



## STARS OF THE APOCALYPSE

Observations On a Few Horror Movie Myths

VICENTE SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA

The Hollywood star system always had a dark side in the genre of horror: with little versatility, predestined from the start of their careers by their disturbing faces, their imperfect bodies or their scarce knowledge of the English language, the actors (above all) and actresses of horror were condemned in advance to segregation and specialization. One could say that here there was a more intense identification between actor and character than in other genres of the classical period. In the same way, the horror genre—as is well-known—covered in B series and supporting features during the 30s and 40s, and only decades later would some of its productions surprisingly become cult films.<sup>1</sup>

During this era, the inspiration for the characters that these actors and actresses embodied was indisputably human: in size and face, anatomy, speech and movements. However much the make-up artists and lighting managers twisted their appearance, the pattern for their bodies could be no other than one inspired by their stories: the human constituted the unquestionable pattern, although the animal—often as the absence of the human or as metaphor, rarely literally—was ready to emerge. This may appear obvious, if it weren't for the fact that the star system which today dominates horror has erased the human appearance, or brought it to almost

unbearable extremes. Deformities are no longer exiled to dubious sets or covered up by dim lighting, but rather, the climate of naturalism that dominates current horror has gone hand in hand with a displacement of disturbing aspects to the face and body. It is no longer a question of a tranquilizing deformity or excess; rather, putrefaction, physical or genetic malformation to the point of unrecognizability, like an explosion of guts, have not respected even that place foreign to all diegesis that was at one time the actor's, and especially the actress's, face. In spite of all this, it would be advisable not to rush in to a diagnosis.

In the presence of these explosions that provoke revulsion, a double reading has been recognized. The first originates with the consideration of the naturalistic climate in which these films are inscribed. It interprets the phenomena of decomposition and ripping apart as a horribly plastic spectacularity of the destiny of the post-modern body. The second reading, suggested to me by Carlos Monsivais, has an infantile origin and connects to a logic of hyperbole belonging to caricature, which is completely consistent with the principle iconographic source of these movies, namely, comic books. It is perhaps because of this that certain young people, and especially children, were able to enjoy a film like *Dawn of the Dead* (George

A. Romero, 1979) as slapstick, disregarding how the cake frosting and rotting blood splatter in unison. It might prove meaningful to carefully examine a possible complementarity of both readings, in spite of their apparent contradiction.<sup>2</sup> But let us return to our original theme: we were discussing the contamination of the face.

### The New Face

In it, the human face, we recognized what is perhaps the only vestige of aura the cinematographic machinery was not able to extinguish; neither by way of narrative speed nor through editing.<sup>3</sup> There is a moment of static and ecstatic fascination: the narrative is suspended — the story seems to have come to a halt on the actress's face, the eye is captivated —editing retreats— continuity stops, the filtered light on the face belies the realism of the scene. This is what marked the insurmountable distance with a body, metaphorically (more than by synecdoche) designated by the face; an angelic and ethereal, remote and evanescent face. However, soon after the momentary obfuscation, the story would recover its powers, and editing its techniques, and the face would settle back into memory, with extreme vivacity, like that “unrepeatable manifestation of the far-off” with which Benjamin defined *aura*. If this aura were broken, clouded over or corrupted by the presence of a technical device, it was an incompatibility which could only be sensed with uneasiness during the 30s, when the auratic model of the painted portrait was still on the horizon, distant no doubt, but also bright like lightening. The habit of the machine and its unstoppable progress would soon alter this crafted classical cinema, capable of restoring an aura that only lost things have.<sup>4</sup>

Now then, the face, perhaps the only basis for aura in an era considered post-auratic and

mechanized, hasn't been able to uphold in recent years the ambushes that the body, the anatomy, undergoes in post-modernity. And thus it has been destroyed as image —as imaginary basis of a spectacle— to become a revulsive which stimulates vomiting or —in accordance with the aforementioned— the sarcastic laugh of the visual hyperbole. Let us, then, take a close look at some of these new faces just as our recent films present them to us, and go over their features.

### The Zombie

The first figure we would like to examine is the zombie. Its contemporaneity is at the least paradoxical, given that this unhappy creature stood out in classical Hollywood cinema without corrupting its star system; but this discretion is due no doubt to the care taken in classical editing of preserving the actor's face from the violence of metamorphosis. Hence, it entrusted to metonymy the animalistic effects which, like a necessity, emerged out of him. It was not mere chance that the reading of the zombie motif varied notably over

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1. Horror is perhaps the genre which has the most faithful fans and is therefore more likely to have cult films. However, this devotion likely affected the cast of monsters more than actors, as the pseudototemic magazines that worship the genre demonstrate.

