



Article

Genre, culture and the semiosphere New Horror cinema and post-9/11

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Abstract

What has been labelled ‘New Horror’ cinema has opened up its boundaries to incorporate signs specific to social and political events that accompanied and followed the events of 9/11. The reality of terror is transported into the fictional universe of horror. This article presents an interpretation of New Horror cinema using Yuri Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere and Wilma Clark’s extension of his theory in order to engage in a critical rethinking of how genres intersect with culture. The primary focus is on contemporary horror films that function as allegories that address post-9/11 and, in turn, to apply Lotman’s theory of the semiosphere and the concept of cultural ‘explosions’ to account for the generic shifts that have transformed the structure of the horror genre.

Keywords

9/11, allegory, cultural explosions, genre theory, horror cinema, Yuri Lotman, semiosphere, terror, torture porn, zombies

The semiosphere, genre and post-9/11

In the wake of the terror attacks that took place on 11 September 2001 film critics have commented on the increasing popularity of a new kind of horror film that is not only dark and vicious in the worlds it depicts but which is also socially aware and critical of the cultural context that gave birth to it. What has been labelled ‘New Horror’ cinema has opened up its boundaries to incorporate signs specific to social and political events that accompanied and followed the events of 9/11. The ‘torture porn’ *Hostel* and *Saw* sequels revisit scenes of ‘interrogational torture’ that were controversial during the Bush–Cheney administration. Numerous ‘living dead’ films, including *28 Days Later* (2002), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Quarantine* (2008) and *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) address global destruction through biochemical and bio-genetic warfare which have

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become a rising concern post-9/11; and the science fiction-horror films *Cloverfield* (2008) and *War of the Worlds* (2005) reflexively reconstruct images of New York in states of catastrophic destruction. These are but a handful of examples of films that use horror conventions as a form of allegory that engages in a critical dialogue with audiences about themes of paranoia, devastation, terrorism, survivalism, and global politics and ideology. The reality of terror is transported into the fictional universe of horror. In this article, I will offer an interpretation of New Horror cinema using Yuri Lotman's theory of the semiosphere, with particular focus on his books *Universe of the Mind: The Semiotics of Culture* (2001 [1990]) and *Culture and Explosion* (2009), and Wilma Clark's extension of his theory in her dissertation *Lotman's Semiosphere: A Systems Thinking Approach to Students' Meaning-making Practices with Digital Texts* (2010) in order to engage in a critical rethinking of how genres intersect with culture. I especially focus on contemporary horror films that function as allegories that address post-9/11 and, in turn, apply Lotman's theory of the semiosphere and the concept of cultural 'explosions' to account for the generic shifts that have transformed the structure of the horror genre.

When referring to post-9/11 I take my lead from Kevin J. Westmore who explains that

'Post-9/11' relates to specific moment in time and a specific event, but has also come to refer to a mindset. Politicians, pundits and media figures use 'pre-9/11' and 'post- 9/11' to categorize ways of viewing the world and the subsequent necessary actions we must individually and collectively take. The words refer to the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, but also all that has come after.... The phrase thus refers to a day, an event, a period, a mindset and a cultural shift. (Westmore, 2012: 4)

These events were presented to the world through diverse media – newspapers, news and current affair television programs – that repeated and codified the depiction of key events associated with 9/11 and post-9/11. Stephen Prince argues that, with regard to the impact on filmmaking practices: 'The most significant long-term influence of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and of the Iraq War that followed, is likely to be found in the provision of new templates for genre filmmaking' (2009: 286). As an event that has been acknowledged as one of the most watched media spectacles in human history, many of its signifying systems were absorbed into the semiotic space of the cinema, influencing the production of 'based on reality' films that explicitly narrativized the 9/11 events and US military presence in the Middle East – for example, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Home of the Brave* (2006), *World Trade Center* (2006) and *United 93* (2006). In this article, however, I am more interested in how the semiotic space of the horror film has opened its porous border to incorporate and renegotiate these real-life events, especially as mediated through the media. The media spectacle that captured the events of 9/11 and the so-called 'War on Terror' included the televising of amateur and professional footage of the falling Twin Towers, images of masses of grieving people and the memorial walls that commemorated those who had died and those who were missing, the destruction of the Pentagon, the Abu Ghraib torture scandal in Iraq, which included photographs of Iraqi prisoners being tortured by United States military personnel, and hordes of citizens trying to flee from the Twin

Towers wreckage. Horror film director Eli Roth proclaimed in an interview with Fox News that, 'Thanks to George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney we have this whole new wave of horror' (Parker, 2009: n.p.). New Horror focuses on graphic and horrific scenarios that often drive home subversive and socially aware thematic issues. Douglas Kellner, for example, sees a direct correlation between 'the violence and brutality of the era' and the *Saw* and *Hostel* film series. The *Saw* franchise, for example, is seen as putting 'on display the demented illusions, grotesque hypocrisy, obscene violence, and utter lunacy of the Bush–Cheney era, which finds its true face in the sick and twisted killer-ex-machina Jigsaw' (Kellner, 2010: 7). Jigsaw's engineering of 'elaborate torture mechanisms and tests to punish "Evil" of various sorts' are read as reflecting how 'the Bush–Cheney administration was constructing apparatuses of torture in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo, and other sites throughout the world to punish its alleged enemies and "evil doers"' (2010: 7). Meanwhile, in *Homecoming* (2005) the director Joe Dante reveals a dominant tendency among horror filmmakers of recent years in the desire to make explicit the connection between the socio-political context and the emergence of the horror. In the film dead soldiers return as zombies in order to vote against the administration that sent them to the Iraq War (while the President is a Bill Clinton look-alike, his voice sounds like that of George W. Bush).

