

Grzegorz Fortuna Jr.

University of Gdańsk

Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Independent American Horror Movies

For decades, horror was one of the most important genres in American cinema. In contrast to most horror films produced in Europe, which tended to focus on fears of a rather universal nature, American horror films liked to comment on political and social changes and feast on collective fears. There are many reasons for this tendency. The most important one seems to be obvious – it is simply easier to scare the audience if the movie relates to them and it is also easier to sell the movie if the audience is already interested in the presented topic.

So, in the 1950s, the era of the Cold War between the USA and the USSR and a decade that followed the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, many Americans feared the possibility of the communist invasion or the effects of splitting the atom. Cinemas were full of films such as *The Incredible Shrinking Man* directed by Jack Arnold from 1957 about a man that started to shrink because of exposure to a combination of radiation and insecticide or *Invaders from Mars* by William Cameron Menzies from 1953, where the analogy between Martians and communists is quite obvious because the aliens come from the *red* planet.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, after the fall of the counterculture, horrific reports from Vietnam and news stories about murders committed by psychopaths such as Ed Gein or Charles Manson, social fears changed and American horror came closer to everyday America. The movie theatres were no longer populated by red Martians or shrinking men, but by psycho killers such as Leatherface from *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* directed by Tobe Hooper in 1974 or Krug Stillo from *The Last House on the Left* by Wes Craven from 1972. These horror films were not only very down-to-earth, but also very gritty – they were made cheaply, often filmed on a 16mm reel and were brutal, with extensive scenes of blunt and pointless violence.

The landscape of American horror changed in the 1980s, after the success of *Star Wars* (1977, George Lucas) and rapid changes in production culture (Adam-

czak, 2010, p. 137-163). Many horror movies made in that decade derived from gritty 1970s horror – especially slashers, such as *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984, Wes Craven) or *Friday the 13th* (1980, Sean S. Cunningham) – but they were less serious and far more friendly to the viewers. Probably the best example would be *Texas Chain Saw Massacre 2* (1982, Tobe Hooper), a bloody comedy horror that had almost nothing to do with its predecessor.

Mainstream American Horror Films

The aim of this extremely brief overview of the history of American horror films is to present the difference between movies from past decades and their modern successors. Nowadays, most popular American horror films do not try to face collective fears, make a commentary on contemporary social problems or scare the viewers in an inventive way. To prove that point, I have picked the 30 most popular (sorted by box office revenue in the United States) American horror films distributed in North America during the past decade (between January 1st 2008 and January 1st 2018). The list looks like this¹ (IMDb, 2018):

1. *It* (2017, Andy Muschietti),
2. *World War Z* (2013, Marc Forster),
3. *Get Out!* (2017, Jordan Peele),
4. *Split* (2016, M. Night Shyamalan),
5. *The Conjuring* (2013, James Wan),
6. *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011, Henry Joost, Ariel Shulman),
7. *The Conjuring 2* (2016, James Wan),
8. *Annabelle: Creation* (2017, David F. Sandberg),
9. *Don't Breathe* (2016, Fede Alvarez),
10. *Paranormal Activity 2* (2010, Tod Williams),
11. *Annabelle* (2014, John R. Leonetti),
12. *Insidious: Chapter 2* (2013, James Wan),
13. *Cloverfield* (2008, Matt Reeves),

¹ I excluded several movies that were on the IMDb list (because they use horror film tropes), but do not try to scare the viewer in any way and therefore – in my opinion – cannot be regarded as horror films: *Hotel Transylvania* (2012, Genndy Tartakovsky), *Hotel Transylvania 2* (2015, Genndy Tartakovsky), *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008, Rob Cohen), *Goosebumps* (2015, Rob Letterman), *Dark Shadows* (2012, Tim Burton), *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008, Guillermo del Toro), *Zombieland* (2009, Ruben Fleischer), *Boo! A Madea Halloween* (2016, Tyler Perry), *Warm Bodies* (2013, Jonathan Levine), *The Shape of Water* (2017, Guillermo del Toro), *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013, Tommy Wirkola).

