HORROR MONSTERS

If you're studying for AQA's A2 Mest3, you may be researching your own case study on media representation, focusing on media theories and debates and wider contexts. Here examiner **Steph Hendry** shows you how to explore the social and cultural contexts of one of our most enduring genres: horror.

The horror genre is one of the media's most successful genres. Since ***Le Manoir du Diable* (Méliès, 1896),** stories that aim to scare their audience have proved immensely popular. **Daniel Cohen** observes that:

> **cultures create and ascribe meaning to monsters, endowing them with characteristics derived from their most deep-seated fears and taboos**

An analysis of horror monsters in the light of their cultural contexts can, therefore, give an insight into the anxieties and concerns of the contemporary culture. Of course, not all people have the same worries at any given time, but it is possible to identify general cultural and contextual trends through the monsters created for horror texts.

Pre-World War 2

Nosferatu* (Murnau, 1922)** has been a major influence on representations of vampires since its creation in Germany shortly after WW1. The vampire is an **'invader'**; he comes from 'elsewhere' and brings pestilence to the local community. His method of attack involves penetration and the exchange of bodily fluids. This can be read as a sexual metaphor but significantly the outcome of a vampire attack is **death or infection**. At the time ***Nosferatu was released, Germany was economically and socially devastated after WW1. Poverty and disease was rife and in 1918 hundreds of thousands of people died during a flu pandemic. The vampire Count Orlok is rat-like in appearance and it is perhaps not surprising that a culture that had suffered at the hands of expansionist politicians and was now vulnerable to disease would respond to a monster that represented invasion and infection.

Many horror texts between the wars reflected **the social changes in terms of power, authority and class** that followed the political upheaval of WW1. Both ***Nosferatu*** and ***Dracula* (Browning, 1931)** featured **a corrupt and abusive aristocratic class** who are the sources of horror. In ***Frankenstein* (Whale, 1932)** the aristocratic class was also criticised. In the film, the son of Baron Frankenstein turns his back on his aristocratic duty and locks himself away to create life in the form of the monster. Dr Frankenstein takes on a god-like role in the act of creation, but he oversteps his social position. The film shows that he needs to return to his predetermined aristocratic role to help protect the village from the horror he has unleashed. ***Frankenstein*** was released during the **Great Depression**, a time

of great financial hardship across the Western world where unemployment and poverty was widespread. **The Russian Revolution** showed one response to weak or corrupt governance and mass poverty – a workers' revolt – something Western authorities feared. Dr Frankenstein's return to his rightful position allows him to lead and control the village population whose fear and anger can be directed at the monster instead of the ruling class.

Frankenstein has many other possible readings that relate to the context of the time. For example, the sympathetic representation of the monster could be read as **a critical perspective**

on the racial tensions that were present in American culture at the time. The monster's eventual death is represented as a mob lynching of an individual who cannot integrate into the dominant culture. 'The monster' himself is not as monstrous as **the abuse of scientific knowledge** that creates him, the aristocrats' abuse of power, or the mindless, murderous mob.

Post-WW2 films maintained the focus on monsters that invaded or infected, and the **'science gone wrong'** motif expanded across both horror and science-fiction. Perhaps this is unsurprising considering the horrors witnessed in the advances in military capabilities, culminating in the nuclear attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945. Add to this the depths of human cruelty seen in the holocaust; and it's all too clear that **mankind had shown itself to have the potential to be monstrous**. Horror movies soon reflected this.

The Not So Swinging 60s

The 1960s was a time of **social change** and this was mirrored in its horror monsters. The decade begins with ***Psycho*** **(Hitchcock, 1960)** reflecting the impact of **Freudian theories** on the culture's understanding of **the human psyche**. The monster here is a man whose family dynamics created an 'abnormal psychology'. In the UK a similar story was told in ***Peeping Tom*** **(Powell, 1960)** where **a dysfunctional family** created another human monster. The monsters in both films were, on the surface, normal people but they brought horror close to home for the 1960's audience. Arguably the mundane settings make the horror more effective than the distant, fantastical horror of the previous decades and the fact that the monsters now look like 'us' creates an unsettling realism.