In his essay 'On the semiosphere' (2005 [1984]) and later in his book *Universe of the Mind* (2001 [1990]) Lotman outlined his theory of 'the semiosphere', which he understood as encapsulating 'the semiotics of culture'; semiotic objects that exist within the semiosphere are understood as operating like 'thinking structures' that reflect 'functions of intelligence' (2001 [1990]: 2). For example, considering the horror film genre as one such semiotic object, some examples of the genre responded directly to other semiotic objects that comprise the media dissemination of events and responses to post-9/11. As a result, as I will argue, the horror genre entered a dialogue with the 9/11 signs that were repeated in media representations; it did so by incorporating iconic events and images – collapsing buildings, the destruction of cities, torture, war – into its generic structure. Within the shared space of the semiosphere, the signs of one semiotic object (media representations of 9/11) entered another semiotic object (the horror genre). In the process, the horror genre exposed the codes of a specific media reality to the rules of the horror genre, forcing these new signs to succumb to the thinking structure and conventions of the genre. In effect, the sign systems and iconic imagery of post-9/11 collided with the signifying system of the horror film and, as a result, a new type of horror film emerged.

Lotman's theory of the semiosphere provides us with a useful model with which to analyse the process of generic development and understand how genres interact with culture to effect new patterns and meanings in a genre. Film genre theory has grappled with these questions of generic development since the 1960s. In his influential article 'A semantic/syntactic approach to film genre' Rick Altman provides an overview of key methods of analysis favoured by film scholars since the 1960s. Altman explains that the two dominant approaches to genre theory consisted of the semantic approach on the one hand, and the syntactic on the other, developing alongside the rise in popularity of semiotic theory. The semantic approach, for example, locates the dominant and repeated codes and signifiers of a genre – in the case of horror this can include the monster (as zombie, psycho-killer, ghost, etc.), the monster's weapon-of-

choice, enclosed dark spaces, the community under threat, the hero/ine, etc. The syntactic approach, on the other hand, is less interested in accumulating a list of formulaic signs and more in the larger structure that locates thematic and conceptual patterns that provide insight into the 'meaning' of a genre. For example, in her book *Games of Terror: Halloween, Friday the 13th and the Films of the Stalker Cycle*, Vera Dika applies a syntactic analysis. Dika's approach is influenced by Will Wright's study of the western in his book *Six Guns and Society* (1977). Adapting the formalist theories of Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist myth theory, Wright located repeated narrative patterns and character actions across the history of the western from the 1930s to the 1960s, but these repetitions also included some differences. Arguing that transformations occurred in the dominant patterns as the genre evolved, Wright contended that the reconfiguration of the western across time (for example, the shift from lone gunslinger to multiple gunslingers, from embracing the community to critiquing the community, etc.) reflected the cultural and social shifts in the society that consumed these films. Similarly, Dika argues that the stalker film, which she sees as being ushered in by *Halloween* (1978) and ending its cycle in 1981, operates as a ritualistic game that works on a deeper structural level as modern-day myth. The stalker film offers cathartic release from 'the changes in political and cultural attitudes in the late seventies and early eighties', including the post-Vietnam trauma, conflict with Iran during the American Embassy hostage crisis of 1979, inflation and the 'reconciliation with institutions of marriage, family, and religion in the wake of the 1960s counter-culture revolution' (Dika, 1990: 132). The problematic nature of both Wright and Dika's models is that the methodology used to relate the genre films' syntactic structure to the cultural context in which the films were produced remains vague and hypothetical.

Altman's insistence on a 'semantic/syntactic approach to genre study' is an important one: 'these two categories of generic analysis are complementary', he states, and 'they can be combined, and in fact ... some of the most important questions of genre study can be asked only when they are combined' (1984: 11). In addition, Altman criticizes the way semiotic genre analysis bypassed history by focusing on 'genres as the interpretive community' while ignoring the importance of the 'live community': the audience (1984: 8). In the revision of the semantic/syntactic structure he presented in his book *Film/Genre*, Altman develops this further by arguing for 'a semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to genre' (1999: 207). Acknowledging the influence of Lotman's analysis of textual systems, Altman states that genre studies should consider not only the addressee, but also how combinations of signs produce specific meaning within a larger language structure that is embedded in a social context:

a semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach refuses determinacy to textual structures taken alone, but in addition it acknowledges the difficulty of extracting those textual structures from the institutions and social habits that frame them and lend them the appearance of making meaning on their own. (1999: 211)

