

THE HORROR GENRE

By Phil Parker

The Boundary between Horror and other Genres

One fundamental key to unravelling this potential mess is to see a clear boundary between Horror and the other genres as the presence of the supernatural. If a character involves a supernatural element then a line has been crossed and the project has entered the horror genre – whether this is desired or not.

Does the presence of a supernatural element always mean we are in a horror film. Clearly many films which do not work for audiences contain monsters or ghosts and end up being just horrible films not horror films. Equally even where the narrative clearly focuses on strong stories from another genre e.g. 'Field of Dreams' (d/w. P.A Robinson) with its strong personal drama element nonetheless it is definitely a horror film in the sense that it deals with the classic fear of death issue – what happens to people after you have died, and you are not there to protect or guide them.

However, Harry Potter's world is by its very nature supernatural, being full of fantastical and supernatural forces yet this is a personal drama not a horror franchise. The difference being that the 'ordinary' world is supernatural, danger arises from the nature of the world not from something, which does not belong in this world, suddenly entering it.

The key to understanding horror as a genre is to see its underlying themes, and to recognise the ability of supernatural forces to destroy us as human beings, and thus our fear of them, and death itself. In this sense many disaster movies fall into the horror genre – where the 'super – natural' is an unpredictable force of nature.

As with the other three main genre groups of contemporary film writing Horror has its primary elements, and its secondary aspects, which define its various sub-genres. Like the other genres the frameworks of these sub-genres though clear, leave screenwriters with a range of options depending on the age of the protagonist/s and the nature of the antagonist/s.

Defining a Horror Film

The **Primary Elements**¹ of the Horror genre are as follows:-

1. There is an 'ordinary' world in which the protagonist/s live prior to the arrival of the danger i.e. the supernatural.

The need for this ordinary world is based upon the creation of fear within the audience and to ensure a level of identification with the main characters before the threat of death or the danger of the unknown takes over.

Establishing this world may be preceded by a prologue in which the presence/idea of the supernatural is introduced to the audience prior to act one essentially setting up what will be threatened e.g. 'The Mummy'(d/w. S.Sommers)

¹ For a fuller explanation and context of genre see Chapter 7 "The Art and Science of Screenwriting' P. Parker Intellect Books :2001

2. There is the presence of a 'supernatural' force.

Defining what is 'supernatural' could take up the rest of this article so for the sake of this working model of the horror genre I have assumed we are dealing with those elements of a narrative, which do not obey the laws of our everyday reality.

I am aware that James Bond's ability to survive various fights unscathed can be seen as supernatural, but this is an example of characterisation rather than a key element which defines the reality of the narrative universe in which a particular plot operates. Equally, the animated nature of 'Shrek' (d.A.Adamson/V.Jenson w. T.Elliot/T.Rossio/J.Stillman/ R.S.H. Schulman), or 'The Incredibles' (d/w. B.Bird) or the fantastical skills of the 'X-Men' (d.B.Singer w. D.Hayter) does not turn the films they appear in into horror films.

Compare these attributes with the presence of Ghosts, Zombies, Slashers and Monsters in a narrative, and the boundary that is being drawn here is fairly clear.

The major debate, which arises from the definition of the 'supernatural' in the introduction to this article, is the presence of disaster movies i.e. the inclusion of 'nature' as a supernatural force. However, the theme, storylines, plot construction, and all the other narrative elements, which focus within the horror genre around the theme of the fear of the unknown apply to disaster films, and so they clearly are horror narratives.

3. The central protagonist/s face death.

This key element is obviously shared with thrillers but there are three significant ways in which it differs in this genre.

- a. The threat is always to the protagonist/s and never just to others as it is in some thrillers e.g. Chinatown (d. R. Polanski w. R. Towne);
- b. The threat of death is not necessarily introduced within the opening of the narrative. Many horror narratives delay the arrival of death until the end of act one, thus providing time for the audience to understand the main characters and their world before the destructive force arrives.
- c. The origin of the threat of death is supernatural.

This latter point is one of the key problems with developing a horror film. The existence of a supernatural force capable of killing the protagonist means the protagonist/s have to have a credible means of defeating/thwarting the antagonist. Many films fail because in the final act the protagonist/s defeat the antagonist/s too easily, and/or by a trick which is not credible.

