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## Body genres, night vision and the female monster: *REC* and the contemporary horror film

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, horror films have continued to proliferate, evolve and diversify in so many ways that it is nearly impossible to speak about 'the contemporary horror film' as such. The current range of products released as 'horror' includes everything from the sadistic gore of the *SAW* series to the sentimentalism of Guillermo Del Toro's *El Orfanato* (2007) and comedies such as *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Fido* (2006) and *Zombies of Mass Destruction* (2010). Accordingly, many film scholars have all but given up attempts to define the horror film by common plots, conventions, character types or styles. Not only do horror films change significantly from decade to decade; they seem to thrive on systematically re-inventing themselves wholesale, overturning familiar conventions, and exploring a wide range of generic hybrid forms (e.g. combining with comedy, computer game platforms and teen romance narratives).

Nevertheless, as Brigid Cherry argues in *Horror*, there is one factor that 'remains constant' in the genre (with the exception of parody): the intention to arouse some sort of fear-related emotional response (2009: 65). This response may range from dread and unease to 'hair-raising' and 'heart-stopping' terror, but all are linked phenomenologically to fear. The very words 'heart-stopping' and 'hair-raising', rhetorical flourishes that invariably punctuate horror film reviews and jacket covers, point to two important facts about the horror film genre: one is that that these effects are as much physical as emotional, the other, ironically, is that there is an element of performance in audiences' acting out of these effects. The rhetoric of horror film pleasure tends to an

intensely somatic register, invoking shivers, goose bumps, squirms, gasps, screams and the chilling or curdling of blood. Nevertheless, the rhetoric inflates the actual degree of physical response. As in melodrama, there is a certain amount of choice in the degree to which a viewer will allow him or herself to be affected by a film (Hanich, 2008: 36–7). Moreover, horror film fans tend to go further than just allowing themselves to enter into the play proposed by the film; they may also exaggerate and enthusiastically perform their fearfulness, meeting the film more than half-way in its production of generic effects.

The idea that genres can be identified by their emotional effects, suggested by Stephen Neale in *Genre* (1980), has been developed by Linda Williams into the influential notion of 'body genres' (Williams, 1991: 4). The three that she identifies, horror, pornography, and melodrama, are all linked by their commitment to provoking a strong bodily reaction (fear, sexual arousal, weeping, respectively). These genres seek to break down the barriers between character and viewer and to produce a strong identification between the out-of-control bodies on screen and those of the audience. Accordingly, when the films 'work' as they are supposed to, viewers of pornography are aroused by the sight of bodies in the grip of arousal, and viewers of melodrama are moved to tears by the sight of people weeping or visibly distressed. In horror, this mimetic dimension accounts for the great attention paid to physical symptoms of fear in film characters: the eyes and mouths opened wide with fear, the trembling and sweating, the gasps and screams of terror.

Thinking about films in terms of their desired intention to create physical reactions helps to focus our attention on the way in which they choreograph these effects. For example, all three body genres are structured according to the logic of repetition within a crescendo. A series of genre-specific scenes (like the song and dance numbers in musicals) will occur, each one designed to be slightly more effective than the last, until the final number brings the emotional effects to a climax. This dramaturgical model of increasing effectiveness is based on the fact that all three genres are organised around the intent to produce a physical response, which can be considered as structurally hard-wired into the form.

Another feature that may be considered universal to the three body genres is the requirement to show a spectacle relevant to the desired reaction, that is, an aroused or at least naked body in the porn film, a victim's visible or audible suffering in a melodrama, and a terrified face and/or body or a frightening scene in the horror film. Since a maxi-

mum display of horror from the beginning would be counter-effective, this is where the crescendo effect of the increasingly scary 'numbers' comes into play. The horror film needs to construct a carefully choreographed and evolving play between concealment, suggestion and display. Although the final effectiveness of a monster or scary scene may be created in any number of ways, the two most important elements in the way that scariness is dosed in the horror film are: one, according to how much exposure a monster gets (the less the better), and two, how unexpected and realistic it is. If the first issue is linked to the traditional chiaroscuro aesthetics of horror films (especially their attraction to shadow effects), the second is related to the importance accorded to special effects and make-up art in horror cinema.

What I propose to do in this chapter is to examine a recent horror film, Jaume Balagueró's and Paco Plaza's *REC* (2007), in order to see how these core genre features mentioned above work in tandem with other more recent developments, including the hand-held camera or found-footage device, the night vision function, a zombie-like contagion, and a female monster. The film has been extremely successful, spawning an American remake (*Quarantine* [2008]) and three sequels (*REC 2* [2009], *REC 3: Génesis* [2012], and *REC 4: Apocalypse* [2014]).

The premise on which *REC* is based is simple: a female reporter, Ángela Vidal, and her cameraman plan to spend the night in a fire station for a local news station. The film begins in TV-journalism style as Ángela interviews the firemen, visits their mess hall and tries on a firefighter's outfit. What we see is the unedited footage, the out-takes, practice shots and everything else that would, in principle, be removed from a television report. Much of the rough realism and authenticity of hand-held camera cinema comes from this seemingly unedited handling of footage. A call comes during the night and they rush in a fire engine to an apartment building where an old woman has been heard screaming. When they enter her apartment, she bites one of the men on the face. The remaining firemen now discover that police have sealed the building, and the other residents, gathered in the lobby, are growing angry. The film assumes a Romero-esque quality as it turns out that the old woman had a mysterious contagion that transforms victims into violent cannibals when they are bitten. Eventually, only Ángela and her cameraman are left uninfected. Hiding in what they believe is an abandoned apartment, they discover a monstrous female creature that attacks them. The final fifteen minutes of the film take place in the