By the end of the decade horror was reflecting some of the enormous social and cultural changes that had taken place. At the start of the decade **attitudes to race** meant it would have been unthinkable to have had a black male lead in an American film but this occurred in ***Night of the Living Dead*** **(Romero, 1968)** which also used vivid and visceral representations of violence, making ***Psycho*** look quite tame. The optimism of 'the Summer of Love' that is often associated with this period was in fact tempered by the **assassinations first of President Kennedy in 1963, and later of his brother Robert** and **Martin Luther King in 1968**. America was at war in Vietnam and audiences in the late 60s were growing accustomed to seeing images of horrific real-life violence. Horror directors could only hope to scare these audiences if they produced horrors as violent and as extreme as the films and photographs that were shown on the evening news.

As horror moved into the 1970s the human monster became more sadistic. ***The Last House on the Left*** **(Craven, 1972)** and ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** **(Hooper, 1974)** became infamous for their sustained graphic violence. These films, like ***Psycho*** before them, located their horror in **a mundane present**; ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** showed the effect of social and economic isolation and on a rural family whilst ***The Last House on the Left*** bought the horror into small-town America. Both films identified a society that, despite idealised appearances, had a brutal underbelly.

The Exorcist **(Friedkin, 1972)** created a great deal of public and media attention and outrage for its depiction of a possessed girl. Like ***Rosemary's Baby*** **(Polanski, 1968)**, ***The Omen*** **(Donner, 1976)** and ***The Wicker Man*** **(Hardy, 1973)** in the UK, ***The Exorcist*** depicted **the secularisation of society** that had occurred since World War 2 and dealt with the unease and uncertainty this was causing by using devils, demons and pagans as its monsters. ***The Exorcist*** was also a film that identified **post-war changes in the structure of the family**. The possessed child is from a single-parent family headed by a working mother. To try to help her daughter, the mother looks to the **'grand narratives' of the day, science, medicine and psychotherapy** before reverting back to religion. The modern, secular world fails to help and the demon is eventually expelled by two Catholic priests (or fathers) the implication being that the modern world, with its fatherless families, reliance on science rather than religion, allowed the demon in.

The 1970s ended with more homespun monsters when in 1978 the archetypal slasher

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film ***Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978)** was released. Owing a lot to ***Psycho***, the monster in this film is a boy traumatised by **rising sexual liberation** and his violent attacks against teenagers are often seen as punishments for 'immoral' behaviour.

The End of an Era

The 1980s saw a glut of **slasher films** as horror became a staple of the home video market. As the audience grew used to the genre's visceral assaults, more outlandish and extreme spectacles were needed to maintain interest. Film franchises replicated the same ideas over and over, and the genre grew tired and clichéd, becoming less economically viable. In the mid-90s horror engaged with this familiarity for both comic and horrific effect. ***Scream* (Craven, 1996)** uses **an ironic approach** to the genre that is **self-aware and self-referential**. It uses the codes and conventions of the genre as a plot device, and the monster in the first ***Scream*** film is finally defeated by being hit with a television after a discussion of the effects of horror films on audiences.

Contemporary Monsters

Recently horror has looked to its past and there have been **remakes** of many of the films mentioned in the earlier sections. Whether bringing them up to date has added anything more than CGI effects is a matter of personal opinion; but **what is often lost in a remake is a sense of cultural context**. Many remakes appear to be 'style over substance' as, whilst they may be more polished, slicker and gorier, they are **more interested in the visceral experience rather than an exploration of cultural fears**. Hollywood also looked to the Far-East in the 2000s and re-made a number of Asian horrors films. Eastern cultural meanings were adapted for the Western audience. **J-Horror** uses the supernatural monster, often ghosts, linked to the traditional veneration of ancestors. Whilst these ideas are not common in the West, these films do touch on globalised concerns such as over-crowding **(*Dark Water:* Salles, 2005)** and the impact of technology **(*The Ring*: Verbinski, 2002)** and ***One Missed Call* (Vallette, 2008)**.