4. The force/s of antagonism are not only supernatural but must initially be clever, and stronger, than the protagonist/s, again similar to thrillers. However, there is one other attribute the antagonistic force/s must have if they are to be 'realistic' horror antagonists – they must represent a real fear, which the audience shares with each other and the narrative. This relates directly to the different themes that underpin a horror narrative compared with a thriller narrative.

This is one other aspect of the antagonist/s where the horror genre starts to differ from the thriller. In the thriller the antagonist/s needs to be worthy of being defeated in the sense that just being a mad killer is not enough. Though there were a number of 1980's films, where this version of the antagonist was used in

some successful thrillers, there was always a backstory to their madness, and when this was weak or unbelievable the films inevitably failed at the box office. Compare this to the antagonist in many horror films, who merely have to be dangerous and capable of destroying all who attempt to stop them e.g. the Aliens in 'Aliens' (d./w. J.Cameron).

It is this simplicity of the antagonist, which is the key factor that delays the introduction of the antagonist into the plot. If this simple antagonist is introduced too early there is not enough development within the nature of the antagonist's characterisation for there to be enough surprises to keep the audience, and the protagonist/s. guessing as to what the antagonist/s will do and what they are capable of. A recipe for boredom, as the audience works out too early what the climax of the film will be, and how the antagonist will be defeated.

5. The two major themes, which underpin horror, are the fear of death, and the fear of the unknown.

These two themes provide a direct link with the fear the audience experiences when watching a horror film compared with the other genres. Though there are clearly issues of identification, surprises, shocks and even horrific moments in other genres this is the one genre where the essence of the narratives construction is to use these elements to develop and play with fear.

Compare the theme of the fear of death in horror with the desire for justice within thrillers. In the thriller the antagonist and the protagonist may both seek justice for a past wrong, as do many antagonists within horror films, but in thrillers the battle is played out in terms of whose claim for justice is the right one as far as the narrative's creators, and the audience, are concerned. While in the horror film it does not ultimately matter who is right or wrong it is merely a question of whether or not the central character/s will survive the threat of death. This is because the fear of death i.e. the knowledge that we will all die is a central fear of all human beings.

This fear is best expressed by the presence of ghosts, or their equivalent, as it is not so much the fear of death itself which many people fear, but more its timing, and the matters left unresolved. Ghost narratives are all about 'things' left unresolved by an untimely death.

The second major fear addressed in horror is the fear of the unknown. This is most obviously seen in monsters, which represent some aspect of the future/present going wrong. The fear itself arises from our personal inability to know everything, and therefore fearing that out of the great 'unknown' will come something, which may destroy us, or our world.

This is perhaps most easily seen with teen-based horror movies. The scope of what is 'unknown' to a teenager, and those entering their teens, is vast compared with adults over 30, for instance, and thus numerous things can be seen as a source of fear, especially sexuality. So films that confront these fears work far more for a teen audience than they do for an older audience.

However, like the thriller, horror is subject to a strong contemporary influence when it comes to monsters, which represent fears. While once it may have been credible to worry about giant ants produced by atom bomb tests e.g. "Them" (d.G. Douglas w. R. Hughes/T. Sherdeman) this will hardly work today. However, mutated animals/diseases based upon genetic experiments is a different story e.g. '28 Days Later' (d. D.Boyle w. A.Garland).

6. In Horror narratives there is an omni-present point of view(POV). This means that the audience is able to placed in any position in relation to the characters.

This plot POV is another major difference between the horror genre and the other three genres. Compare the various approaches to the action in a Horror narrative with personal dramas, and romances, where few if any scenes are seen without the protagonist/s and all action is seen from their perspective. Even in the thriller where some scenes are deliberately inserted into the plot to create suspense these scenes are very few. However, in the Horror film the action is often seen from the antagonist/s POV, secondary characters are often given whole scene/sequences without the central protagonist/s, and the audience is often shown things which neither the protagonist/s nor the antagonist/s can have seen/know.

However, it is common for act one of horror narratives to restrict the POV to that of the protagonist/s, and it is one of the significant shifts in perspective when the other POVs start being part of the narrative, which ensure the audience's uncertainty is increased.