In effect, Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach mirrors Lotman's semiosphere, which contains a myriad of semiotic objects. Yet Altman's method lacks

the systematized structure applied by Lotman, in particular, his concept of borders and peripheries and the dialectic generated by the signifying systems that lie within and those that occupy the space beyond. The usefulness of Lotman's concept of the semiosphere is that it is concerned with culture as a complex system of signs that communicate with one another. However, this is not an amorphous system of floating signifiers but rather one in which multiple sub-semiospheres form their own coherent language structures and signifying systems that are contained by conceptual borders, peripheries and centres. Lotman discusses the significance of the boundary as a mechanism for 'semiotic individuation' (2001 [1990]: 131). While containing its own, unique units of semiosis, according to Lotman, the boundary or periphery of a semiosphere is also malleable and open to dialogue with other semiospheres that circulate around it. It is at the periphery that new signs can enter a semiosphere from another semiosphere so that 'what is "external" is transformed into what is "internal", it is a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere's internal semiotics' (Lotman, 2001 [1990]: 137). In one passage, Lotman turns to the example of genre, explaining that:

something similar can be seen when the texts of one genre invade the space of another genre. Innovation comes about when the principles of genre are restructured according to the laws of another, and this 'other' genre organically enters the new structure and at the same time preserves a memory of its other system of encoding. (Lotman, 2001 [1990]: 137)

The 'boundary acts as an organising mechanism' that filters and adapts 'the external to the internal' (Clark, 2010: 65). The more the previously external signs are adapted and used by the new system – in this instance the insertion of post-9/11 signs into the horror film – the more they shift away from the periphery and towards the core, which is where the dominant, law-forming systems are located (Clark, 2010: 65; Lotman 2001 [1990]: 214). As such, the presence of signifiers that refer to the era of 9/11 have now become more dominant in examples of New Horror, in effect marking what Indrek Ibrus calls 'micro-explosions' that have disrupted and altered the existing paradigm of the horror genre (Ibrus, n.d.). I will return to Lotman's assertion that, while 'the "other" genre enters the new structure' it also 'preserves a memory of its other system of encoding'. For the moment, my interest lies in Clark's elaboration of Winfried Nöth's (2006) observation that there are levels of semiospheric space that 'comprise an interconnected group of semiospheres, each of them being simultaneously both participant in the dialogue (as part of the semiosphere) and the space of the dialogue (the semiosphere as a whole)' (Clark, 2010: 57).

Many examples of New Horror cinema are in dialogue with multiple spaces simultaneously: with their own genre; with intersecting genres such as science fiction (for example, *Cloverfield* and *War of the Worlds*); and with media representations of post-9/11 and the cultural reality this intersected with. At times, the dialogue with genre conventions may reflexively allude to other examples of the genre. For example, this was achieved with virtuosic flair in *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), which offered the diegetic audience and the 'real' audience a sample of narrative scenarios and monsters that belong to an array of horror subgenres. The main characters seal their fate by choosing to open an ancient book and reciting demonic text (a reference to *The Book*

of the Dead in *The Evil Dead* [1981]), which unleashes the Zombie Redneck family as the main film monster. Later in the film, however, the two surviving characters are confronted by hundreds of glass boxes that imprison monsters that refer explicitly to specific films or monster-types from horror subgenres: the angry molesting tree (*The Evil Dead*), a mummy, vampires, zombies, a Hell Lord (*Hellraiser*), a killer robot, a werewolf, witches, etc. By presenting the monsters as a series of signs, through audience expectation, the film draws attention to the satellite semiotic structures (plot, community, iconography, main protagonist/s) that would accompany them if they were main antagonists of their own film or subgenre. Effectively, both film and spectator engage in a dialogic process that speaks to the nature of generic conventions and the production of generic meaning. In other examples, a different dialogue ensues: one that plays on audience expectations of generic signs in order to critique, undermine or transform those signs. *Psycho*, for its day, was a notorious example of this kind of dialogue. Relying on the audience expectation that its main female protagonist Marion would be the film's central character, the film then undermined this by killing her off a third of the way into the film. In doing so, not only did the film reject the conventions of narrative cinema, it also opened up a dialogue with what would later become a convention of the stalker/slasher subgenre of horror – the murder of sexually promiscuous characters at the hands of a psycho-killer. Horror films, therefore, enter a dialogic relationship with other examples that are part of a larger semiosphere on a micro level, which is bound by sets of generic rules and conventions (horror subgenres, other genres, other films). However, horror films also participate in a dialogic relationship that is part of the semiosphere on a macro level – the semiosphere that is culture.

Kevin J. Wetmore, for example, locates numerous horror films released after 2001 that introduce tropes and iconic images that refer directly to post-9/11 terror events. He suggests that 'together these elements represent ways in which horror cinema has appropriated 9/11 and its imagery, not least of which in order to contain it, understand it and re-experience it under safer conditions or with a different ending' (Wetmore, 2012: 24). One of the most prevalent conventions to enter New Horror cinema is the use of the 'found footage'/ hand-held camera technique that implies that film characters are not only witness to the horrific event that is narrativized, but that they also video it.