14. *The Purge: Election Year* (2016, James DeMonaco),
15. *Alien: Covenant* (2017, Ridley Scott),
16. *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014, James DeMonaco),
17. *Cloverfield Lane 10* (2016, Dan Trachtenberg),
18. *Lights Out* (2016, David F. Sandberg),
19. *The Final Destination* (2009, David R. Ellis),
20. *The Visit* (2015, M. Night Shyamalan),
21. *Friday the 13th* (2009, Marcus Nispel)
22. *The Purge* (2013, James DeMonaco),
23. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010, Samuel Bayer),
24. *Underworld Awakening* (2012, Måns Mårilind, Björn Stein),
25. *The Wolfman* (2010, Joe Johnston),
26. *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010, Paul W.S. Anderson),
27. *Saw V* (2008, David Hackl),
28. *Dracula Untold* (2014, Gary Shore),
29. *Happy Death Day* (2017, Christopher Landon),
30. *The Haunting in Connecticut* (2009, Peter Cornwell).

According to the list above, the landscape of contemporary mainstream American horror seems to be very undifferentiated. 20 of the listed films are remakes, sequels, prequels or spin-offs (numbers: 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28); many of them (numbers: 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 18, 29) are films about some kind of possession: by ghost, demon or other paranormal entity. In the top 10 of the bestselling horror films in American cinema, at least 6 tell a story about possession, which suggests that mainstream horror storylines connected with this subgenre seem to be the most popular among the audience.

Horror is very different from other genres in terms of necessary resources and probability of success at the box office. In contrast to action films, adventure movies or superhero blockbusters, mainstream horror films do not require enormous budgets, expensive special effects or A-list stars to succeed at the box office. A study published on FastCompany.com (Berkowitz, 2015) listed 20 movies with the highest return of investment distributed between 2010 and 2015. Horror films dominated the list in a spectacular way – taking 9 places in the top 10, leaving other genres behind. The unexpected winner was *The Devil*

Inside (2012, William Brent Bell), which earned more than 53 million dollars at the American box office despite an extremely low budget of 1 million. The next places belonged to *Insidious* (2011, James Wan, BO: 54 mil., budget: 1,5 mil.), *Paranormal Activity 2* (BO: 85 mil., budget: 3 mil.), *Unfriended* (2015, Levan Gabriadze, BO: 32 mil., budget: 1 mil.), and *Paranormal Activity 3* (2011, BO: 104 mil., budget: 5 mil.). The numbers seem to be even more impressive if we compare them to revenues generated by Hollywood blockbusters. For example, six instalments of the series *Paranormal Activity* generated 891 million dollars worldwide, despite a combined budget of just 28 million. This means that this low-budget horror franchise earned more than the superhero spectacle *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016, Zack Snyder), which cost ten times as much to produce.

Moreover, an investigative report published by Stephen Follows and Bruce Nash that studied the correlation between the reviews a movie receives and its chance of reaching profitability showed that horror is one of the genres which are most likely to turn a profit (second only to animation) and that there is almost no correlation between positive reviews and box office success in the horror genre. In fact, “As horror films receive better reviews, they do little to improve their chances of making money. [...] The most profitable horror films score between 30 and 50 on the Metascore scale, equivalent to between two and two and a half stars out of five” (Follows, Nash, 2017). The authors described the correlation as “downright bonkers”, because it seems that horror is the only genre in which mediocre movies are “rewarded” by the audience.