7. The nature of the plot affects the main plotlines.

The plot lacks the overall mystery question of the thriller i.e. who is the killer/behind the murders, and focuses instead on how will the protagonist/s survive and/or how will they defeat the antagonist who is identified early in the narrative - normally at the beginning of act two

With the omni-present POV unlike the other genres where the plot is dominated by the protagonist/s' two main stories, the Horror genre often uses not only the antagonist's storyline to share the main plotline but also in many ensemble narratives allows secondary storylines to dominate sections of the plot, especially the first half of the film.

In this context there are three storylines that dominate the genre.

- i) The Unrecognised Virtue.
This is the main storyline for the ultimate protagonist. It is their ability to discover something about themselves, or reveal their true nature, which ultimately defeats the antagonist.
- ii) The Fatal Flaw
This is the storyline which secondary characters invariably follow as they fail in their attempt to defeat the antagonist, or in some cases side with them.
- iii) The Spider and the Fly
The antagonist's storyline, which often dominates sections of the second act of the narrative, and the climatic sequence.

These three storylines and the omni-present POV provide the screenwriter with a number of options when constructing the plot of a horror film. The problem is keeping the focus of the narrative and not losing the audience by confusing them with too many storylines and POVs.

8. The protagonist/s actions must be credibly realistic/natural in their representation on screen, while the antagonist/s are obviously supernatural, even if at the beginning they do not appear so.

The need for the protagonist to be realistic and ordinary arises from the need for the audience to experience their own fear through the protagonist. If the protagonist is a specialist e.g. the detectives of thrillers, then there is a distance between the audience and the protagonist, which will undermine the creation of fear.

Equally important is the supernatural quality of the antagonist. If they do not possess qualities beyond our everyday reality they cannot represent our fear of the unknown or reach beyond the point of death. However, it is the quality of these supernatural antagonists, which represents the biggest challenge for a screenwriter of horror narratives.

The classic monsters e.g. vampires have only a limited shelf life with audiences. After all how many times are you going to be scared by something, which can ultimately be destroyed by sunlight? Equally, how many different ways can a Slasher slash before it becomes obvious/boring and not scary, or on the other hand having been scared once the audience does not want the same scare again. This is the reason that many monster based narratives come and go historically as a particular audience becomes immune, and the writer/producer has to wait for the next generation to grow up before the cycle can start again.

It is these limitations on the antagonist, which make style so important to the horror genre.

9. The existence of an expert is critical to the plot.

Given the ordinary nature of the protagonist/s it becomes essential that at some point in the narrative an expert is available to the protagonist/s in order for them to solve the problem they face. This can range from the shark expert in 'Jaws' to the ghost themselves in 'The Sixth Sense'.

10. The style of a horror film is critical to it working for its historical audience i.e. horror narratives rely heavily on what the last horror film the audience is referencing.

There exists a significant horror audience, who will watch any vampire narrative or cite a particular 'gore fest' just because it is gory. However, for large mainstream audiences to watch a horror movie the presence of monsters, or gory violence, are not enough. In the case of the latter the horror genre has lost some of its power owing to the realism of horrific violence recently shown in personal dramas, in particular war films e.g. 'Jarhead' (d.S. Mendes w. W.Broyles Jr.), and in some thrillers e.g. 'Seven' (d. D.Fincher w. A.K.Walker).

This has led to the growth of the fantastical as a significant part of the visual style of horror narratives e.g. 'Underworld' (d.L.Wiseman w. D.McBride), and

comedy being used in various different ways, from the character/situation style of 'Tremors'(d. R.Underwood w. S.S.Wilson/B.Maddock) to the self-aware parodies of the 'Scream' franchise. With the increase of digital effects then the complexity of the visualisation of the supernatural and the spectacular aspects of the both setting and action will continue to provide means for bringing a new vision to old horrors.

Those these aspects are obviously really important to renewing and developing the visual style of horror films, they pale to insignificance compared to the camera, sound and editing style elements of this genre's identity. Central to the genre's style is the use of POV camera work, expressionist visuals(including camera angles); fast editing and distorted sounds, plus disquietening music.

It is hard to imagine any sense of fear being generated without the POV shots in which we the audience enter a room/space uncertain of what we will encounter but certain, just because of this camera work and the attendant changes on the soundtrack, that something is waiting for us. The effectiveness of these style elements is most strongly seen when even in film's which are not working, a sudden POV sequence executed well still manages to capture the mind and generate the uncertainty/fear of the unknown.

