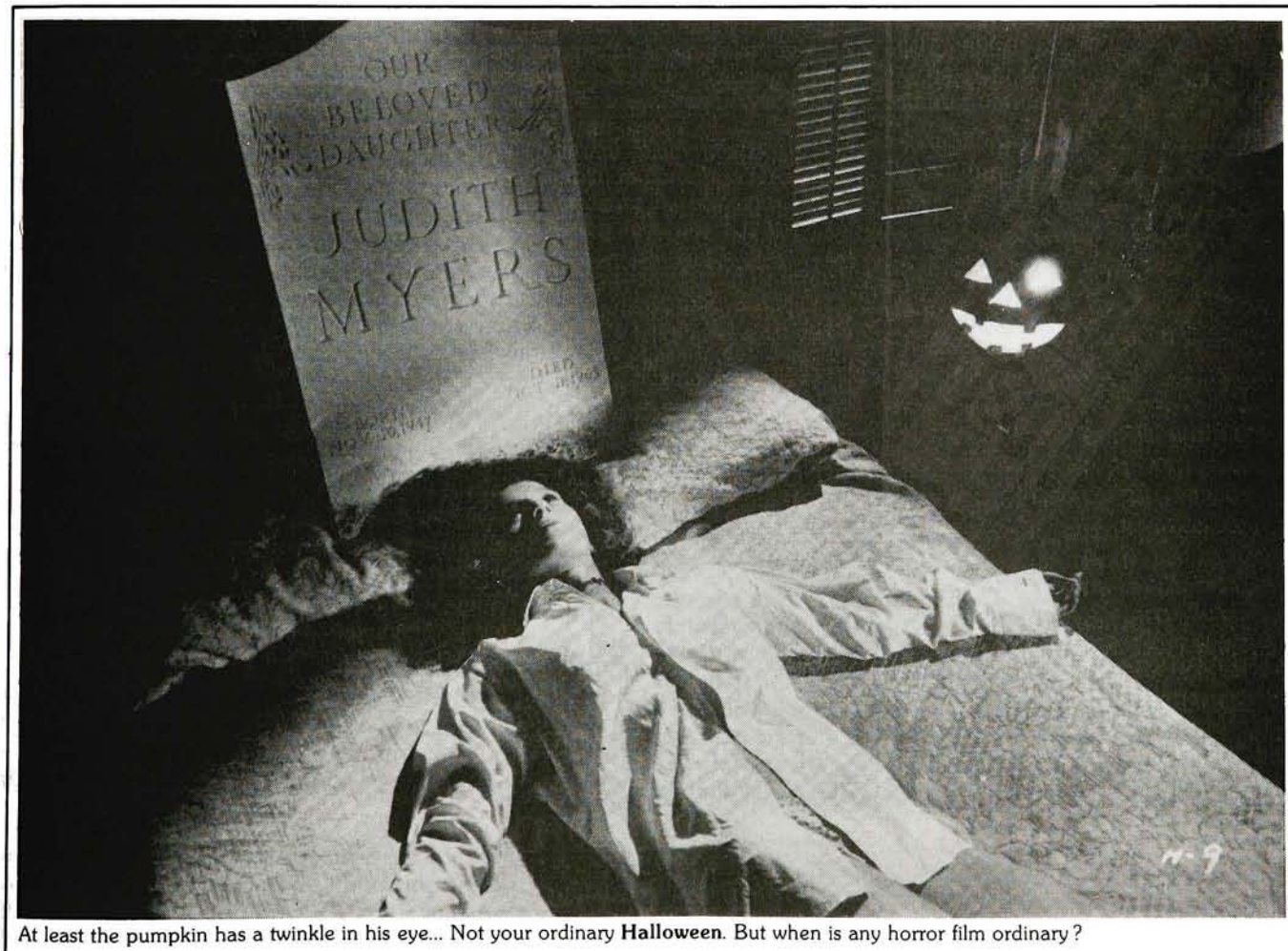
the american nightmare

by florence jacobowitz

The horror film genre seems to exist in a world of its own, populated by monstrous characters and viewed by ardent followers. But the repressions which stimulate the genre are omnipresent in our society, as Robin Wood and Richard Lippe, organizers of A Retrospective of American Horror Films, explain.



At least the pumpkin has a twinkle in his eye... Not your ordinary **Halloween**. But when is any horror film ordinary?