Although we have seen images of crowds fleeing before, from *War of the Worlds* (1953), *Independence Day* (1996), *Gojira* (Godzilla, 1954), and numerous disaster films, the image changed in two ways on 9/11. First is the transformation in the nature of the image itself. The crowds fleeing in the above-mentioned films run past a static camera. Crowds move past a camera that is capturing the image, but is separate from the events itself. As a result of much footage from 9/11 coming from cameramen and women who were running themselves, a very different crowd-fleeing scene has risen to prominence: flashes of a fleeing crowd combined with unrecognizable images as the person holding the camera runs. As one can see from the images from *Cloverfield* and *War of the Worlds*, crowds now flee not past the camera, but with it, creating a jarring, shaky series of images echoing the camera work of 9/11. (Wetmore, 2012: 26)

In addition to the prevalence of the hand-held cameras and the 'found footage' device that adds to the immediacy of the horrific scenarios (which is also used in *Quarantine*

[2008], *REC* [2007], *Diary of the Dead* [2007], *The Garlock Incident* [2012], *The Tunnel* [2011] and many other films), New Horror cinema has adapted numerous other codes and tropes. Iconic images that are re-appropriated circulate around the ‘idea of New York City as “ground zero”’ (Wetmore, 2012: 24) and include the image of New York burning, attacked or on fire; planes crashing; crowds fleeing; buildings collapsing; walls covered in photos and fliers of the missing and the dead; empty, abandoned streets; and bodies falling to their death from high-rise structures (Wetmore, 2012: 26ff). Footage of high-rise buildings that collapse and fill the city with clouds of smoke, dust and fire, that trap victims in their wreckage, or leave behind abandoned cities in the wake of destruction are played out in *Diary of the Dead* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), *War of the Worlds* (2005), *Vanishing on 7th Street* (2010), *I Am Legend* (2007), *28 Days Later* (2002) and *28 Weeks Later* (2007) – although, the last two films are set in London. Echoes of the 9/11 wall of photos and posters that depicted missing individuals appear in *War of the Worlds* following the alien attack, and in *Pulse* (2006) to warn of the evil spirits. The photograph of ‘the Falling Man’ (and many others like him) who leapt to his death in order to escape the crush of the collapsing Towers is rehearsed over and over in the films *1408* (2007), *Pulse*, *Quarantine* (2008), *The Descent* (2005), *Cloverfield* (2008), *The Happening* (2008), *Skyline* (2010) and *The Ruins* (2008) (see Wetmore, 2012: ch.1). Wetmore provides a detailed reading of *Cloverfield* and *The War of the Worlds*, arguing that the films are obsessive about weaving in scenarios that recall post-9/11. In the case of *Cloverfield* Wetmore states:

Emblematic and iconic locations in New York are attacked and destroyed. The characters must rescue a friend trapped on the top floor of a skyscraper.... Like *War of the Worlds*, it attempts to understand and contain 9/11 through the use of its imagery in a monster movie. (Wetmore, 2012: 54)

In one scene, it is revealed that the character Marlena has been infected by one of the aliens. The viewer looks on in horror as she is ‘hustled into a lit quarantine tent, where her silhouette expands and explodes, spattering blood on the plastic.... She is a monstrous suicide bomber, exploding open to generate more terror among the doctors and soldiers’ (Wetmore, 2012: 55). In this instance, the reality and fear of suicide bombers is reinvented within the context of horror conventions, the instigator of the bomb now being an alien monster.

Horror and allegory: ‘torture porn’ meets 9/11

In his influential book *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film*, Adam Lowenstein asks the question, ‘What does cinematic horror have to tell us about the horrors of history?’ Lowenstein asks us to think of the relationship between horror and real trauma in terms of an ‘allegorical moment’ (2005: 2). Lowenstein’s allegorical moment occurs because the horror genre has opened its borders to incorporate extra-textual signs from the semiotic space of post-9/11. Numerous horror and cultural theorists explore this idea of horror functioning as allegory that addresses the historical trauma of post-9/11. For example, in *It Lives Again! Horror Movies in the New Millennium* (2008) Axelle Carolyn turns to ‘torture porn’, an example of New Horror cinema initiated by the *Hostel* and *Saw*

films, which shifts the source of horror away from monstrous others (aliens, zombies) and onto monstrous, sadistic humans. Carolyn states that there are:

obvious parallels between *Hostel* and real-life atrocities that the Western world was only too familiar with, from Kana (Jennifer Lim)'s burnt face recalling the blowtorch torture Saddam Hussein's troops used against Iraqi dissidents, to the image of Josh (Derek Richardson) hooded, stripped to his underwear and tied to a chair directly mirroring photographs from Abu Ghraib published by the US media a couple of years earlier. (2008: 129)

Catherine Zimmer (2011: 85) offers a similar parallel between the torture porn films *Hostel* (2005) and *Turistas* (2006) and 'real-world torture'. For Zimmer these films react to the presence of the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay and the abuses at Abu Ghraib and, as such, the torture of young Americans in foreign countries must:

be read as a tremendously projective fantasy – one in which American youth are figured as the victims rather than the perpetrators of this kind of organized violence. At the minimum, the contemporary appearance of so many films about the economies, bodily experiences, and technologies of torture must be viewed in conjunction with the politics of torture that has concurrently occupied the American and world stage. (2011: 84)

While offering an alternate position to Zimmer's interpretation of these films as both regressive and politically conscious, Matt Hills also discusses how these films mine the key signs of post-9/11 and military involvement in the Middle East. He states that 'at the level of their narrative problematics – returning obsessively to the meanings and contradictions of supposedly "righteous torture" – the *Saw* films can be read as recodings of U.S. political debates', particularly in relation to the US torture of prisoners of war and the media representations of Abu Ghraib (Hills, 2011: 107). However, what is especially insightful about Hills' analysis is that, rather than understanding the *Saw* films as clear-cut, cause-and-effect reflections of real-world politics and, particularly, US media coverage of them, he instead acknowledges that the films eventually succumb to an internal logic that is about the conventions of the horror genre: 'As torture porn, these movies circle thematically around contemporary political controversies, without quite being "about" them' (Hills, 2011: 107). To call upon Rick Altman's syntactic/semantic model of genre analysis, while the films draw heavily on post-9/11 culture on a syntactic level, this syntax is then applied semantically to the logic of the horror genre. Hills offers the example of the character of Eric Matthews in *Saw IV* (2007) who, even though he is 'literally on thin ice while dressed in an orange jumpsuit, this iconography – potentially visually cueing imagery of Guantanamo prisoners – goes unremarked on in the film' (2011: 108).

