Trump Era Horror and the Politics of Fear

Making Media Literacy Great Again by Teaching What Scares Us

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In January 2017, Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States. According to The New York Times, he took office as the least popular president election modern history. His controversial inauguration, or ‘inaugu-rage’ as it is more commonly referred to (due the divisive and volatile nature of the event), marked the ‘Don of a New Day’ for the United States, an era characterised by increasingly hard-line policies and rhetoric which favour nationalism, America first-ism and xenophobia. So dramatic, hotly contested and consequential was this victory that British newspaper The Independent ominously stated ‘So Help Us God’, as the billionaire reality television star evoked a dark vision of patriotism and protectionism. For many, Trump continues to represent an American nightmare; a clear and present danger to democracy, US global peace, and stability. Trump’s ascendancy can be read as a symptom of the rising fear and anxiety that has fuelled, and been fuelled by, recent xenophobic, nationalist, racist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric in numerous countries. Take, for example, the United Kingdom, which has been attempting to tear itself from the European Union for some of the very same reasons, since around the same time.1 It is such turbulent political climates into which the horror genre tends to sink its teeth- spitting out the bloodied pieces as politically conscious metaphors.2 This is why the genre is known to personify our collective nightmares: the terror of a culture expressed in its cinema. Take, for example, Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956), which evoked cold-war anxieties about Communism; or The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974), which recalled the horrors of the Vietnam War; or Hostel (2005), which called our attention to the legacy of torture in the ongoing ‘War on Terror’. The genre is plugged into its social and historical context in fairly compelling, complicated and persuasive ways. By bringing popular horror into the classroom, our students engage with the traumatic legacy of the recent past in a genuinely serious manner. Consider the questions that the fictional world of dystopian horror drama The Handmaid’s Tale (2017+) raises in class, in which women are forced into reproductive slavery by the political ruling class. Our students have drawn parallels between the visceral, woman-centric horror that ensues on the show and the grave violation of women’s rights in the world beyond it – resulting in a critique of male hegemony in the Trump-era. We encourage our students to engage in respectful dialogue with us and one another on the issues we face – not with a forced or feigned sense of neutrality, but with the promise of respect and integrity and in the spirit of understanding.3 By engaging with popular horror in this manner, our students have been able to acquire new literacy skills and critical awareness to comprehend, review, critique, and produce meaningful content. They have also learned that popular horror not only forcefully reflects, but also provokes, a certain sense of how the world is, as well as the capacities for our relations within it. It goes without saying that horror films are not political manifestos, but rather, cultural commodities designed to make a killing at the box office. Much of the best horror remains textually open, meaning that a variety of contextual, cultural anxieties can be cued– depending on what you are teaching. Horror is a complicated business. Therein lies its appeal. Many monsters can stand for two, or more, seemingly opposed termssimultaneously.4 Horror, it might be said, is progressive precisely to the degree that it refuses to be satisfied with the simple.5 The moment of unprecedented incoherence that we currently find ourselves living in, and the subsequent complexity of popular horror, particularly horror that is not noticeably political at all, provides the ideal access point with which to demonstrate to our student show our political world is becoming increasingly popularised, and our popular world increasingly politicised, in new and important ways. A plethora of recent horror circles thematically around the contemporary political ills of Trump, without quite being about them.6 Take the echo of reality found amidst the new influx of natural creature features, 47 Meters Down (2017) and The Shallows (2016), which suggest a bewildered and horrified reaction to Trump’s US-Mexico border strategy. In both popular films, a carnivorous Great White shark cruelly mans an imagined border whilst threatening to devour new visitors. Such horror films, which emphasise constructions of the human and non-human, of ‘us’ and ‘them’, of borders and bloodshed, have provided a vantage point for our students to contemplate weaponised boundaries and/or how some are ‘othered’ or demonised by society. Five key horror trends appear to be emerging as the Trump era unfolds: (1) the monstrous clown is crawling back out of the drain and into the cultural landscape; (2) female and queer representation is taking a turn away from capital punishment for existence toward narratives of survival and resilience; (3)significant stories of white male anger are proliferating once again; (4) powerful horror centric imagery and tropes are bleeding into children’s animated film, adult animated TV series, internet parodies and podcasts and (5)horror reboots, such as Twin Peaks: The Return, are deliberately resisting any comfortingly nostalgic escape from the socio-political realities of the American present. As the old saying goes, “every generation gets the movie monster it deserves,” so a monster is never just a monster, but rather a metaphor for something much larger and more real. Our students study popular horror in class, read critical theory, and make connections between popular horror and their own societies. They study horror in terms of gender, politics, philosophy, religion, and so on, and write papers, give presentations and make short films about horror. They learn a lot from engaging with popular horror and have fun whilst doing so, much to the displeasure of some of our more dubious colleagues, who equate studying less popular work with doing more serious work. We believe that it is crucial to teach, and explore, the shared history of fear and what scares us most. The pedagogy of horror will galvanise, unsettle and transform your classroom, if you give it a chance. You too can use the genre as a powerful tool to consider complex and interconnected issues of identity, culture, monstrosity, normativity, and the fine line between fiction and reality, with your own students.

Notes

1 Monteverde, Giuliana and McCollum, Victoria. 2020. Resist! Protest Media and Popular Culture in the Brexit-Trump Era. Rowman & Littlefield.

2 McCollum, Victoria. 2016. Post-9/11 Heartland Horror: Rural Horror Films in an Era of Urban Terrorism. London: Routledge.

3 Acosta, Katie. 2017. Bringing in the Political Self. Insider Higher Education (Online).

4 Hills, Matt. 2012. “Cutting into Concepts of ‘Reflectionist’ Cinema? The Saw Franchise and Puzzles of Post-9/11 Horror.” In Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror by Briefel, Aviva. and Miller, Sam. Austin: University of Texas Press.

5 Wood, R. 1984. “An Introduction to the American Horror Film.” In Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film by Grant, Barry, Keith and Sharrett, Christopher. New Jersey: Scarecrow.

6 McCollum, Victoria. 2019. Make America Hate Again: Trump-Era Horror