Red, Carrie White and Blue: Viewing Carrie as Symptom of the Cultural Anxieties Experienced by Americans in the 1970s

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Abstract
Following from Robin Wood, Conte locates a dialectic of sublimity and destructiveness within the film's fraught hybridization of American culture. Carrie's fondness for metaphors of deviance and sexual becoming thus invokes its eponymous character's abjection as not just a gendered, but an explicitly nationalized negotiation of the politics of normalcy.

Keywords
Carrie, horror, sublimity, abjection, 1970s, Americana
Of all the genres in American Cinema, horror is arguably the most enduring and varied. Indeed, one of the things that make a genre analysis of a horror film so challenging is that it is difficult to pin down the precise elements that make a horror film a horror film. Part of the reason for this is that the horror genre has evolved dramatically over the course of American history which “can be correlated to broader cultural anxieties into which they somehow tapped” (Phillips 3). As a result of this evolution, the horror genre has come to acquire an almost infinite variety of subgenres, making analysis even more complicated. This has led some scholars, like Robin Wood and Dennis Giles, to use psychoanalytic theory to frame their analysis of horror films because it is broad and flexible enough to pick out the elements that ‘all’ horror films, regardless of when they were released, have in common. Other scholars, like Kendal R. Phillips and Jonathan Lake Crane, prefer to use the context of when a film was released to frame their analysis.

In this essay, I will use a combination of these two methods to show that Brian DePalma’s Carrie (1976) exemplifies many of the generic elements associated with the horror genre and in doing so, suggests that the film is symptomatic of the cultural anxieties experienced by America in the 1970s. To prove this thesis, I will begin by first giving a brief description of how Wood uses psychoanalytic theory to frame his analysis of horror films and will use this description to frame an analysis of an important sequence in the film. I will then summarize Phillips’ account of how the cultural anxieties of the 1970’s and the releases of both The Exorcist (Friedkin, 1973) and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Hooper, 1974) influenced the horror genre by introducing and popularizing the element of the ‘apocalypse’. I will use this summary to show how Carrie might be viewed as a symptom of the pessimism following the social justice movements of the 1960’s.
In An Introduction to the American Horror Film, Robin Wood uses the ideas of ‘surplus repression’ and the ‘other’ from psychoanalytic theory to develop a model for the horror film (Wood 164). Repression, Wood explains, involves containing and suppressing our desires and behaviors that make living in society impossible (Wood 165). Repression becomes surplus repression when the behaviors and desires we must stifle are fundamental parts of who we are and are “unnecessary for the existence of civilization in some form” (Wood 168). Among those things that fall into the category of surplus repression are female sexuality – which Wood describes as “the denial to women of drives culturally associated with masculinity: activeness, aggression, self-assertion” – and the sexuality of children, which he describes as “the denial of the infant’s nature as sexual being” when they hit puberty and move into adolescence (Wood 167). For Wood, the idea of the other is intimately connected to the idea of surplus repression and he explains that it can be understood as “that which bourgeois ideology cannot recognize or accept but must deal with… in one of two ways: either by rejecting it and if possible annihilating it, or by rendering it safe and assimilating it, converting it as far as possible into a replica of itself” (Wood 168).

With these concepts in mind, Wood argues that the formula of all horror films can be distilled into one simple sentence: “normality is threatened by the monster” (Wood 175). Although there are a myriad of sequences (the scenes where Carrie and her mother talk about sexuality, as well as Sue’s dream sequence at the end of the film come to mind as obvious examples) in Carrie that exemplify the idea of surplus repression, there is one sequence that exemplifies Wood’s formula (and by extension, the ideas of surplus regression and the other). The first sequence takes place at the beginning of the film. At 0:00:35, there is a fade in to a crane shot of a volleyball court where a group of teenage girls – almost all of which are wearing
nearly identical pairs of black shorts, knee high socks and yellow t-shirts – are playing volleyball. The ball hits the ground and Miss Collins blows her whistle, announcing that it is “Game point, 15-14, this team serves”. As the girls play, the frame tracks into a medium shot of a Carrie, (positioned slightly to the left of the frame’s center) who misses the ball and loses the game. The shot lingers on Carrie as the other teenagers (whose faces are obscured because they are facing the opposite direction of Carrie) run past her into the top right half of the frame. As Chris passes Carrie, she tells her to “eat shit” and there is a cut to a girl’s locker room.