There is thus both a distance from the post-9/11 'real' via the finite, non-interrogative, and artificial modality of Jigsaw's traps, and a closeness to the 'real' via the narrative problematic of torture claimed as morally justifiable. As Solomon argues of effective art-horror, *Saw*'s narratives are precariously poised between these two meaning-making possibilities. But the objects of Jigsaw's game are not othered as terrorists, enemy combatants, or Islamic fundamentalists. Quite to the contrary, these victims represent versions of U.S. audiences' cultural selves: they are implicitly or explicitly identifiable as American citizens. As a

producer on *Saw II*, Mark Bury, argues, 'He's killing these people who don't appreciate how good they have it in life, as most people in America don't realize.' (Hills, 2011: 108)

The 'two meaning-making possibilities' that comprise 'effective art-horror' in this instance are the 'real' as mediated through the media and New Horror cinema, which functions according to its own version of the 'real'. The *Saw* films, like so many other examples of recent horror films, open up their borders as examples of horror cinema to generate a dialogue with the events and representation of post-9/11, but they also transform the semiotics of post-9/11 – through this dialogue – into a language that is part of the semiotic structure of horror cinema. While the syntax of 9/11 is embraced, debates about the politics and real-world terror are jettisoned from the *Saw* films' semiotic structure. Instead the syntax succumbs to a horror narrative concern with individual and collective identity and morality.

In his article 'Spectacle horror and *Hostel*: why "torture porn" does not exist' Lowenstein also presents a case for understanding post-2001 horror films as both being products of their immediate cultural context and as examples that inevitably have allegiances with the reality of their own genre history. However, Lowenstein's conclusions differ from Hills' regarding what happens to the syntactic structure of 9/11 once it enters the space of horror. As Lowenstein explains, *Hostel's* 'production and reception took place within the shock waves generated by the Iraq War's Abu Ghraib torture scandal, a news story that broke widely in April 2004' (2011: 50). Following its release, film critic David Edelstein published article in 2006 in *New York Magazine*, labelling the 'recent ultraviolent trend in narrative cinema "torture porn"' (Lowenstein, 2011: 42). In discussing the prevalence of 'explicit scenes of torture and mutilation' in these films, Edelstein also draws a parallel with post-9/11 and the 'brutal scenarios of domination at Abu Ghraib' (2006: n.p.).

For Edelstein, part of torture porn's status as 'porn', with its connotations of gratuitous, artless, harmful excess, stems from its irresponsible relation to history. 'Torture porn', according to this logic, wallows in torture with the effect of justifying its use at Abu Ghraib rather than critiquing it. But is this true? ... [Edelstein] ignores the possibility of spectacle horror's mode of feeling history as anything other than immoral and irresponsible. It is true that when *Hostel* evokes one of Abu Ghraib's most notorious images, the photograph of a hooded Iraqi prisoner wired for electrical torture, the hooded prisoner is no longer a victim of American torture but a victimized American citizen. Yet this potentially wishful reversal of Abu Ghraib gets complicated by how its spectacle is routed through horror film genre iconography. (Lowenstein, 2011: 50)

Lowenstein argues that during the hooded torture scene, the use of the I-camera – which is a device associated with point of view of the killer in the slasher film – is transferred to the victim Josh's viewpoint under the hood.

But here in *Hostel*, the I-camera belongs to the victim, not the killer. Through horror genre iconography, then, the I-camera provides a visual suggestion that Josh stands in not just for an American victim of torture, but also for an American torturer. The inverted use of the I-camera is one way ... that *Hostel* confronts the audience with American responsibility for Abu Ghraib rather than dismissing it. (2011: 52)

I agree with Lowenstein that, like so many contemporary horror films, *Hostel*, like its early cinema cousins, channels its spectacle horror through spectator desires to feel history' (2011: 50). For Lowenstein, therefore, examples like *Hostel* appropriate the syntax of the 'real' and 'representation' and, in doing so, emerge with a new dialogue that explicitly critiques US involvement in the 'war on terror'. Dialogue between two semiotic spaces is shaped into an allegory that becomes the means to social critique; in the process, the genre shifted and introduced new signs into its structure.

New Horror cinema has provided one of the most ruthless political critiques of the social events relating to US and allied-country involvement in the 'War on Terror', and the dialogue that occurs through allegory transforms 'real-world' events (the destruction of the Twin Towers, the Iraq War, terrorist bombings, bio-warfare, etc.) into horrific, fantastic and imaginary narrative scenarios. As such, these films don't direct themselves to conveying events of 9/11 and the 'War on Terror' in the way news media do, instead they adapt, redefine and transform the signs of these events by placing them in dialogue with the conventions of horror. To return to the Lotman quote from above, while interacting with media spaces depicting 9/11, the horror film also 'preserves a memory of its other system of encoding' – namely, the encoding system that is the horror genre – but in creating a dialectic relationship with systems that are external to it (media representations of 9/11), the horror genre has pushed and expanded its boundaries to allow for the entry of new syntactic structures. In turn, these syntactic structures produce new semantic meanings. As these patterns are repeated in film after film, the new semiotic structures produced shift away from the periphery and towards the centre of the horror film's generic space, in the process becoming part of the genre's core discourse.

