jenkins 2008: 4). It is also essential to note that the project’s impetus is not confined to the ‘anxiety’ model alone. It uncovers the joy of championing near-forgotten or rediscovered films and under-appreciated filmmakers, recuperating legacies of texts and critical voices that may have been consigned to history as outliers in more popular configurations and fan circles. It actively seeks to bring new interpretations and celebrations of these works back into the scholarly fold.

Contemporary culture looks back at this decade as a paradoxical time of intense upheavals and neo-conservative backlash while also fetishising it through retro-horror nostalgia. The 1980s continue to endure today through the postmodern resurrection and recycling of its aesthetic styles and texts, giving the decade an altogether undead continuance four decades beyond its conclusion. At the forefront of this retro-recall, Hollywood studios have released a series of nostalgic properties in a ‘1980s cycle’ of remakes and reboots of classic horror titles, with mixed success. Since the 2008 financial crash, resurrecting 1980s film series, television, and aesthetics/music has proven to be a lucrative endeavour, with horror and other transgeneric formulations continuing series and featuring the decade’s most iconic monsters and properties, including *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Halloween*, *Poltergeist*, *Friday the 13th*, *Ghostbusters*, *IT*, and *Hellraiser*. As a logical, if nightmarish, persistence of this ‘1980s cycle of films’ in the early-to-mid 2010s as outlined by Kathleen Loock (2016: 278), the post-2008 financial crash period intensified such nostalgic impulses, fuelling a toxic turn inward in socio-political discourse in an attempt to restore an imagined past (see Ní Fhlainn

2022: 206-208). There is a distinct sense that, to make any sense of the precarious future, the compulsion to look back firmly took hold. Much like the 'contradictory experience of the 1980s' as David Sirota describes it (2011: xviii), the intense upheavals of the twenty-first century continue to find purchase in the decade's iconic and often original horror productions; such returns and replications of a known, safe, and familiar past is, in itself, a revealing Rorschach test. Therefore, this special edition of *Horror Studies* examines the darkness of the decade as a distinct nexus point in recent cultural history. Each article queries presumptions and inconsistencies about the decade and explores its historical richness and strange elisions. These significant examinations include: overlooked female filmmakers; the supposed 'dominance' of the slasher film and the impact of production practices by New Hollywood filmmakers; the unloved and misunderstood *Halloween III* in the horror franchise; the lexical representation of the 'scream queen' in *Fangoria*; the pervasiveness of rape culture; and the privileged projection of the white nuclear family and the instability of male subjectivity in Satanic Panic cinema. Each article repositions and re-reads its selected films and filmmakers, critics and theorists accordingly to re-evaluate its cultural purchase as a 1980s text that remains timely in Horror studies today.

The first three articles are primarily concerned with re-evaluating existing discourse and querying entrenched ideas about 1980s horror culture. In 'Beyond the Slasher Film: History, Seriousness and the Problem of the Children's Audience in the Critical Reception of Big Budget Horror in the late 1970s and Early 1980s', Mark Jancovich proposes that contemporary 1980s horror histories tend to overlook the critical impact and reception of big-budget releases alongside their low-budget counterparts. Examining the critical reception of horror cinema through the lens of the tastemaker critics Vincent Canby and Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, Jancovich identifies that the critical reception of many horror releases was bound up in significant debates on the industrial shifts in New Hollywood. Thus, this approach examines fascinating and nuanced departures from expected points of reference commonly cited in contemporary horror studies.

Ciarán Leinster examines the divisive reception with which *Halloween III: The Season of the Witch* (1982) was met in his article, 'Halloween III: Season of the Witch: It's Time (Again) for a Re-evaluation'. Leinster examines how this cult sequel has come to occupy a unique space within the *Halloween* franchise while being critically disavowed for its lack of inclusion of Michael Myers as its chief villain. For Leinster, *Halloween III* becomes a TV text and a commentary on numerous technological anxieties fused with 'mystical' ancient magic, and tinged with a peculiar anti-Irish sentiment. Claiming that *Halloween III* deserves serious reconsideration forty years on, Leinster posits that it may be, in fact, the franchise's finest sequel and, despite being directed by Tommy Lee Wallace, can also be read as a continuation of John Carpenter's auteurist legacy.

Charlotte Gough's article, 'Another Man's Memories: Masculine Trauma and Satanic Panic in *The Believers* (1987) and *Angel Heart* (1987)' examines fragile male subjectivity and trauma during the Satanic Panic crises of the late 1980s. Using psychoanalytical readings, Gough critically unpacks the fracturing of the privileged white male psyche and the failure of projected Reaganite ideals in both films to query the source of male power. Often filtered through a demonic or racialised context, the films, Gough contends, reveal a brittle and fragmented form of subjective trauma at the core of lost male authority, particularly in the wake of the War in Vietnam, during the final years of the Reagan presidency.

The final three articles examine the complex and shifting nature of women's place and cultural capital in 1980s horror. Using linguistic models, production histories of overlooked women practitioners, and the invisible stranglehold of rape culture, the authors identify cultural influences and practices that have overwritten or significantly marginalised women's agency. In turn, each point to significant shifts already underway in our contemporary moment to reexamine horror history and how, through feminist discourses, to actively enable necessary interventions to re-read and empower women in horror discourse.

Lexi Webster's article "'Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps?)': Critiquing representations of women throughout the 80s in *Fangoria* magazine' examines responses to and representations of women in 1980s horror culture. Focussing on gendered discourses and published commentaries by critics, creators, journalists and fans in *Fangoria* magazine during the 1980s, Webster undertakes a linguistic examination of women's nuanced place in horror culture and the prevailing socio-political trends that shape its lexical expression. Webster then analyses two specific *Fangoria* interviews — with Jamie Lee Curtis and Heather Langenkamp — to evidence the unstable linguistic and cultural boundaries between character and actor, feminism and misogyny within the discourse.

Alison Peirse examines the omission of critical work on women in horror history in her article, 'Towards a Feminist Historiography of Horror Cinema'. Using the cinema of Jackie Kong as a starting point, Peirse examines the rich production tradition of women practitioners in horror culture (in film production but also in horror scholarship), and how this history has remained critically underexamined and undervalued. She queries what this practice of overlooking women in horror says about the perceived place of women more generally in horror history. Offering a feminist model and critical historiography to consider how we write horror history, Peirse's methodology aims to advance how we critically think about women as practitioners, directors, historians and scholars, and the rich potential that lies at the heart of this necessary recovery of women's horror histories.

Vernon Shetley concluding article scrutinises sexual assault and misogyny in 'Sidney Furie's *The Entity*: Horror and Rape Culture'. Shetley's primary focus on Furie's *The Entity*, with a secondary examination of rape culture in Larry Cohen's *God Told Me To* (1976) and Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1981), interrogates how these films navigate female subjectivity and powerlessness within male-dominated misogynistic systems and coded spaces. Examining how these films channel second-wave feminist discourses, Shetley argues that rape culture is documented in *The Entity* as a pervasive yet unseen force in the film's diegesis to actively critique its systemic entrenchment.

As a complex and contradictory period, this special issue on 1980s Horror Culture aims to advance scholarly work and critical thinking about the continued relevance and textual richness of the decade's myriad upheavals and popular horror entertainments. For all of the cultural decade's advancements and the joys it brought to the fore in Horror studies, there are yet more histories and challenges to be uncovered here and, I hope, in future critical work on this complex long cultural decade. Perhaps we should keep those videotapes a little longer...

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