This leads to a sad conclusion. If American horror film producers and directors do not search for new ideas, it is like this because they do not have to. Scary movies seem to be lucrative and prolific nonetheless. The storylines of possession films listed above can serve as a perfect example. The structures of their plots are very similar, which makes it hard to distinguish one movie from another. In most cases the plots follow this structure:

1. They often start with a character or a family who moves to a new home or buys a strange item;
2. Then something strange starts happening/someone gets possessed;
3. One of the characters sees or feels more than the others;
4. The effects of the possession or haunting become increasingly acute;
5. The characters call for help (preferably an old priest with a crisis of faith or a psychic);
6. Then the priest or psychic uncovers the truth – for example someone got killed in the house and his soul cannot find peace;
7. There is a confrontation with the demon or ghost;

8. In the last scene, there is a suggestion that danger might come back, so the doors to a sequel are left open.

In many popular articles about contemporary American horror, the lack of fabular originality is presented as the biggest problem of these films, but I would argue that there is another problem of contemporary mainstream horror that comes from a completely different place and it is connected not to the recurrence of plots but to the methods of scaring. Most horror film directors seem to play it safe and use only *jump scares* to scare the audience. A jump scare is “a quick moment of action within a shot that surprises the audience and character. [...] It’s done by catching the audience off-guard and surprising them with a sudden jolt of action. It works best when the action moment comes from a place the audience and character least expects it to” (Draven, 2013, p. 52). So, firstly, all the sound is drained from the movie, then we have an abrupt camera movement towards something scary connected to a loud and frightening sound.

Jump scare seems to be very effective, because it works on a biological level, but many horror film directors over-rely on jump scares, without trying to build real tension throughout the whole movie. For example, in the first part of *The Conjuring* we have 5 jump scares, in the second part – 8 jump scares. And in the spin-off, *Annabelle* – 9 jump scares that are carefully distributed throughout the movie, so they come at ten minute intervals to scare the audience. This method seems to be very thoughtless, but it works on an economic level, because all of the films listed above made a huge profit.

Independent fears

However, if someone wants to seek an alternative, there is the independent American horror, which seems to have had some kind of renaissance in recent years. In indie horror, methods of scaring seem to be very different and more innovative than in mainstream horror. I would like to illustrate that statement with the example of *It Follows* (2014) directed by David Robert Mitchell. It tells the story of a teenage girl called Jay (played by Maika Monroe) who spends the night with her boyfriend. After intercourse he abducts her and tells her that he passed a curse through the intercourse onto her and shows a walker coming toward them. He warns her that she must pass the curse to another man; otherwise she will be hunted down by the walker. Furthermore, the walker is very slow, but changes form and may look like any person in the world, even someone she loves.

The plot summary sounds like a joke about the most popular slasher film trope – “you can’t survive the movie if you have sex” (Pheasant-Kelly, 2015, p. 159) – that was even used in Wes Craven’s meta horror, *Scream* (1996). However, the director treats it very seriously and builds the whole movie around the idea of a very slow creature walking toward the character. In contrast to most mainstream horror films, *It Follows* does not rely on the abruptness of the attack but on the inevitability

of the attack, which helps to build tension throughout the movie and invest the audience in searching for the monster. There are almost no loud sounds or rapid camera movements. In one of the scenes that shows characters visiting school to gather information about Jay's ex-boyfriend, the camera makes two slow circles around its axis, showing the main characters and the environment around them. We can see a strange person walking straight toward the camera, but we have no idea if it is the monster or just a normal student. There are many other sequences constructed in the same way, so after a while the viewer starts to unconsciously scan the frame seeking information about the monster. It is basically *Where's Wally*, but in this version Wally is an empty-eyed, blood-thirsty demon.

David Robert Mitchell tries to creep out the viewer with other very subtle methods. For example, we have no idea in which decade the action takes place. The interiors look like they are from the 1980s, one of the characters drives an old car that looks brand new and there is almost no modern technology, while on the other hand, Jay's friend, Yara, uses a clamshell e-reader that looks very futuristic. The seasons do not make any sense, either. Despite the fact that the action takes place in one month, some of the costumes suggest that it is summer, while others suggest that it is autumn. This helps to construct a movie that is somehow eerie, weird and off-putting and, thanks to all of that, really creepy. As viewers, we have almost no real facts to hold on to. In interviews, Mitchell states that it was a conscious strategy, not just a coincidence (Lamble, 2015).