It can be argued that these elements of the narrative are down to the director/cinematographer but as any casual read of recent successful horror screenplays will show the majority of these sequences are described on the page. However, it should be noted that the sound designer and composer play a vital role in really emphasising the impact of these sequences within a narrative.

11. The presence of Innocence

As with thrillers this can range from the obvious innocence of an animal or child e.g. the innocents in 'Alien' and 'Aliens', to an adult who though flawed in the general terms of a society is nonetheless innocent compared with the other people portrayed in the film e.g. the younger child in many teen slasher films.

These eleven elements define the horror genre, but as with the other three genres it is the presence of the secondary elements, which help us work out which type of horror we are developing and ultimately watching on the screen. Equally true, it is the nature of the antagonist and the setting, which separate one sub-genre from another.

Where Ghosts share the screen with Monsters and natural Forces

The Secondary Elements lead to three distinctive sub-genres:-

- Monster Horror
- Ghost Stories
- Disaster Movies

1. Ghost Stories

This is the most intimate of the horror genre and is the sub-genre, which relies heaviest on well-developed, characters as much as intricate plotting.

- a. The main story is concerned with a ghost/s entering the life of a family or in some cases an individual's life.

It is critical to this genre working that the ghost has a distinctive relationship with those it is haunting. This can range from being part of people's dreams as in the Freddie Kruger franchise to being available to someone like themselves as the small boy in 'The Devil's Backbone'(d.G. del Toro w. G.del Toro/ A. Trasorras/D.Munoz)). They are by definition supernatural, and walking through walls etc., comes as standard.

- b. The main characters are ordinary people i.e. in the general course of their lives they do not encounter the threat of death and danger, as encountered in this genre.

This element, which is common to all horror narratives, is emphasised in this sub-genre by the setting being very localised, and often largely confined to the place the protagonist/s live in i.e. their home.

- c. The theme of these narratives is the fear of death.

Though there is a quality of the unknown obviously about the ghost/s at the centre of the narrative, this is not the emotional aspect of the film that is being dealt with. Ghost stories are about our fear of what happens after we are dead, and in particular the correction of wrongs, which may be unresolved or created by our death.

- d. A past wrong, or possible repeat of a past wrong, is crucial to the plot.

Past acts often play a major role in nearly all horror narratives but it is often only one plot twist, or a character's motivation, whereas in ghost stories it is the central reason for the ghost's action and must be dealt with in the climax.

- e. The action centres on discovering the truth about the ghost/s' story.

The narrow confines of a domestic, and/or work, based plot ensures the audience is focussed on the everyday life of the protagonist and the disruption the ghost poses to them but it is the uncovering of the ghost's reasons for the haunting which is the main driving force of the plot – after the ghost has been revealed..

- f. The protagonist's point of view, plays a significant part in this sub-genre.

One of the key elements of this sub-genre is a very strong use of the protagonist's POV. The use of short scenes in which something is revealed that heightens the sense of either uncertainty in the audience or the anticipation of danger for the protagonist is common but compared with the omni-present POV in most horror narratives ghost stories tend to limit the use of this key element more.

Owing to this approach to scenes it becomes vital within this sub-genre to make effective use of shots, which reveal things within a location/scene that the protagonist is not aware of. It is the audience's awareness of these extra pieces of information that create the sense of suspense and tension within the narrative.

- g. The presence of only a small number of victims, often only one or two in the whole film.

This makes the development of the plot difficult compared with the other sub-genres as in many instances it is only the protagonist who is under threat and they cannot die until the last act, if at all. Note in many ghost stories the protagonist is not under threat of death by act three, but is placed in the position of stopping, or correcting, past wrongs i.e. they become the ghost's accomplice.

Owing to the limited scope for deaths, and in some cases the climax not relying on this outcome, it is important for the presence of death to be introduced very early into the plot, and often a reported death to be revealed later in the plot. Equally useful is the death of a minor character, which at first appears unconnected to the protagonist's problem/s but is later revealed to be linked.

Examples of this sub-genre include 'Poltergeist'(d. T.Hooper w. S.Spielberg/M.Grais/M.Victor); 'Ghost'(d. J.Zucker w. B.J.Rubin; 'The Sixth Sense'(d/w. M. Night Shyamalan) 'Ringu'(d. H. Kakata w. H. takahashi) and 'Los Otros'(d/w. A. Amenabar).

2. Monster Movies

Monsters unlike ghosts remain within the reality of our world, but have some supernatural powers – often only strength and speed but critically they are difficult to kill!

