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Be Afraid, Be Somewhat Afraid

By **TERRENCE RAFFERTY**

HORROR is among the most durable, if disreputable, American movie genres, and Halloween, which always generates at least a small spate of horror films, is the best time to check its vital signs, to determine whether it's really alive or just stubbornly, annoyingly undead.

Recent evidence hasn't been encouraging. The last horror movies to make a significant impression on audiences came out in the previous millennium: the self-conscious, quasi-parodic "Scream" pictures (the first was in 1996), the indie sleeper "The Blair Witch Project" (1999) and, of course, the gimmicky ghost story "The Sixth Sense" (1999), which jump-started the increasingly dubious career of M. Night Shyamalan.

Since then, the genre's fans have had to get by on a diet consisting largely of sequels, prequels, remakes, the occasional monster smack down ("Freddy vs. Jason," "Alien vs. Predator"), and most dismaying of all, an awful lot of expensive, heavily promoted action pictures that use horror elements but don't have the decency to honor the genre's sworn mission: to scare the wits out of us. We've had too many of those in the past year or so: the vampires-versus-were-

wolves blowout "Underworld," "Van Helsing," in which Bram Stoker's famous vampire-hunter is pressed into service to take on a whole axis of evil, composed of werewolves, vampires and Frankenstein's monster, too and most recently, "Resident Evil: Apocalypse." That's the state of the art: plenty of tricks, precious few treats.

A certain amount of silliness is, as even fans have to admit, business as usual for this genre. Horror movies have always lent themselves to what we now call franchising: the act of squeezing every last drop of box-office blood out of a popular premise. Old movie monsters never die, and they're rarely allowed to fade away with any dignity, either. Freddy, Jason and Michael Myers keep bouncing back from oblivion in picture after picture, looking a bit paler and a bit creakier every time, just as Dracula and the Wolf Man and Frankenstein's orphaned creature did in years past.

There is no point bemoaning this: the absurd, seemingly endless replication of beloved cinematic grotesques is an inevitable consequence of the relationship between the horror movie and its natural audience, the young. Especially in the two and a half decades since John Carpenter's low-budget slasher classic, "Halloween" (1978), attracted teenagers to the multiplex like crows to roadkill, the audience for the genre has consisted overwhelmingly of adolescents and early twentysomethings, who tend to be deeply appreciative of stuff that isn't good for them.



Rolf Konow

The wonderful thing about this market, from the point of view of the canny exploitation filmmaker, is that it's a constantly renewable resource: when the viewers of, say, the original "Friday the 13th" lose their appetite for cheap thrills, their little brothers and sisters will be just discovering theirs, and "Friday the 13th, Part VI: Jason Lives" will be waiting for them.

You wouldn't want to call this fast-food processing of gore honorable, exactly; it is, however, a fairly efficient delivery system for fear and trembling, the staple products of the genre. In the late 70's and the 80's, horror franchises

sprouted like fur on a werewolf — "Halloween," "Friday the 13th," "Nightmare on Elm Street," "Alien," "The Howling," "Predator," "Hellraiser," "The Evil Dead," among others — and although some have since expired (apparently), a remarkable number survive, enfeebled but game. This Halloween brings the latest sequel (the 73rd, I believe) to the 1988 killer-doll movie, "Child's Play": the new installment (set to open Nov. 10) sports the jaunty title "Seed of Chucky." While you might not feel the need to actually see the movie, it's kind of comforting to know that Chucky, Howdy Doody's evil twin, is still out there in the heartland, terrorizing the American family.

And I don't even like the Chucky movies much. It's just that the series' out-there gruesomeness and frank stupidity strike me as preferable to the more recent style of big-budget action/horror pictures like "Resident Evil: Apocalypse" and the coming "Blade: Trinity" (Dec. 8). The heroes and heroines of this sort of film do battle against traditional horror-movie threats — mutants, lethal viruses, vampires, homicidal computers and the like — but in a proactive, can-do sort of way that seems to negate the true power of the genre: the dire possibility that the malignant, irrational forces we struggle against may finally be stronger than we are. Who could seriously doubt that these sleek paramilitary operations, full of advanced weaponry and preen-

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ing computer-generated imagery, will succeed in beating back the dark implacable enemy? There might as well be a "Mission Accomplished" banner in the background of every scene.

The action/horror movie can be exciting, but it's not usually very frightening. Ridley Scott's "Alien" (1979) gave people nightmares; James Cameron's action-packed sequel, "Aliens" (1986), did not. Horror is essentially a passive genre: terrible things happen, and you're powerless to prevent them. And for the audience, the experience of watching the movie is, at its purest, a yielding of rational control, the kind of total surrender that takes will and conscious agency out of the equation. Sober, practical-minded adults on the whole do not enjoy that feeling: it undermines their sense of power over their own lives — without which, they fear, everything they've built could fall apart, everything they value could be lost. Kids, who have less to lose and fewer illusions about their power in the world, give up control a lot more willingly, even eagerly, and therefore rate going to horror movies only a little below getting drunk and having sex in their hierarchy of desirable activities.