'The American Nightmare — A Retrospective of American Horror Films took place September 7-15 as part of Toronto's Festival of Festivals, and was, in the words of F.W. Murnau, "a symphony of horrors." The retrospective was a wonderfully orchestrated event, well-organized and clearly thought out. A collection of essays on the horror film entitled *The American Nightmare,* edited by Robin Wood and Richard Lippe, were made available to all passholders, as were a daily series of program notes. The series' films were organized in a progression of decades from the Twenties to the present, with the best and sometimes most representative films of the decade chosen for screening.

Daily seminars, set up after the first film of each festival day, were hosted and attended by a number of distinguished film critics and filmmakers. These were designed to open up a two-way discussion about the films and the process of filmmaking. The retrospective was not only a chance to see the largest collection of horror films ever to be screened in North America, but was also an important opportunity to analyze why, — in a decade that has produced such comparatively regressive and infantile films, — the horror film has stood out as an ever popular, energetic and increasingly violent filmic genre.

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Although it is unfair to try to condense the essays in *The American Nightmare,* they develop the philosophy underlying the most progressive, artistic works of horror: that socio-sexual-political repression is projected into the 'Other' and that this 'Other' becomes the embodiment of all that normal society deems threatening. That which is repressed is never eliminated: it resurfaces in the perverted monstrous form, essentially a force from within ourselves, our families and our social structures.

(One needn't delve too deeply to feel the intense repression our society fosters; it is blatantly and simplistically exemplified by the Ontario Censor Board. The Board's recent decision not to allow the original versions of **Luna** and **Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands** to be distributed in the province have caused the producers to withdraw these films altogether, rather than allow them to be mutilated.)

The relationship of art to culture and, more specifically, of the horror film to the 'entertainment' milieu, was discussed at length during the seminars. There is resistence in our society to analyzing the phenomenon of 'entertainment' and discussions on this point were among the most thought-provoking of the Retrospective. Other questions dealt with why there was currently a resurgence of the horror genre, and how the filmmakers and the film impart both conscious and unconscious, subversive messages within the confines of a capitalist/patriarchal Hollywood system.

Despite the limited attendance at the seminars, The American Nightmare film retrospective — or perhaps, *introspective* — achieved its end; that of encouraging critical dialogue, of opening up films to a three-way discussion involving the artist, the critic and the audience, and especially of emphasizing the need for good film education.

The first step towards any type of constructive change involves identifying our problems and accepting our responsibilities. This includes examining cultural art forms like the horror film, which so starkly reflect social and cultural despair, annihilation and apocalypse. We are still struggling to be freed from the oprression of the night.

Florence Jacobowitz

In the following interview Florence Jacobowitz speaks with Robin Wood and Richard Lippe about the significance of horror films in our society, audience responses to them, and the question of responsibility for the violence portrayed.

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Cinema Canada: *You stated that the aim of the Retrospective was to investigate the horror film as a cultural phenomenon — to give insights into our own culture. Do you feel the screenings were a success? What progressions were set up and do you feel they were achieved?*

Robin Wood: I thought the Retrospective went well. You know lots of people were very enthusiastic about the films; but the seminars were attended by so few. The critical seminars never had more than about twenty people. Obviously, the reflection on horror, as opposed to simply looking at horror films, depended very much on those seminars, as well as on the book. It's very difficult to assess what sort of impact or usefulness the book will have because we can't know, but I would say that the achievement of the festival in terms of attracting attention to the horror film as a cultural phenomenon was very limited indeed.

So you didn't really notice any progression in the audience's questions.

Richard Lippe: The audience varied so much every day, it's very difficult to assess their reactions.

Robin Wood: The fact that such a small proportion of the people that came to the films attended the seminars is a serious problem, and I don't know how one gets around this. It's so deeply rooted in the lack of any serious film education, and particularly in the lack of any such education directed towards Hollywood, the entertainment film, and the whole concept of entertainment. The pressure of our society has caused it to be dismissed as something trivial, simply to be enjoyed and not to be thought of in terms of a cultural phenomenon.

Richard Lippe: Since our Retrospective was part of the festival, we were competing with the festival proper, which is geared to the European film and to the idea of the 'art' film, as opposed to the 'entertainment' film. Under those circumstances our Retrospective was dismissed as something secondary, because people were geared to the idea that the art films were meant to be seen, 'thought about', and taken seriously. A horror film retrospective is something that you don't really bother about unless you have nothing better to do. Wayne Clarkson, from the festival, agreed that the idea of a retrospective such as this should have been done at another time, when it could be given its own place, as opposed to lumping it together with the festival.