2. One example, in the case of violence, is the *Grand Guignol*, where the anti-naturalist and grotesque stylization contrasts with the catalogue of decapitations, mutilations and bodily brutality it presents.

3. See the penetrating study by Jacques Aumont, *Du visage au cinéma*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma/Etoile, 1992. For Aumont, the tendency toward a transparent and diaphanous face of cinematographic classicism is counterbalanced by the expression of lust given to it by glamour.

4. There is mourning in aura, as well as illumination. The mourning of classical cinema in the electronic era would be a fine example.

the years without altering its respect for the face. *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932) presents lifeless faces to embody the absence of will of the so-called zombies, as well as their remote control by way of an animistic style hypnosis. *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943) went a step further: a mechanized body, in a catatonic state, was altered by an uncertain cause (A voodoo ceremony? A sudden fever provoked by some chance occurrence that science was at a loss to explain?). The interpretation was suspended in doubt which, for Todorov, was the basis for the model of the nineteenth century fantastic. But the face —impassive— did not undergo any violence, nor was it demythified: in its place, it was the story that staggered. *The Plague of the Zombies* (John Gilling, 1966), faithful to the notion of a primitive, animistic zombie, laid out —like the majority of Hammer's products— the intellectual mannerism of a social discourse on slavery and the color scheme of its corporeal graphics: grayness of the skin, lividity of the face, the red blood in rituals, etc.<sup>5</sup> And yet, in this context, the most popular motif of the zombie at present —created by George A. Romero and John Russo beginning with *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)— seems to have its origins in other sources and to be marked by another iconography.

In the first place, this zombie, of post-nuclear origin, presupposes a curious reversion of death. He is neither dead nor alive, but rather —as Dr. Van Helsing would call Dracula in Bram Stoker's novel— Undead. This condition would exceed our present reflections given that the body of the zombie carries inscribed in its flesh the traces of its previous death: it is a decaying body that gives off an unbearable stench. Now then, one of the narrative requirements —his being a threat against humans— presents a paradox in relation to his

attributes: his movements are slow, motorized, his coordination is a marvel of clumsiness; often he is surpassed by humans in speed and dexterity. This fact, seemingly contrary to any threat intended to be verisimilar, is given over to a fully unexpected progression: in the course of the sequels of Romero's film, conceived and filmed by him with the ingenuity of John Russo, the zombie's awkwardness and mechanization gradually increase to the point of easily becoming fuel for ferocity, sadism and experimentation on the part of humans. The danger that these creatures generate lies in their gregariousness, in their nature as cannibals and in the speed with which they transmit their disgusting condition. Therefore, whereas *Night of the Living Dead* presents a certain, albeit diluted, strength in its confrontations with humans, *Dawn of the Dead* embodies an unusual case —alluded to above— of clumsiness. In the heart of an abandoned mall, the formless slabs of meat which are the zombies, moved only by immediate impulses, are the object for the sadism of a group of motorcyclists: the heads and chunks of meat are thrown about in the same manner as in a sequence fitting for comic cinema at the turn of the century, except that when the attackers are defenseless, the pieces of meat turn into voracious cannibals who mercilessly pounce on their prey.

Now then, their faces, not to mention their bodies, are not robbed from our view but are, rather, luxuriously displayed. We see all the races that populate the "melting pot", all the social conditions, all the fashionable clothes... It is a sort of inverted, caricaturesque mirror of America in the last few years. But it is also an ostentatious presentation of faces which permit no identification: a ceremonial of revulsion and hyperbole.<sup>6</sup> It is surprising to see how the subtleties of animism, its complex inflection between the visible and the invisible, and the exploration of the romantic

fantastic have lost all credibility since 1968 (except for a few anachronisms), and that the iconography created by Romero-Russo has taken over without competition.<sup>7</sup>

There are —clearly— multiple connections between the beings mentioned here and others inspired by them. For the sake of brevity we will not develop this point, but only mention, as an example of the implementation and accentuation of Romero's aesthetics, the case of Lamberto Bava and his *Demons* (two films which date 1985 and 1987 respectively): the attention to detail in the faces, suddenly transformed into blisters of puss and bloody drool is combined with an even more predatory zeal than that of Romero's own zombies. Whatever their differences may be, we can assume the following equation is valid for the work with horror by many Italian movie makers: L. Bava represents, with respect to the figure of metamorphosis, the same mannerist excess that Dario Argento embodies with respect to violence.