- a. The antagonist/s derive/s their power from their supernatural powers.

Deciding what powers the monster/s have at their disposal is the critical element when developing this sub-genre, and equally important is how they can be killed. It is the failure to answer these questions with credible characteristics, which often undermines many monster films.

The other major problem is the simplistic, often one-dimensional nature of the antagonist, which means delaying their arrival into the plot for as long as possible is critical to retaining interest in the conflict.

- b. The protagonists - this is an ensemble genre – face death at the hands of the monster/s.

Though there is often a central protagonist who may be the only one to survive the monsters, or be the last one to confront them, the narrative rests on a threat to a group, who represent a wider society.

Given the simplicity of the antagonist, and hence their late arrival into the plot this genre requires much more protagonist character development/establishment in act one than ghost stories

- c. The protagonists fail to successfully confront the antagonist/s until the climax, and the plot hinges on who will survive, and to some extent why?

The plot of this genre works with the real danger often not being revealed until the end of act one, and then it becomes a simple matter of survival until the end of the narrative. Whether or not any of the protagonists survive the climax is upto the screenwriter.

- d. The theme of this sub-genre is the fear of the unknown.

This is reflected in the lack of information on the antagonist, and the often-indiscriminate nature of death. It also provides a key to why the plot hinges on trying to discover information on the antagonist i.e. to remove the unknown element.

- e. The plot needs various characters to act as victims in the early part of the narrative.

The death of key characters is one of the great twists available in the monster film, and is often used to hide not only the antagonist but also who will be the ultimate protagonist.

Examples of this sub-genre include 'Jaws'(d.S. Spielberg w. P.Benchley/C.Gottlieb); 'Alien'(d. R. Scott w. D. O'Bannon); The Descent'(w/d N. Marshall); 'The Mummy'(w/d. S.Sommers) 'Jurassic Park'(d. S. Speilberg w. M.Chrichton/D.Koepp) and 'Halloween'(d. J. Carpenter w. J. Carpenter/D. Hill).

3. The Disaster Movie

This is in essence a variation on the Monster film but this time we are confronting the supernatural power of nature itself.

Like the murder mystery being a variation on the investigative thriller so this genre shares the majority of the monster film's key elements i.e. b, d, and e.

The key differences are

- a. The power of the antagonist is the power of nature itself.

This can be the sea, volcanoes or fire etc. The simplicity of this antagonist presents the largest problem to the writer working in this genre, and underscores why this is an ensemble sub-genre and even by the mid-point few of the protagonists will have died, and the full potential of the danger is often not revealed.

- b. The plot pits protagonists against an unstoppable force.

Unlike the Monster this antagonist is not to be understood/explained but merely avoided. In the climax it is a simple question of can the protagonists who remain avoid death or not. The danger here is the simple 'Deus ex machina' solution e.g. over the hill comes a large helicopter to pull everyone out. This ending i.e. the moment of closure, can be used if it is set up well earlier in the plot, but the protagonists must confront one final test of survival before this rescue for the climax of the narrative to work.

- f. The protagonists represent a wider society/community than in other horror narratives.

This additional element explains why this sub-genre traditional appeals to a broader audience than many ghost or monster narratives. However, it also underscores the need for solid character development/identification for the genre to deliver its fear of the unknown.

Examples of this sub-genre are 'The Poseidon Adventure' (d. R. Neame w. W. Mayes/S. Silliphant)'Armageddon'(d. M. Bay w. J. Hensleigh/J.J. Abrams; and 'The Day After Tomorrow'(d. R. Emmerich w. R. Emmerich/J. Nachmanoff).

The inclusion of this last sub-genre will I recognise be questionable for many who see horror as all about shock and surprise. However, the forces of nature work, within this sub-genre, exactly as the other antagonists within the horror genre, and thus as with many aspects of our complex relationship with films this sub-genre belongs in a group that at first does not appear obvious.

Equally problematic may be the lack of sub-genre such as Slasher, Teen Horror, or Gore fest, but as these are simple changes in protagonists, and style, which as with all the other genre discussed, these elements are in the control of the film's creators they are not central to the genre. Consider the question of 'Do we limit the protagonists of romances to one age, or the investigators of thrillers to one type?', and the question of who is at risk in horror is placed within the overall genre perspective?