Aside from remakes, perhaps the most notable development in contemporary horror is **torture-porn** which focuses on extreme visceral violence, nudity and sadistic torture. ***Saw* (Wan, 2004)** is a long-running series of torture porn films, utilising CGI to maximise the extreme nature of the violence depicted. It's been suggested that perhaps **audience desensitisation** is at the heart of torture porn's success. Mainstream television shows such as ***CSI* (CBS)** uses graphic imagery; and computer games have long used 'splatter', exposing players to more and more extreme violence. Torture porn does what horror has always had to do: attempt to find more and more extreme ways to scare (or repulse) the audience. However, the rise of torture as a subject in horror also parallels contemporary concerns over **the post-9/11 treatment of terror suspects and prisoners of war** as stories of Western government endorsed torture was reported. Despite its violence, ***Saw*** began by presenting the audience with a deeply moral monster. The monster acts as judge offering second chances (or punishments) to those he sees

as having transgressed. His torturous games can be seen to be potentially 'good for' his victims and society even if his methods are extreme. Later examples of the sub-genre however show torture as a game and a pleasure with the monsters in ***Hostel* (Roth, 2005)** being wealthy clients who pay for the ultimate consumer thrill in a manner that echoes recent concerns about human trafficking.

Contemporary culture is **media-saturated**. Entertainment is available anywhere and anytime. From on-demand TV, the apparently infinite nature of the internet and mobile technology, contemporary culture is arguably running the risk of **over-stimulation** and the impact of our reliance on technology for entertainment and social interaction is often questioned. It is frequently argued that over-stimulation could lead to extreme **desensitisation**, and this idea can be seen in recent horror monsters. Dehumanised 'feral youth' are the monsters of ***Eden Lake* (Watkins, 2008)**; and the monsters in ***Funny Games* (Haneke, 2008)** and ***The Strangers* (Bertino , 2008)** are disconcertingly emotionally removed. These monsters are also **anonymous**; ***Eden Lake*** makes 'the group' the monster and masks are worn by 'the strangers'. The nondescript clothing and appearance of the killers in ***Funny Games*** emphasises the impersonal nature of this violence and there is a of lack clear motive for the violence in these films other than the monsters' desire to seek stimulation. These monsters appear to be **the culmination of a desensitised culture which has chosen to seek entertainment through the terrorisation of others**. They are calculating and deliberate, implying that they are making violent choices simply as a stimulus in their otherwise over-stimulated and desensitised lives. The ***Saw*** franchise shows how the monster's victims become monsters themselves and the monsters in these recent films could easily be those selected by Jigsaw for punishment. Unlike those of previous eras, these monsters are not invaders or creations of science or poor parenting; they are **selfish, nihilistic creations of the culture itself**.

Whether **re-working** traditional conventions (the mad scientist in ***The Human Centipede* (Six, 2009)**; re-inventing itself for an adult TV audience in ***The Walking Dead* (AMC)** and ***True Blood* (HBO)**; framing itself as parody or domestic comedy in ***Dead Set* (C4)** and ***Being Human* (BBC3)** or as soap opera and high-romance in ***The Vampire Diaries* (CW)** and ***The Twilight Saga***, horror still attracts audiences. The genre has the ability to adapt to allow it to tap into each generation's preoccupations and concerns and its metaphorical approach can be used to deal with ideas and issues that appeal to a range of audience groups. Other genres such as Westerns may not be able to speak to modern audiences in the way they used to but horror continues to provide a **cultural catharsis** over 100 years since it first hit celluloid.

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