### Freddy Krueger's Burned Body

As protagonist of one of the most successful series in recent years —*Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, 1984)— the character of Freddy Krueger has elevated the actor Robert Englund to the status of star hero. What's more, his character, Freddy, a sadistic child killer, has become a child idol who, not to mention his visits in their dreams in fiction, appears on their very T-shirts and fan cards. And if that weren't enough, he has an active fan club with more members than most singers. But the interest in Freddy lies above all with his iconography: in a basement full of machines, a sort of modern day fort, he fabricates —such is the initial dream of the character Nancy— his fingernails, which are actually sharpened jack-knives which will unthinkingly rip to shreds every type of matter, i.e. clothes and flesh.<sup>8</sup> A concise expression

of a knife joined to the animalization of the character, Freddy's claw possesses the added value of multiplying the tool of attack (by each of his five fingers), converting it into an extension of his very body (i.e. incorporating it to himself), and also, making it burst into a child's nightmare. It is impossible to go any further. His outfit is completed with a tacky red and black striped sweater —giving him somewhat of a caricaturesque, comic book look— which is repeatedly described as dirty, and a wide-brimmed hat. As for the rest, his sarcastic laugh announces a sadistic irony and bomb-proof bad taste. And that's not all: this character who appears in the dreams of various children, and who possesses the power to be in two places at once and the capability of metamorphosis which he uses to invade other bodies, shoots his recognizable rays at various objects or springs out of the most unexpected places (a cuckoo clock, the television...) and even turns into a skeleton or gets inside of a video game.<sup>9</sup> Throughout various

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5. Naturally the examples given here are purely illustrative and do not intend whatsoever to be exhaustive.

6. And let us not overlook how both concepts generate contradictory feelings and attitudes in the spectator: the first announces an impossible distance, the second a comical de-identification.

7. Lucio Fulvi, for example, is the author of several films which are titled *Zombi*, the first of which dates from 1986: these creatures are equally disgusting but rapid in combat, so Romero's aesthetic seems to proceed in an inconsistent manner.

8. Note that in modern horror films fire arms are almost no long present. Given that we are dealing with tearing bodies apart, axes, switch-blades or kitchen knives have taken their place as privileged "work tools".

9. This is what happens in *The Final Nightmare. Freddy's Dead* (Rachel Talalay, 1991), a curious manifestation moving in the direction toward virtual reality.

episodes, without any strict order, he is genealogically presented according to a kind of biological determinism. He was the son of a nurse, Amanda Krueger, who was raped by one hundred maniacs; in later episodes her daughter is incorporated along with a fragment of their family life before the tragedy is improvised.<sup>10</sup>

But, without a doubt, what is decisive about Freddy is the way he displays the trace of his tragedy: burned with gasoline in a lynching by the parents of the twenty children assassinated in the unassuming town of Springwood (Ohio), Freddy always exposes his singed flesh, his face melted by fire. With this face, recognition seems to cease and yet, differing from other psychopaths like Michael Myers (*Halloween*) or Jason (*Friday the 13th*), Freddy lets children get close to him... so close that they worship him.

### **A Butcher\*: Leatherface**

Here we come across a cult figure, as provocative as they come, characteristic of a horror that is no longer common today, which in part goes along with *Night of the Living Dead* and the aggressive, non-conformist, bad taste aesthetics that spread at the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s. Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) is the fat, brainless brother in a family of cannibal butchers who have fallen on hard times due to the development of industrial production in that sector. The clan, nevertheless, remains faithful to their tradition and carries out their profession in the arid solitude of the Texas desert. The clan is made up of a shriveled patriarch, incapable of lifting a finger—a livid cadaver who is, nevertheless, heir to the glories of his profession—a dissected and bloodied mother who sits comfortably in an armchair, and a young man who attracts screaming and contorting prisoners, and above all, Leatherface. We will omit the description of the scene—the macabre objects

that fill it and make up the film's grotesque, visceral environment. We will focus instead on the group of players—not professional actors—in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974). Several unforgettable fragments show Leatherface running in the middle of the night after the terrified and bloody Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns): the grotesque figure follows the girl, first in his butcher's apron splashed with entrails, then decked out in his best tie wielding an electric saw—the only point of modernization in the anachronistic butcher family. Leatherface is determined to catch up with the girl, but his fat takes him by surprise and we see it shaking out over his pants. It is a grotesque and comical image. What keeps us from laughing to the fullest is the denseness of repulsion and the non-stop tension of the narrative situation.