It Follows is just one example of American independent horror films from recent years that tries to offer something different and more inspiring in terms of methods of scaring and narrative strategies. Others are: *February* (2015) by Oz Perkins, that tells a story about the demonic possession of a young girl without showing the actual possession in a traditional way; *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale* (2015) by Robert Eggers, about a Puritan family living in New England in the 17th century that has to confront evil living in the woods; or *Get Out* (2017) by Jordan Peele, which combines classic horror with social satire. These movies are very different and use completely different methods of scaring, but what they have in common is the fact that the scares are not obvious, working on a rather unconscious level with the directors relying on atmosphere and tension.

In the case of *February*, most of the scares come from narrative solutions that play with a viewer's expectations. Perkins tells two stories side by side; one about the teenager Kat (terrifying Kiernan Shipka), who stays in a Catholic boarding school during the break because her parents did not come to take her home; the other about Joan (Emma Roberts), a girl who escaped a psychiatric ward and met Bill (James Remar), an older man, who offers her a ride. Since the two storylines are intertwined, the viewers do not know if there is any correlation between them and can only guess that something is wrong thanks to off-putting scenes (such as a scene in which Joan giggles after hearing that Bill's daughter was brutally murdered) and brief flashbacks. Moreover, Perkins consciously recalls well known horror tropes to confuse the viewer and lure them into fabular dead ends. Till

the last scene we do not know if *February* tells a story about revenge, possession, molestation or mental illness (or maybe all of them).

This strategy of continuously not fulfilling viewers' expectations connected to their experience with previously watched horror films can also be found within single scenes. In one of the best moments in the movie, Kat attacks one of her tutoresses. The scene is constructed in such a way that makes us believe that the girl will twist her head and body like Regan in *The Exorcist* (1973, William Friedkin) and that the demon will manifest its existence. Nothing similar happens; Kat simply swears at her guardians. *February* is consistent in this strategy of reversing audience expectations; it is a puzzle or a splice of two storylines and different genre tropes that were carefully put together by Perkins: "One of the cool things about horror is that you're able to code the information you're presenting. And the horror genre is rich with so many archetypes, symbols, weird codes, alphabets, and recognizable imagery that lends itself to that" (Taroy, 2017), said the director.

In another debut feature, *The VVitch*, Robert Eggers tries to evoke the atmosphere and mindset of a 17th century Puritan family living in New England that has to leave the plantation due to a difference in interpretation of the New Testament. The family starts their own life on a farm near the woods, but weird things start happening – the fields are consumed by a strange disease, the youngest son disappears and the fraternal twins, Mercy and Jonas, seem to have an unspoken connection with the family's goat called Black Phillip. The whole plot is based on folktales from New England that were carefully studied by Eggers.

The VVitch "feels almost like a documentary account of the harshness of seventeenth century life in America" (Bitel, 2016) and less like a typical horror film. Thanks to extensive research and brave artistic strategy, Eggers's debut seems to be very different from other American horror movies – there is no homage to horror masterpieces from the past (like in *It Follows*, that evokes the atmosphere of John Carpenter's films) and the movie feels secluded from other titles within the genre. This, which is also the case with *It Follows* and *February*, was a conscious artistic idea, which was executed in a spectacular way. "I wanted this film to be like a nightmare from the past, like a Puritan's nightmare that you could upload into the mind's eye. And it's a folktale", said the director (Bitel, 2016).