Do you think that the critic is perceived as a threatening force because, in his analysis of horror films, he defines the monstrous as that which normal society tries to repress? That the system must then repress this intellectualization of entertainment to remain safe?

Richard Lippe: There is the fear of intellectualizing entertainment. You are destroying the pleasure of entertainment and supposedly the two are to be kept apart. When one deals with cultural artifacts there are always hierarchies where it is permissible to become intellectual and critical, and where it is not. Entertainment is enjoyment for the masses. Although something more 'elitist' can be criticized, one shouldn't intellectualize on a 'lower' mass level. This thinking is erroneous: one can enjoy and be critical at the same time.

Robin Wood: I think that raises an absolutely essential quandry. Certainly in popular culture (in fact, until you get right outside in remote areas, like Godard's recent movies that don't really get shown anywhere), the only way in which really radical and subversive ideas can be expressed is under the cover of entertainment, often at unconscious levels on the part of the filmmaker, as well as on the part of the audience. In a way the concept of entertainment is enormously important and useful because it enables all kinds of things to be expressed that otherwhise wouldn't be. If one compares the horror film with the American social problem film, which consciously tries to tackle specific social problems, implying that if these problems are set right everything will be O.K., one sees that that's the most that can be done at the conscious level. On the other hand, because films are labelled as 'entertainment', they are set apart from any serious consideration, their usefulness is undone at the same time as it's there. Criticism has to concern itself with attempting to sort out what is *actually* there.

About the title of the book, The American Nightmare, *do you feel the 'nightmare' is particularly American, or of a collective, Western cultural origin? Is it different from the British nightmare, or the Canadian nightmare?*

Robin Wood: First, I must point out that it wasn't our title. The title was given by Wayne Clarkson. I suggested *Return of the Repressed,* but the *American Nightmare* is what was announced at the press conference, and we had no real quarrels with that title. What we're talking about is possibly a patriarchal, capitalist nightmare which would apply to the whole of Western culture: but it clearly gets a different inflection in each particular culture. There are specifics about the American horror film that distinguish it from the British horror film, so there is some point to calling it 'American', as long as one doesn't assume that only America has a 'nightmare'.

Why does the horror genre particularly stand out in the last decade? Who is its audience?

Richard Lippe: (referring to a discussion with Andrew Sarris and Molly Haskell at the Ontario Film Theatre, R.L. elaborates...) Sarris mentioned that the horror film genre is one of the only genres that has retained any vitality. Molly Haskell noted that in the late Sixties Hollywood tried to get into the youth culture market, and attempted this through the horror film. The youth responded.

Robin Wood: This also seems to testify to the essentially subversive nature of the horror film. One can't explain the horror film's tremendous following among the young simply as people wanting to be scared. Why shouldn't older people want to be scared as well? It does suggest that there is, perhaps, some kind of largely unconscious attraction to the horror film, on the part of people who are trying to grow up and find their way in a still fundamentally repressive culture. The horror film appeals to them on that level.

Richard Lippe: Hollywood tried to tap the energy of the youth market that was largely directed to the music market. What is interesting is that the energy that's involved in interpretive music is found in the horror genre. It is perhaps the most energetic genre: the shock, the stimulation, the threat...

Could you re-establish the difference between the reactionary and the progressive horror film? During the festival, you said that the more violent the monster — reflecting a more intense degree of repression — the greater the violence necessary to drive it back and that certain horror films pay the price of total negation. In other words there remains no confidence to restore any values: attempts at constructive change are defeated. Is there a possibility to project and move beyond this total negation, or are we already too repressed, too 'frozen in a nightmare'?

Robin Wood: There are a number of issues involved here, one of which is the enormous importance of tone and

attitude, as against the actual message of a given film. In terms of content, on a message level, I suppose a film like Larry Cohen's **Demon** is as negative as the **Texas Chainsaw Massacre.** In terms of tone and attitude, however, it's very different. In my opinion, Cohen and Romero are the two most interesting and important directors from this point of view; their films are open to the idea of change, to the forces that might make the change. Look at the fact that the **It's Alive** babies are given a very strong positive, as well as negative, connotation: the fact that Romero's characters in **Dawn of the Dead,** through achieving a kind of personal autonomy, do manage to escape, even if it is only a temporary respite. In Romero's films, there is at least the possibility of conceiving characters who could cast off the whole legacy of patriarchal, capitalist repression, and start to rethink life, society, attitudes, and human relationships. Although the films don't offer any elaborated alternative to the society we live in, they strike a far more positive note than a film such as **Texas Chainsaw Massacre** or **Carrie**, both of which seem to accept the idea of total apocalypse — far more than the reactionary films, like the **Exorcist,** which identify energy with the traditional Christian conception of the devil, and can only serve to repress it all over again.