Cultural texts, semiospheric texts, explosions and zombies

Lotman's model of the semiosphere has a great deal to offer genre analysis. Genre films exist within the semiosphere that is culture and, as such, they are always in dialogue with the semiosis that circulates in that culture. Lotman's description of the semiosphere encompasses both the micro and the macro of cultures: 'It is simultaneously portrayed as part and whole; as both semiosphere and semiospheres' (Clark, 2010: 56). However, he fails to pin down a precise definition that speaks to a distinction between the micro and macro levels. The analysis of the 'torture porn' films offered above reveals how these films are in perpetual communication with the micro (the horror genre) and the macro (culture). For the rest of this article, I will further develop the spatial relationship that exists between the culture and history (macro) and genre (micro). I am indebted to Wilma Clark's detailed delineation and extension of Lotman's theory of the semiosphere, and agree with Clark's conclusion that:

[Lotman's] lack of differentiation in the dual use of the term is problematic and results in a lack of clarity in the relationship between the notion of semiosphere as 'greater system' and the notion of individual semiospheres as sub-systems of that system. Lotman does use other terms to describe culture in its micro context, e.g. 'substructures' ... 'sub-systems' ... and 'sub-semiospheres'.... (Clark, 2010: 56)

While media coverage of post-9/11 has a more immediate relationship to the reality of 9/11, it is nevertheless a mediated reality. Both the media representations of post-9/11 and the contemporary horror film function like sub-semiospheres or sub-(generic)-structures that produce semiotic systems on a micro level from within the macro space of the larger cultural context of post-9/11. Clark's clarification of the concept of the semiosphere is useful in this respect. The semiosphere is '(1) the space of a particular culture; (2) the space of two or more communicating cultures; and (3) the whole semiotic space of culture' (Clark, 2010: 95); beyond this, however, as Clark explains, Lotman fails to further articulate these three systems. Clark proposes instead that:

- (1) The space of a particular culture be labelled a cultural text.
- (2) The space of two or more communicating cultures be labelled a semiospheric text.
- (3) The whole semiotic space of culture be labelled the semiosphere. (Clark, 2010: 95)

... I propose that the concept of the semiospheric text be used to frame the notion of a system of interest. As an absolute minimum it is an indicator of actuated semiospheric dialogue. It may reflect communication between a single cultural text and the semiosphere as a whole, described as intra-systemic dialogue. Alternatively, it may relate to the dialogue between two or more cultural texts in a process of inter-systemic dialogue. (Clark, 2010: 96)

The media spectacle surrounding the events of 9/11 and its aftermath may be viewed as one cultural text, and the contemporary horror genre as another. Both are media representations and exist within the larger semiotic space of culture that is the semiosphere. To refine the definition further still, given that New Horror cinema as cultural text has opened its boundaries to communicate with the media spectacle of 9/11, it is also a dynamic 'semiospheric text' because it is in dialogue with a system external to it. Lotman argues 'that "thinking" semiotic structures need an initial impulse from another thinking structure and that text-generating mechanisms need a text from outside to set them going...' (Lotman, 2001 [1990]: 3). In the case of New Horror, while retaining many of its core codes and conventions, the genre has also opened its borders to an outside text. In the process, the 'thinking structure' of this external text has introduced new signifiers and meanings within the space of the horror genre.

Lotman argues that:

Many systems encounter others and in the midst of flight change their appearance and their orbits. Semiotic space is filled with the freely moving fragments of a variety of structures which, however, store stably within themselves a memory of the whole which, falling into a strange environment, can suddenly and vigorously restore themselves. (Lotman, 2009: 114)

Recent horror films have undergone precisely such a transformation. In thinking through the relationship between horror and post-9/11 directors like Eli Roth, Alexandre Aja, Juan Carlos Fresnadillo and James Wan (to name but a few) have exposed the 'memory of the whole' that is the horror genre to new systems. In doing so, the horror genre has restored itself and shifted in new directions. As Lotman explains, 'Semiotic systems, encountered in the semiosphere, display an ability to

survive and to be transformed and, like Proteus, become “others” whilst remaining themselves’ (2009: 114). The boundary that separates ‘the closed world of semiosis from extra-semiotic reality, is permeable’ and ‘is constantly transgressed via intrusions from the extra-semiotic sphere which, when bursting in, introduce a new dynamic, transforming the bounded space and simultaneously transforming themselves according to its laws’ (Lotman, 2009: 115).

