'Violent Exchanges: genre, national cinemas, and the politics of popular films'

Case Studies in Spanish Horror and American Martial Arts Cinema

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Contents:

Abstract:

This thesis argues that in order to understand the way in which films work one has to place them into a variety of contexts. As well as those of production, these include the historical and culturally specific moments of their creation and consumption. In order to explore how these contexts impact upon the textual construction of individual and groups of films, and our potential understanding of them, this study offers two contrasting case studies of critically neglected areas: Spanish horror cinema since the late-1960s; and US martial arts films since the late 1980s.

The first places a range of horror films into very particular historical moments: the Spain of the Franco regime; the transition to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s; and the contemporary, increasingly transnational, Spanish film industry. Each chapter in this section looks in detail at how the shifts and changes in Spanish society, the critical reception of cinema, and production trends, has impacted upon the texts that have appeared on increasingly international screens.

The second case study considers the shifts and changes in the production of US martial arts films. It discusses the problem of defining an area of filmmaking that is more commonly associated with a different filmmaking tradition, in a different national cinema. Each chapter here investigates the ways in which 'martial arts movies' operate in strikingly different production contexts. In particular, it contrasts films made within the US mainstream or Hollywood cinema, and the exploitation world that functions on its fringes.

Finally, these case studies suggest that a fuller understanding of these works can only be achieved by utilising a number of approaches, both textual and contextual; creating an approach which Douglas Kellner has described as 'multiperspectival'.

1. Introduction

Violent Exchanges: genre, national cinema and the politics of popular films is the study of two distinct types of films in very particular national, cinematic, cultural and political contexts: Spanish horror films from the 1970s onwards, and martial arts films produced in the USA since the late 1980s. It will argue that in order understand these specific examples of popular cinema one must place them into particular national, political and cinematic contexts. Furthermore, throughout each chapter it will consider the ways in which these contexts inform the potential readings of individual films and groups of films.

From the outset the concept of genre has been both a key component of this study and informed the major assumptions behind it. That is, that popular films fall into generic boundaries and that our understanding of these works is intertwined with our shared acceptance of generic codes and conventions. It also acknowledges that these codes and conventions may change and develop over time, and that any genre may have contrasting cycles and trends in operation at any time vying for dominance within it. For this reason I do not make concrete claims for sweeping, definitive generic definitions but argue that a detailed textual analysis must be employed to properly consider each film alongside placing it within the shifting boundaries of a film genre.

Alongside this, and also at the centre *of Violent Exchanges: genre, national cinema and the politics of popular films* is the argument that in order to understand these films one must place alongside an understanding of the generic codes and conventions in play an awareness of the contexts of their production. Here, this involves very particular historical and cultural moments that assist in an explanation of why certain types of films appeared in the manner that they did within certain industrial production contexts. What follows then is an exploration of Spanish horror cinema and US martial arts films that is based on the drawing together of a variety of approaches both textual and contextual.

1.1 Genre

Genre as an approach to cinema has now had a long and fruitful place within film studies for over 40 years. Its first major impact was as part of a move to displace author based approaches in the 1960s, in favour of ones that more clearly acknowledged the wider social and cultural influences upon, as well as the industrial nature of, cinema. However, much of the work that appeared was primarily concerned with identifying the boundaries of what constituted film genres. For example, Will Wright's analysis of the western, *Sixguns and Society: a structural study of the western* [1] is concerned centrally with issues of definition. Andrew Tudor has identified this drive as the search for the 'X' that links these films together under a generic label[2]. In terms of a wide ranging analysis this search can become reductive and ultimately limiting. This study will take a lead from Douglas Pye's article 'Genre

and Movies' where he suggests a move away from simple definition, arguing that 'It seems more likely that the outlines of any genre will remain indistinct and impossible to chart and that genre criticism should concern itself with identifying *tendencies* within generic traditions and placing individual works in relation to these'[3]. In fact one might argue that contemporary cinema itself invites critics to move beyond these somewhat essentialist positions regarding what makes an individual film part of a genre. In particular, this has been the result of many films blurring traditional boundaries, as they become self-conscious, generic hybrids.

Whilst films themselves have changed so too have the critical approaches to them. However, through these changes, as Barry Keith Grant has observed, 'genre criticism has been able to accommodate the interests of newer approaches to film' [4] and maintain its position as a vibrant and important starting point for much contemporary writing on cinema. That has been the case whether that work has been focussed on the films themselves, their industrial contexts of production, or their audiences and the reactions they have to films and cinema-going. Genre can therefore be usefully linked to a wide variety of aspects connected the life of a film, including those beyond the cinema screen in terms of audiences or industry. Again, as Grant notes genre approaches, 'have been exceptionally significant as well in establishing the popular sense of cinema as a cultural and economic institution, particularly in the United States, where Hollywood studios early on adopted an industrial model based on mass production.'[5]