It is interesting that both De Palma and Cohen abandoned earlier experimental work to return to, as you describe, a real allegiance to the Hollywood tradition — in a sense sacrificing experimentation in new structures and content.

Robin Wood: In order to reach a wide audience you do have to employ conventions with which the audience is familiar. You can set about destroying those conventions, but you must start from them. When we asked De Palma about the possibility of creating a cinema that was directly committed to social change or revolution, his answer was perhaps the most revealing thing he said about his films. It was to the effect that, the cultural situation is impossible, that there is nothing anyone can do to change it, and that all the artist can do is sit back, rather grimly, enjoying the corruption around him as things fall apart.

His exact words were, "Isn't corruption fascinating?"

Robin Wood: Yes, that kind of cynicism is absolutely central to De Palma's films and explains why, in terms of any intellectual reflection on his work, he has retreated to a purely formal level. He thinks of his films in technical/formal, structural terms, creating effects and playing with the audience rather as Hitchcock did. Actually, there is a direct link there between De Palma and Hitchcock.

Stephanie Rothman, on the other hand, seemed intentionally, socially constructive, a feature visible in her films.

Robin Wood: And Wes Craven as well.

I think it is interesting that Stephanie Rothman mentions Jean Cocteau and Franju as her favourite directors. Do you think that their influence is apparent in the ***Velvet Vampire?***

Robin Wood: I was going to ask her if she was aware of the direct influence of surrealism on her films, but the question became superfluous since she answered it before it was asked. I was thinking especially of the dream sequence in the **Velvet Vampire,** and the mirror imagery in her films.

Damien (Harvey Stephens), son of the U.S. Ambassador to England, in **Omen** — looking dreadfully grave for one so young

The Canadian director, David Cronenberg on the other hand, feels no commitment to social change. Does that result in the totally black form his films assume? He questions whether movies have to be constructive or, as he puts it, 'didactic,' or socially responsible at all.

Robin Wood: He seems to see no point in social responsibility. His line is "As we all die in the end, what does it matter anyway". That is also extremely revealing in terms of the total negativity o his films — the most negative I have ever seen — not only in terms of content and message, but in terms of sympathies, and the sense of possibilities inherent in human beings, possibilities for development and growth. He seems to negate everything.

Richard Lippe: Is that negativity expressed as cynicism?

Robin Wood: De Palma's films are cynical, whereas Cronenberg's are pathological, and thereby potentially very harmful.

Wes Craven seems very committed to identifying problems, and bringing the question of responsibility for violence back to the audience. How does a film's violence affect the audience?

Richard Lippe: Both the filmmaker and the viewer share

An acupuncture specialist ? in **The Crazies**

responsibility for the way violence is used in a film or, for that matter, in any art work. One can't make a generalized statement. Wes Craven's films are a good test case. **Last House On the Left,** for example, is extremely violent, and yet the film doesn't exploit violence to give the audience a 'thrill' or 'catharsis'. It operates below the conscious level of 'I feel better now'. But who bears the brunt of this violence? Where does the violence come from, what are the pressures that make us violent, and how are they released in our society? Who is responsible for this? It becomes quite an involving question.

I found the audience's cheering at the end of ***The Hills Have Eyes*** *very curious: an ending like that, where the 'good guy' finally kills the last of the monstrous family, cries out, 'but at what a cost!' The hero has undergone a total role reversal, the former victim has been reduced to the same level as the violator, but the audience cheered all the killings equally.*

Robin Wood: That points out the weakness of **The Hills...** as opposed to the **Last House...** The monstrous figures are simply so monstrous that the film doesn't generate the sympathy or empathy that the **Last House...** does, so that it is much easier to cheer the hero who destroys the last of the monstrous family, too alien to be identified with on any level at all. **The Last House...** is far more disturbing. The fact that the audience feels so personally threatened cause people to walk out. Because there is so much sympathy for both the victims and the violators — in terms of audience identification — a very disturbing pattern of contradictory sympathies arise. It's easier for audiences to accept the disgust generated by Cronenberg's **Shivers.**

Regarding voyeurism, when the audience is placed in the position of 'voyeur', does it make one feel superior to the characters on screen, or more isolated and detached? Does one recognize the two-way mirror image being presented? And does this reflection lead to self re-evaluation?