There are multiple levels of dialogue and interaction that occur across culture(s), and in relation to the new wave of horror, this includes socio-political events, media representations of those events, genre conventions and, more specifically, horror genre films. Semantic collision between cultural texts results in dialogue and translation whereby a system – in this case the semiotic space of New Horror cinema – can integrate the semiotic units of another system and generate a dialogue with these sign systems, in the process either rejecting them, or integrating and translating the signs into its own system and, by doing so, creating new meanings. Clark explains:

The act of translation relates to a process of transformation. It is not a mere substitution of like for like but a remediation, an act of assimilation and resemiotisation across and between disparate sign systems. This resemiotisation generates an element of unpredictability in the dialogic process. It is this element of unpredictability that forms the basis for Lotman’s conceptualisation of the notion of explosion. (Clark, 2010: 67)

Lotman more fully articulates his theory of explosion in his final book *Culture and Explosion* (2009). In very simple terms, it represents the collision of semiotic codes from diverse systems that are reconfigured into a new semiotic system that is creative and unpredictable: ‘the moment of explosion is marked by the beginning of another stage’ (Lotman, 2009: 16). Clark adapts Lotman’s model of explosion (Lotman, 2009: 5) in order to clarify stages of communication in this exchange between cultural systems within the semiosphere (Clark, 2010: 67, 115). In Figure 1, I adapt her diagrammatic explanations and relate them to contemporary horror and its dialogue with the cultural text of media representation of post-9/11. In turn, I consider both of these spaces as coming together as a semiospheric text that is the product of the semiosphere that is culture.

As Clark explains, the space of intersection:

represents the active zone of translation.... The non-intersecting areas (A and B) are ‘excluded from the dialogue’ while the peripheral areas (T) are said to suffer from a ‘flaw of triviality’.... By ‘triviality’ Lotman means that where there is total mutual comprehension in an act of communication, no new information is generated. (Clark, 2010: 68)

The ‘flaw of triviality’ (T) occurs at the point of meeting between two (or more) systems where signs communicate but no dialogue takes place between them (the signifying systems of post-9/11 that horror rejects); dialogue instead occurs in the space of intersection (X) which is where the horror genre incorporates certain signs

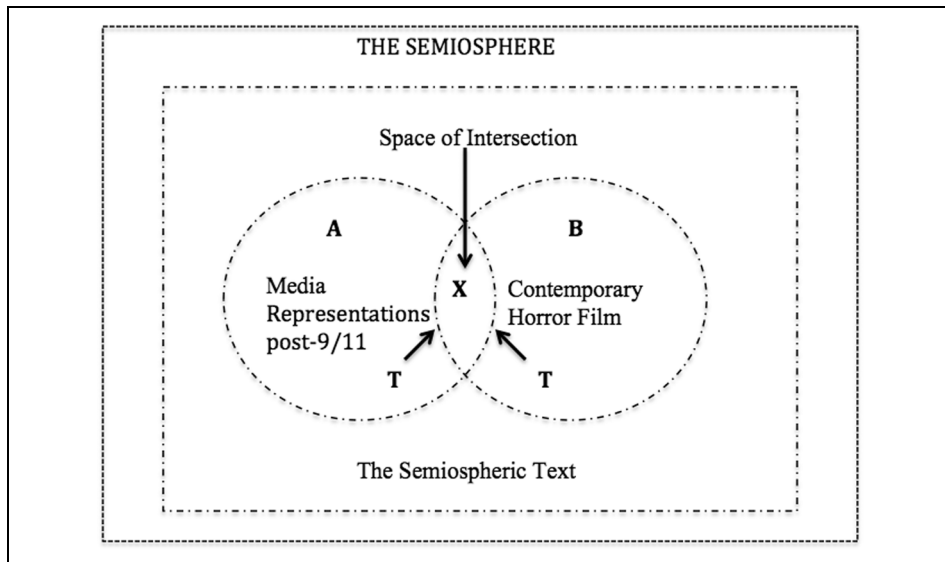


Figure 1. Contemporary horror cinema's intersection with the cultural text of media representations of post-9/11 and the semiosphere.

from A and begins to translate them into its own semiotic space, thus generating a process of 'resemiotisation' (see Figure 1). This dialectic, furthermore, may be understood as a semiospheric text in that it involves a 'space of two or more communicating cultures'. For Lotman, it's at the point of collision and intersection – where dissonance and ambiguity between previously distinct cultural texts – that new meanings can be generated. 'Where the level of ambiguity is great, the likelihood of cultural explosion is higher and the amount of new information generated is greater' (Clark, 2010: 68) – ambiguity being caused by the dialectical exchange between what had been two distinctive systems.

The example of the new directions explored by the living dead or zombie film highlight Lotman's process of explosion. Themes of military power and violence, religious zealotism and bio-warfare are central to the living dead films; one of the major differences in the conventions of the subgenre since the 1960s is that, since 2001, the return of the living dead is not so much the result of exposure to high levels of radiation, but rather, exposure to a virus – most often created by the US government as a bio-weapon that mutates human beings into zombies. This narrative scenario becomes an allegorical means to experiencing contemporary fears about biological terrorism under government, military and extremist control through the filter of horror conventions. Living dead/zombie films comprise a significantly large part of the post-9/11 New Horror cinema boom, and follow in the tradition of George A. Romero's original 'Living Dead' trilogy – *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985). The trilogy established a new subgenre of horror that engaged with social reality through allegorical means, particularly offering an apocalyptic view of the world that was critical of humanity and its failure to establish stable and effective social structures. The iconic image of the living dead returning

from the grave in these films speaks to a humanity *en masse* that has become 'zombified' under the repressive influence of ideology, social and economic conditions, and political and military control. The first film in the series – *Night of the Living Dead* – was met with controversy but eventually gained much critical acclaim: the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York was the first institution to screen the movie, *Night of the Living Dead*, honouring Romero in a film program in 1970, and acknowledging the film's status as modern art by later purchasing it for its collection. The website accompanying the 2007 MoMA exhibition and screening of *Night of the Living Dead* stated that the film's apocalyptic subject matter (the dead returning to claim the living) was heavily informed by the cultural context of the Vietnam War; furthermore, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and John F. Kennedy formed a 'metaphor for societal anxiety, the sight of America literally devouring itself'.¹