Thanks to all of this, the terror induced by *The VVitch* seems to be somehow primal and pristine (so I can only guess that H.P. Lovecraft would binge-watch this movie to death), not carrying the luggage imposed by thousands of pop-culture pictures of the titular character. Some of the scenes may recall folktales that we all know (for example, the scene in which Thomasin and Caleb go to the woods together and find a strange house seems to be rooted in early versions of *Hansel and Gretel*), but *The VVitch* restores the terror connected to them in the times before Disney's adaptations. Moreover, there is only one jump scare in the whole movie and the atmosphere of fear is built in a very subtle way. For example, in one scene we can see Mercy and Jonas playing in the courtyard, singing a dev-

ilish song. The other characters do not notice this and we do not see any scene of possession, but the audience can feel that something bad and unspeakable has already happened.

The subtlety of terror that perfectly creates the atmosphere in both *The VVitch* and *February* is not the only way to scare the audience in an inventive way. Jordan Peele's debut, *Get Out*, seems to be a good example of generating terror and fear by blending genres and ideas that are non-obvious and very innovative. The movie tells the story of African-American photographer Chris (Daniel Kaluuya) who reluctantly agrees to meet the family of his white girlfriend Rose (Allison Williams). During the visit, he discovers that Rose's parents may have a very strange attitude to African-American people.

Peele uses techniques known from horrors from the 1960s and 1970s – especially films like *The Stepford Wives* (1975, Bryan Forbes) – to evoke the mindset of an African-American person surrounded by rich, white people that behave in an odd way in his presence. In contrast to movies about racism, *Get Out* does not try to deal with open racial hatred, but with cultural appropriation that seems very hard to pin down. His movie is both a horror film and social satire that tries to show the viewers fears of a different person or a group of people – in this case, African-Americans.

A New Hope

It is worth noting at this point that since, as mentioned above, horror movies do not need to have A-list stars and massive budgets to appeal to a wide audience, the line between mainstream and independent is somehow blurred when it comes to horror. The first *Paranormal Activity* film directed by Oren Peli and released in 2009 cost just 15,000 dollars, but it was soon acquired by DreamWorks. The company was then bought by Paramount, which tried a new and inventive distribution technique to market the movie virally (you could go to a *Paranormal Activity* website and “demand” a screening in your area; when there were enough demands, Paramount organised a screening). Peli's film soon became so popular that it was distributed nationwide in 760 theatres across the United States and grossed over 100 million dollars in North America. All the sequels were consecutively distributed by Paramount – a major studio with huge resources and efficient distributing tools. Because of that it is hard to say if *Paranormal Activity* should be considered an independent or mainstream phenomenon.

It is also the case with the most lucrative horror production company in the United States – Blumhouse, founded by Jason Blum, who made *Insidious*, *The Purge*, and *Ouija* amongst others. The business model of the company is to produce films with a small budget, give artistic freedom to their directors and then release the movies through the studio system. Again, because Blumhouse com-

binés methods known from independent film production with the resources of big Hollywood studios, it is not easy to put a label on their movies. Are they independent or mainstream?

I would argue that in case of horror films like *Paranormal Activity* or *Insidious* the first movies of the series (filmed very cheaply, with no expectations about box office outcome) should be considered independent, but later instalments – mainstream, because they were made to appeal to a very wide audience and earn more than their predecessors. This means that all of the films listed in the last chapter of this article should be considered independent as they are all based on original ideas and there are no plans to produce any sequels that would start profitable franchises.

Moreover, despite many differences, all of the movies listed above seem to have something in common – they all allow the viewers to penetrate someone’s psyche, look at the world through their eyes or, to use Eggers’s wording, live through a “nightmare that you could upload into the mind’s eye”. This might be the nightmare of a maturing teen (*It Follows*), a Puritan family (*The VVitch*), a scared and abandoned child (*February*), an African-American person (*Get Out*) or any other.

This is not the end of the list of innovative American horror films from recent years. Other ones worth mentioning are *It Comes at Night* (2017) directed by Trey Edward Shults and *A Quiet Place* (2018) by John Krasinski. *Hereditary* (2018), a feature debut by Ari Aster, received extremely positive reviews at the Sundance Film Festival.