Richard Lippe: It depends on the ability of the filmmaker, to make us identify with the character on the screen: which is partly why Hitchcock's films are so involving. You're involved and implicated with the characters, though not necessarily on a purely conscious level. When you are involved, particularly on the subconscious level, you take part of it away with you, which hopefully elicits a self-questioning response.The films that *don't* raise these questions, and are non-involving, are perhaps the ones that must risk exploiting violence.

Robin, you raise some important questions in your excerpt on ***The Sorcerers:*** *"To what extent do we, like Catherine, want the young man to commit horrible murders while we sit in our seats sharing the sensations in second-hand security? Are we, too, contaminated? What do we go to horror films for anyway? The experiment will only work if the guinea pig is willing." Almost like Grace, in* ***Sisters,*** *"You asked to see, so here it is."*

Robin Wood: I wrote that piece a good many years ago. I think I would change those questions somewhat. I'd want to go a step further. Instead of asking 'Do we go to horror films to see these things?', I would ask 'Why do we want to see these things?' Then, I still accepted some sort of idealistic notion of human nature containing terrible forces that have to be kept down, whereas now, my position would be that those forces should be let out so that we can examine them. By simply accepting that they must be repressed, they never get looked at. That's quite an important difference. I still acknowledge that the release of these forces is obviously very dangerous, because repression breeds perversion, and therefore violence.

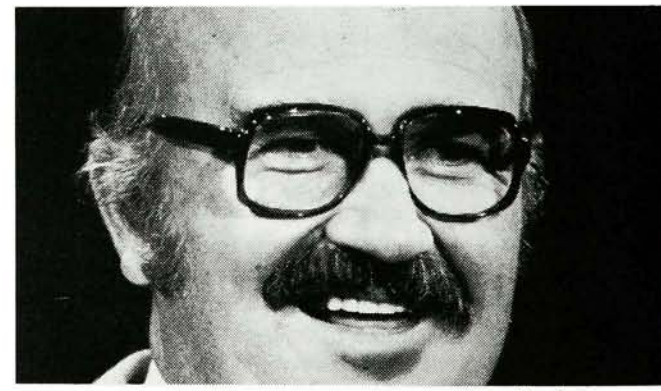
You talk of "steering towards a civilization in which the traditional concept of the horror genre could not exist — its very premises would be strictly meaningless." Is this a real utopia, do we have a long way to go?

Robin Wood: I think it's a very long way to go: farther than we've gotten in several thousand years. But the fact that the whole issue of repression within patriarchal culture is now being raised is very important. It's a step closer. This is becoming something that can be thought about and discussed, so that the notion of a liberated society becomes somewhat more than just a phrase: it becomes a possibility, however remote. And it is very remote, especially when one looks around one.

What do you hope your book ***The American Nightmare*** *will accomplish?*

Robin Wood: I hope it will make clear what we were trying to achieve in the Retrospective. I think it's very important that the book exists, with all its flaws and inadequacies. If we do anything like this in the future, I think what we have to do is review the whole concept of cinema. One crucial thing would be to place the seminars at a much more key time in the day, rather than in the morning: at a peak viewing hour, six to eight in the evening for example, so that people wouldn't just stay in bed late, but would come to the films and stay on to discuss them.

The book demonstrates why the horror genre is so central today. You point out how descent mythology, ***Der Erlkonig*** *and vampire lore, have existed as long as civilization has. It's not particularly new, it just seems part-*



Elwy Yost

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre — a blood bath beyond belief

icularly central. Any other general comments?

Richard Lippe: The Ontario Censor Board deserves criticism for its cutting films like **Dawn of The Dead.**

Robin Wood: At least six films were seriously harmed by the Censor Board: **Death Trap, Last House on the Left, The Hills Have Eyes, Martin, Dawn of the Dead,** maybe others, but certainly these were mutilated by the censor and couldn't be shown in their complete form, in what was, after all, conceived of as an educational enterprise. This is a very good example of the way in which censorship, by definition, is reactionary — that it actually prevents discussion. We are prevented from discussing what is shown in these films because the things are not there to discuss. It actually blocks the promotion of awareness which is, after all, essential education. □

Florence Jacobowitz is a graduate of York University Fine Arts department, where she is presently working on her Master's degree.