And once again, the face: covered by a leather mask, with his black, disheveled hair like a naughty boy, this ungainly creature hides his face from us. In the third part, called *Leatherface*. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre III* the prologue gives us another turn of the screw that changes the grotesque into the merely repulsive: a pair of hands carefully cuts the skin and flesh off of a real face and later puts it on in triumph and as a sign of identity.

### **A Strange Form of the Macabre**

The three cases presented here could be easily amplified to a whole throng of unequivocally modern creatures.<sup>11</sup> All of them, in spite of their boom in popularity, do not belie the solid base of a present day star system (albeit transformed, naturalized and brought in closer to us by television). What is curious is that our strange idols make up a star system of the character, i.e. the monster, the psychopath or the freak, more than showing a faithfulness to the actor who incarnates it. Rather than focus on this aspect we would like to emphasize the terminal nature they appear to

remit back to and of which these new stars are emissaries: inhabitants of apocalyptic tales, inexorable demiurges who threaten the childhood world even beyond dreams,<sup>12</sup> blind, insatiable avengers of death, or the very limit itself of barbarity in the aridity of a scene in the antipodes of the oneiric<sup>13</sup> or an explosion of disgust in a post-nuclear universe. It wouldn't be going too far to say that we are witnessing the birth of a new iconography of the macabre, of disturbing parallels with the one that arose during the fourteenth century and lasted until the sixteenth when the Renaissance decided to stamp it out with its enlightenment. The well-known image, although less abundant than what was suggested, of the cadaver in the process of decaying went hand in hand with the rise of the *Artes moriendi* and was opposed to the later 'morte secca' or dissected cadaver. The insistence on the degradation of the body once it has passed the fatal moment can legitimately be evoked when we see our screens put forth beings of this kind.

But let us not deceive ourselves: the figures of the macabre we see today lack an allegorical function. During the indicated period they functioned to symbolize man's failure and were complementary to the notion of the temporary. While our current creatures too, perhaps, show human failure, they also scream the failure of death itself. Because death no longer represents a boundary for these characters: they are not emissaries of the beyond, nor warnings of a "good death." In fact, they—as we mentioned above—have surpassed death, and yet, they ambulate in deserted places, they penetrate into children's dreams or into the cities that survived a nuclear catastrophe. And they do it with blind violence, but also in many cases, with blatant sarcasm. Also, the macabre iconography existed—as Philippe Ariès has shown<sup>14</sup>—where the face had been covered.

This is just the opposite of what occurs with our cinematographic emissaries of the apocalypse who act with obscenity and uncovered faces.<sup>15</sup> What occurs is that Freddy, Leatherface, the zombies, the coenobites, as well as Jason, Michael Myers and so many others, speak to us from after the apocalypse: between their death—declared impossible—and the end of time there is no place for hope. Anguish then will cover that hole which, in by-gone days, was covered by eschatology ○

**TRANSLATION:** SUSAN HOOVER

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10. Here the actor Robert Englund appears with his real face, unscarred by fire burns, but this lasts only a few minutes and is seen through the childhood memories of the daughter.

\* Translator's note: The original *carnicero* in Spanish has the triple meaning of "carnivorous, flesh-eating", "savagely, cruel, bloodthirsty" and also "butcher".

11. To add to the list of secondary references, worthy of note are the hellish beings in *The Evil Dead* and *The Evil Dead II. Dead by Dawn*, both by Sam Raimi, 1983 and 1987 respectively. Also, the resurrected in *Hellraiser* (Clive Barker, 1987) and its sequel *Hellbound. Hellraiser II* (Tony Randel, 1988).

12. Thus we should like to denominate nightmare, a formula whereupon pleasure has disappeared and the search consists only of being able to wake up... in order to continue dreaming, to use the fitting expression by Jacques-Alain Miller.

13. *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977) and its absurd second part show that all the family structures in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* began a tradition.

14. Philippe Ariès, *L'homme devant la mort*, Paris, Seuil, 1977, p. 116. On this topic, his, can equally be consulted.

15. In the case of *Leatherface*, although it is unique, can in no way be considered hidden by the mere fact that he wears a mask.

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DE LA FILMOTECA

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**LAS ESTRELLAS:  
UN MITO EN LA ERA DE LA RAZÓN**



The Stars:  
a Myth  
in the Age  
of Reason



VICENTE SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA &amp; VICENTE J. BENET

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