One of the key things Grant identifies is the fact that for the most part genre study has concentrated on Hollywood films. However, there is a an increasing acknowledgement that genre filmmaking exists outside of the dominant Hollywood industry, produced within and across other national cinemas across the globe. Grant himself acknowledges that in his introduction arguing that 'As one might expect, genre criticism has concentrated on (mainstream) American cinema...But such questions as the relation of genre to ideology have ramifications beyond Hollywood. From Japanese Samurai films to Italian westerns to French gangster films to Hong Kong action movies, almost all national cinemas have been influenced to some degree by American genre movies.'[6] His argument echoes Peter Hutchings' comment that 'genres exist not only in American cinema but also in other national cinemas and for non-American audiences. The more one considers this geographical dispersal, the more genres seem to become rather fragmented entities. For example, as far as the horror genre is concerned, it arguably makes more sense to interpret British/Italian/Spanish horror films in relation to those institutions that characterise the local cinematic regime rather than to lump them all together into a unified whole.'[7] Taking note of what both there writers argue this study addresses genres that have strong relationship with Hollywood cinema but which also display traits that can only be understood fully by isolating them in contexts that are beyond Hollywood. Therefore what follows will acknowledge the influence of Hollywood cinema on these genre films but will also consider them in their own production contexts.

1.2 National Cinemas and popular genres

In the introduction to their 1992 collection *Popular European Cinema*, Dyer and Vincendeau[8] identify that, traditionally, popular cinema produced in Europe has been perceived as not 'arty' enough for those who champion art cinema and not slick enough for those who celebrate the products of Hollywood. Falling between these two poles, the study of popular European film has lagged considerably behind the academic and critical work produced with regard to both conventional art cinema and the style of popular cinema most typified by Hollywood. In a similar fashion, the products of the exploitation end of the American film industry have also tended to slip outside critical vision. In this case they also lack the high production values of Hollywood, and fail to fit accepted notions of US art house or 'independent' cinema. That is not to say that scholars have ignored popular cinema produced in Europe and exploitation cinema in the USA. Significant early work was produced on things like the spaghetti western, for example by Christopher Frayling[9], and by Aaron Lipstadt and Jim Hillier on Roger Corman's New World company[10]. Indeed recent years have seen a marked increase in work concentrating on the neglected area of US exploitation cinema, with perhaps the most substantial piece being Eric Schaefer's *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*[11].

In the case of European cinema much of the critical work produced still continues to consider, explicitly or implicitly, a clear distinction between the art cinema products, traditionally so closely associated with European cinema, and those

produced in more aggressively commercial contexts. Here, I want to argue that this overly simplistic division needs to be broken down in order to realise that the commercial industries across Europe have produced works of great critical interest. In the case of Spanish horror cinema these are works that in their ambition and achievement should be considered as significant films worthy of sustained study in their own right and not 'interesting' but still lesser works.

Whilst decades of interest in Hollywood has managed to successfully elevate the products of that industry to the status of justified objects of study in film departments and on film courses, the products of European commercial cinema remains somewhat marginalized. Indeed, when courses have included popular European films they have often been as part of wider discussions of, for example, auteur directors. In these cases the European films of directors such as Hitchcock and Sirk have been continually seen as minor compared to their Hollywood output which has been the focus of the most sustained academic work on these figures. Again, this works to maintain the problematic assumption that if you are going to make interesting films in a commercial context, Hollywood is the place to do it. If, as an academic or critic, you want to take popular films seriously then Hollywood is often assumed to be the most obvious place to look for subjects.

In relation to European cinema, V. F Perkins[12] has made clear why this has been this case. He considers that when approaching European popular cinema it has usually been seen as a poor relation to the commercial slickness of Hollywood. If one

is interested in popular cinema there seems to be an unwritten assumption that, at the very least, we should look at work with higher production values that is seen by large audiences. Hollywood's global reach has meant that other national industries that produce commercial work often struggle in splendid isolation, their products rarely reaching the international festival circuit and even less often acquiring international distribution. Simply, if these films are rarely seen beyond their national cinemas then they are very unlikely to be the focus for sustained critical work. The idea of genre, already identified as a key approach for this study, has also become increasingly popular in the study of national cinemas. By concentrating on genre cinema critics have been able to a move away from traditional approaches to non-US cinemas that have focussed on key art cinema directors, often isolated from their industrial production contexts due to their perceived auteur status.