In the sequence described above, the distance of the crane shot and the identical outfits of the teenage girls establish ‘normality’ by making it difficult to identify features that distinguish the teenagers from one another as they work together to keep the ball in play. When the camera tracks toward Carrie, she is visually separated from the other girls, which suggests her identification as ‘the other’ by her peers. This visual identification of Carrie as ‘the other’ is reinforced at the end of the sequence through her blocking: she is facing the camera and is easily distinguished from her peers via her facial features, but her peers have their backs toward the camera which makes it difficult to distinguish them from one another. Additionally, Carrie is standing still in the left half of the foreground while her peers are moving toward the right half of the background.

Her inability to hit the volleyball and keep the game in play is the first (of many) incidents where she ‘threatens normality’. Her peers deal with her status as the other and her threat to normality over the course of the film in the two ways that Wood describes: Chris attempts to “reject” and “annihilate” Carrie by turning her peers against her and humiliating her at the prom, while Sue tries to ‘assimilate’ Carrie by ‘transforming her’ (so to speak) into a replica of herself by forcing her own boyfriend to take Carrie to the prom.
Although the types of genre analysis employed by scholars like Wood are undoubtedly useful, they are not without flaws. In Terror and Everyday Life: Singular moments in the History of the Horror Film, Jonathan Lake Crane explains that “when genres are treated like long chains of immutable codes, important historical shifts… are treated as little more than minor variations, which have no significant bearing on the fundamental meaning… of the genre in question” (Crane 23). With this in mind, I will now turn my attention toward a different form of analysis framed by Kendall R. Phillips account of how the releases of both The Exorcist and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre influenced the horror genre by introducing and popularizing the element of the ‘apocalypse’.

In Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture, Kendall R. Phillips argues that there are ten films that “made such an impression on American culture that they… redefined the notion of what a horror film is” (Phillips 3). Among these films are The Exorcist and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Phillips argues that both of these films “share a crucial apocalyptic tone” and explains that the notion of ‘apocalypse’ can be understood in three ways: as “the end of the world”; as “a final moment and a sense that the world can never be the same”; and as “a revelation” (Phillips 102). In Eros and Syphilization: The Contemporary Horror Film, Dana B. Polan offers support for this view, explaining that “the vast majority” of new horror films “seem to rely on the concept of an evil apocalypse that grows from within the social order” (Polan 205). Although Phillips acknowledges both The Exorcist and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre’s role in popularizing this theme, both he and Polan seem to agree that the element of the apocalypse corresponds to America’s collective feelings of pessimism that followed the failure of “the youthful optimism and utopian dreams of the 1960s” (Phillips 107). Polan writes that the sense
of apocalypse suggests that “the new horror films argue that in some sense, we partake in the monstrous” (Polan 204).

In Carrie, the element of the apocalypse is undoubtedly what Phillips describes as “a final moment and a sense that the world can never be the same” (Phillips 102). Arguably, the film has two final moments. The first and perhaps more obvious is when Carrie is crowned prom queen. This point in the film represents the culmination of Sue’s efforts to assimilate Carrie into ‘normality’ and for a brief moment her efforts appear to be a success: Carrie stands on the stage with Sue’s boyfriend Tommy smiles triumphantly to the crowd. However, at 1:15:34, a bird’s eye shot of Carrie and Tommy standing on stage reveals that Chris’ plans to ‘annihilate’ Carrie will triumph over Sue’s plan to assimilate her. The composition of this shot is perhaps one of the most interesting in the film; the wooden support beams that the bucket is balanced on forms a crooked, rectangular frame around Carrie and Tommy. This framing, when considered in relation to the star decorations as well as the contrast between the red light cast on the bucket/support beams, the blue of Tommy’s tuxedo and the stage, and the white of Carrie’s gown and the chairs, evokes images of the American flag.

The second ‘final moment’ takes place after the prom when Carrie’s mother stabs her. Carrie retaliates by crucifying her mother and ends both of their lives by using her telekinetic powers (though not necessarily intentionally) to cause the house to collapse in on itself, killing them both. Where the first apocalyptic moment seemed to suggest that America’s attempts to create a new, utopian society where everyone is assimilated can never be a reality, the second apocalyptic moment suggests that any attempt to return to the ‘old’ America, where everyone is united by religious ideology, is also impossible.
Works Cited


Filmography