In this first wave of the living dead subgenre, Romero created a dialogue between the cultural text of horror (especially genre traditions dealing with the vampire, ghoul and voodoo zombie, as well as the more recent science fiction-horror film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]) and the cultural text of the 1960s as mediated primarily through television, radio and the press (where A is now a cultural text that focuses on the 1960s – the Vietnam War, the assassinations of JFK and Martin Luther King, etc). At the point of intersection, the dialogue and translation generated was so intense that the outcome (*Night of the Living Dead*) resulted in an explosion that triggered an entirely new subgenre of horror cinema. The more these conventions were reproduced and assimilated into the system, however, the less the potential for explosion was present. As Lotman explains: 'The moment in which the explosion is exhausted represents the turning point of the process' (2009: 15). Through saturation and exposure to the codes of the living dead film, the subgenre moved away from being the 'transformative event' introduced by *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. As hundreds of films became part of the subgenre, 'The element of unpredictability [was] substituted in the mind of the observer by an element of regularity' (Lotman, 2009: 15). In short, the more familiar rules of the subgenre were established and while, obviously, variations were introduced there were no radical transformations that would constitute an 'explosion'. In the mid-1980s and 1990s, the living dead subgenre understandably abandoned its concern with social themes of the 1960s and 1970s and ejected its dialogue with the extra-textual signs of this cultural text from its generic space. Instead, the subgenre began a more intense dialogue with other texts from within the horror genre, parodying its own conventions and succumbing to the 'comedy-horror' style. The spatial patterns seen in Figure 1 are reproduced, however now they turn inwards so that the point of intersection favours a dialogue with other examples of living dead films and horror more generally. This intensely self-referential phase of the subgenre may also be characterized as another explosion that led to a new wave of living dead films during this period (e.g. *Re-Animator* [1985], *Braindead* [1992] and Romero's *Day of the Dead* [1985]). After exhausting its potential for re-semiotization, this stage of development in the subgenre began to flag in terms of its popularity. However, since the beginning of the 21st century the subgenre has returned to its socially reflexive roots, while also achieving success on a big-budget scale within the mainstream. Living dead films in the 21st century – such as *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *28 Days Later* (2002), *Land of the Dead* (2005) and *28 Weeks Later* (2007) – returned to the hard-core

critical approach that typified the first wave in the late 1960s and 1970s. With the release of *28 Days Later*, the year 2002 is seen as a turning point that ushered in a horror film renaissance.

Many scholars on New Horror establish a correlation between the rise of hard-core, apocalyptic horror and the aftermath of 9/11. According to Kyle Bishop (2009, 2010), for example, there's a parallel between the success of the living dead subgenre of horror and current political events. Just as *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero, 1968) was placed by critics against the backdrop of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, student riots, racial unrest and the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War, so too is the zombie comeback – as witnessed in *28 Days Later* (2002), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Day of the Dead* (2008), and so many others – placed in the current socio-political context of post-9/11. Discussing the resurgence of the living dead in horror cinema, Bishop states: 'This renaissance of the subgenre reveals a connection between zombie cinema and post-9/11 cultural consciousness' (2009: 20). In fact, some films move beyond the zombie-as-allegory for social issues to directly address the post-9/11 crisis. The post-apocalyptic backdrop present in the New Horror living dead films stresses:

the collapse of societal infrastructures, the indulgence of survivalist fantasies, and the fear of other surviving humans. All of these plot elements and motifs are present in pre-9/11 zombie films, but they have become more relevant to a modern, contemporary audience. (Bishop, 2009: 20)

Like many other subgenres within New Horror cinema, the living dead films have revived their form by opening their borders to the semiotic system of post-9/11 as a cultural text. The semiotic exchange has resulted in the re-semiotization of the subgenre that may be understood as yet another explosion. The innovations injected into the space of horror (A), which have much to do with direct dialogue with the historical moment, have been a key factor in its revival and success for a 21st-century audience.

According to Bishop:

horror films function as barometers of society's anxieties, and zombie movies represent the inescapable realities of unnatural death while presenting a grim view of the modern apocalypse through scenes of deserted streets, piles of corpses, and gangs of vigilantes – images that have become increasingly common and can shock and terrify a population ... (2009: 10)

Lotman's theory of the semiosphere has a great deal to offer in terms of understanding how this intersection between society and the cultural object occurs. For decades film genre theorists have attempted to address a key logic of genre: film genres offer the spectator both repetition (sets of stable formulas that recur) and difference (innovations and new codes that are introduced). In this article I hope to have offered a glimpse into the potential a semiospheric analysis has to open up a clearer understanding this dialectic. Lotman's model makes possible a more systematized model that speaks to how genres exchange, translate and often radically transform the semiotic texts that

circulate within the space of culture; and, in turn, how the semiotic spaces of genres are part of a greater process of meaning production that is the semiosphere of culture.

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Note

1. See: <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/films/565>.

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