Almost all of the new, well-received American horror films from recent years come from debutants or young filmmakers and brave producers that do not fear experimenting or giving their directors artistic freedom. If the producers of consecutive instalments of *The Conjuring* or *Paranormal Activity* do not want to try new narrative and fabular solutions, because they know that the movies will be lucrative anyway, their colleagues responsible for movies like *It Follows* or *The VVitch* think in a drastically different way that we could probably sum up in such a way: since horror is one of the most prolific and profitable genres in the film industry and it is very hard to lose while making a horror film, there are no boundaries that should hold us back from trying new solutions.

Numbers show that this strategy pays off. *Get Out*, despite a budget of just 4.5 million dollars, earned more than 255 million worldwide; *A Quiet Place* cost 17 million to produce and earned almost 300 million globally up to this date (12th of May 2018) and *The VVitch*, made on an extremely tight budget (4 mil.), earned 40 million from the box office. Taking all of this into consideration, I think that we are on the brink of an important change in this genre – a change that may make more producers and directors induce fears that we could all feel.

Bibliography:

- Adamczak, M. (2010). *Globalne Hollywood. Filmowa Europa i polskie kino po 1989 roku. Przeobrażenia kultury audiowizualnej przetomu stuleci*. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria.
- Berkowitz, J. (2015). *The Horror: These Are The Movies With The Highest Return On Investment*, FastCompany.com, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3049133/the-horror-these-are-the-movies-with-the-highest-return-on-investment> (accessed: 12.03.2018).
- Bitel, A. (2016). *Voices of the undead: Robert Eggers on The Witch*. BFI.org.uk. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/robert-eggers-witch> (accessed: 12.03.2018).
- Draven, D. (2013). *Genre Filmmaking: A Visual Guide to Shots and Style for Genre Films*. Taylor & Francis.
- Follows, S., Nash, B. (2016). *Do Good Reviews Lead to a Higher Chance of Financial Success?*, AmericanFilmMarket.com, <http://americanfilmmarket.com/do-good-reviews-matter/> (accessed: 12.03.2018).
- Lamble, R. (2015). *David Robert Mitchell interview: It Follows and horror*, DenOfGeek.com, <http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/it-follows/34247/david-robert-mitchell-interview-it-follows-and-horror> (accessed: 12.03.2018).
- IMDb (2018). *Top-US-Grossing Horror Feature Films Released 2008-01-01 to 2018-01-01 With Country of Origin United States*, https://www.imdb.com/search/title?type=feature&release_date=2008-01-01,2018-01-01&genres=horror&countries=us&sort=boxoffice_gross_us,desc (accessed: 12.03.2018).
- Pheasant-Kelly, F. (2015). *Reframing Parody and Intertextuality in Scream: Formal and Theoretical Approaches to the 'Postmodern' Slasher*. In: Wickham Clayton, *Style and Form in the Hollywood Slasher Film*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Taroy, D. (2017). *"The Blackcoat's Daughter" Director Oz Perkins On Why The Best Scary Movies Are Sad Movies*, FastCompany.com, <https://www.fastcompany.com/40400661/the-blackcoats-daughter-director-oz-perkins-on-why-the-best-scary-movies-are-sad-movies> (accessed: 12.03.2018).

Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Independent American Horror Film

The main aim of the article is to paint a picture of contemporary American horror film and mark the division between its mainstream and independent sides. The first part focuses on topics, subgenres and strategies connected with mainstream American horror films; the second part is dedicated to the renaissance of low-budget, but original and artistically fulfilled horror movies produced outside Hollywood and directors that achieved commercial success thanks to following their vision and thinking outside the box. In the article, Grzegorz Fortuna Jr. uses methods connected with production studies research to discover how the economy, changing tastes of audiences and artistic ideas influence contemporary independent American horror film.

Keywords: American independent cinema, horror film.