It's what the great teenage poet Arthur Rimbaud, a serious devotee of sex and absinthe, was talking about when he recommended "the total derangement of all the senses." A good horror movie should derange at least a couple of them, and the result is often a kind of light-headedness, a weird giddiness. The audience at, say, a Chuckie picture can seem to be screaming

and laughing at pretty much the same time, as if it couldn't quite distinguish one response from the other. And why should it? Fear and laughter are both strong, involuntary, practically ungovernable reactions; it's not for nothing that laughter is so frequently (and approvingly) described as "helpless." Horror and comedy have in fact always got on famously. And since horror filmmakers seem unsure of how much fear the post-Sept. 11 audience will tolerate in its entertainment product, a fair number have turned to comedy as a kinder, gentler danger of the viewer's senses.

Arguably the most enjoyable horror-like pictures this year have been comedies: Don Coscarelli's funky "Bubba Ho-tep," in which an old man who thinks he's Elvis (and may be) joins forces with an old man who thinks he's John F. Kennedy (and because he's black, is definitely not) to drive a reincarnated Egyptian mummy out of their Texas nursing home; David Koepp's "Secret Window," in which Johnny Depp plunges hilariously into the special hell of writer's block; and Edgar Wright's extremely funny "Shaun of the Dead," which pits a tiny band of British yobs and yuppies against a horde of ravenous zombies. (The heroes and heroines make their last stand at the place they feel safest — the local pub, where they can knock back a pint or two while they're knocking off the flesh-eaters.)

But horror aficionados can't be satisfied with laughs alone, any more than the zombies of "Shaun of the Dead" would settle for a packet of crisps. Something more nourishing is required, and the only movie currently serving up an adequate portion of the genre's traditional red meat is Takashi Shi-



Rogue Pictures

"Shaun of the Dead" pits British yuppies against a horde of ravenous zombies for a show-down at the local pub.

mizu's "The Grudge," an English-language remake of his 2000 film, "Ju-On," which is as unnerving a horror movie as I've ever seen.

"Ju-On" is the sort of film at which the audience does not scream, laugh and carry on — one of those rare movies, like the original "Haunting" or "Carnival of Souls" or "Blue Velvet," that turn you relentlessly inward and leave you unable to share your dread with anyone else. Even if you see it in a packed theater, you feel alone. The subject of the film, in fact, is a curse that afflicts its victims with a kind of murderous alienation, a lethal, self-obsessed paranoia that persists, and spreads, beyond the grave. There's some conceptual similarity to the rage-virus premise of last year's "28 Days Later," but no stylistic similarity whatsoever. Both "Ju-On" and "The Grudge" are as hushed and elegant as "28 Days Later" is boisterous and crude.

The remake is set, as the original is, in Tokyo, but substitutes for its Japanese heroine an American student played by Sarah Michelle Gellar, whose vampire-slaying

skills do her absolutely no good in this situation. Although Mr. Shimizu, who has the most sinuous, seductive horror-movie style this side of Brian De Palma, supplies some deep chills in "The Grudge," this new version of the story sacrifices the surreal intensity of the original for the sake of improved narrative clarity. Mr. Shimizu's vision is still a nightmare, but this one's a lot easier to shake off.

The peculiar fact is that despite all the external threats we live with in our world of color-coded fear, American horror movies now seem more effective — scarier, that is — when they're dealing with the terrors that come from within. There are no monsters as such in Brad Anderson's moody independent thriller "The Machinist" (although Freddy Krueger might not feel entirely out of place in its hero's hallucinatory reality). But if you're in the market for sensory derangement, this picture certainly delivers the goods. The title character is a factory worker named Trevor (played by a shockingly gaunt Christian Bale) who, he says, has not slept in a year: to his perpetually

wakeful consciousness the world has begun to look menacingly strange.

Although "The Machinist" isn't in any sense a conventional horror film, it does somehow tap into what seems to me the native source of American horror, i.e. the Puritan colonists' *much* too lively sense of sin. By the end, Trevor — who, it turns out, has made his own bed and is unable to lie in it — seems like one of the unfortunates described by Jonathan Edwards in his famous, luridly terrifying 18th-century sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." This is not an ideal Halloween movie, perhaps, but it could be some kind of omen.

Are we actually more frightened, as the Puritans were, of what's inside us than of what's out there in the wilderness? Maybe! In any event, the internal terrors are infinitely harder to laugh at, or to beat back with overwhelming force, or to turn into a lucrative, teen-friendly franchise. Horror movies will always be with us, but in the foreseeable future, our thrills might not come so cheap.