In the case of the critical examination of Spanish cinema the turn towards an intellectual investigation of popular cinema has been a very slow one. This can partly be explained by the mistrust of popular film shown by many Spanish critics and intellectuals throughout the 1960s and beyond as they championed an anti-Franco art cinema. As Sally Faulkner has noted, many of these writers and critics dismissed popular cinema for 'its saccharine optimism, facile humour and low production values'[13]. This was certainly due to the political context at the time, which involved the development of an anti-Franco artistic resistance which included a number of figures who would have an enormous influence as taste makers in the 1960s and 1970s. For such people filmmakers like Carlos Saura clearly represented an

intellectually and artistically rigorous style of practice, and vitally one that challenged the regime in terms of its allegorical mixture of form and content. Such films of the so-called New Spanish Cinema brought the country awards at international film festivals, but failed to attract large domestic audiences. Against these films the products of the commercial, Spanish film industry was seen as almost in-league with the Franco dictatorship.

More recently writing on Spanish cinema has sought to redress this imbalance by focussing on the popular films previously largely ignored. This realignment has included a number of works that have looked closely at the comedies produced in Spain from the 1960s onwards. In doing so both Triana Toribio[14] and Marsh[15] have argued that these films do not simply reflect the values and ideals of the Franco regime but often work to undermine them. Other s such as Labanyi[16] and Woods[17] have considered the musical a suitable genre through which to take Spanish popular cinema seriously. Spanish horror cinema, however, has not yet received such re-evaluation. The first case study of this project is designed to reveal not only the ways in which horror films undermined the values of the Franco regime but also actively articulated anti-Franco ideas. It then goes on to suggest that horror has been an important genre in Spain and one that has provided challenges to the values and ideals of mainstream filmmaking.

1.3 Popular Cinemas and their Interaction with Hollywood

Spanish horror cinema from the 1970s onwards allows this study to investigate how a popular genre can intersect with the very particular social, cultural and political, as well as production contexts of a specific historical and national situation. Spanish horror cinema also provides an opportunity for a re-engagement with a number of films that offer clear critiques of the society within which they were produced. By considering how generic codes and conventions are used as a cloak under which potentially oppositional filmmaking was produced I argue that Spanish horror cinema has an important place within the history of Spanish cinema. A place that the genre has often been removed from in established histories of the nation's politically motivated cinema.

In a contrasting, but complementary, manner US produced martial arts films from the 1990s onwards allow for a consideration of how popular films produced in the shadow of Hollywood's mainstream continually enter into a system of exchange between the exploitation and the mainstream American film industries.

US martial arts films have on occasion entered into the economic system of mainstream Hollywood. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of stars such as Steven Seagal and Jean-Claude van Damme in the 1990s.The ability of Hollywood to assimilate a peripheral form such as the martial arts film has a clear impact on the form and style of the US produced martial arts films that follow. This influence occurs in terms of, most obviously, production values and budget, but also vitally in relation to the distribution, exhibition and consumption patterns of these works.

However, more recently the assimilation of Hong Kong martial arts film practitioners and styles has relegated the US version of the martial arts film back into the ghetto of exploitation cinema. Certainly, when addressing the idea of the martial arts film one has to take into account that for most people the most prominent examples that spring to mind are those films that are produced within the Hong Kong film industry. Indeed, it is from within the Hong Kong and Chinese, and perhaps to a lesser extent Japanese, film industries that most peoples conception of the codes and conventions of the martial arts film emanate [18]. However, it is highly problematic to simply attempt to transfer these Hong Kong styles and approaches into the realm of US film production and the works produced in this context. Again, as in the case of Spanish horror cinema, the various contexts that surround these films are a vital component to any critical understanding of the US martial arts film.

David Desser argues that 'the martial-arts film, as a distinct American film genre, can be clearly dated as beginning in 1979. It is an offshoot, a borrowing, and an outright co-optation of the Honk Kong martial arts film...'. In his attempt to delineate the genre Desser identifies 5 sub-genres or variations of the martial arts film in the USA. These are: a) the 'arena' subgenre; b) the law enforcement subgenre; c) the 'juvenile adventure fantasy'; d) the 'video/cartoon fantasy; and e) the science fiction subgenre. In identifying these variations Desser clearly wants to make a case for the US produced martial arts film to be taken seriously[19]. However, in doing so he overlooks the fact that many of those films contained within his law enforcement or the science fiction sub-genres are probably better understood by a large section of

their audiences as law enforcement or science fiction films that incorporate martial arts action within their codes and conventions. This is an important point regarding generic distinctions. For general filmgoers and DVD renters a film such as Steven Seagal's *Under Siege* (1992) is primarily an action movie. For more hardcore fans of Seagal, those who are aware of his martial arts background, it might be a martial arts film first and foremost. In a similar fashion for a general audience Jean Claude van Damme's 1994 *Time Cop* is a science fiction action movie, for van Damme fans the martial arts elements may be more important in their attempts to classify the work generically. Both of these examples highlight the problem of definition with regard to the US produced martial arts film. Throughout the 1990s any definition becomes much more difficult as martial arts films are produced closer to the mainstream of Hollywood and incorporate stars that made their names in exploitation films. This difficulty is enhanced as they are marketed as 'action' rather than 'martial arts' in an attempt to find a cross-over audience. The latter term remaining something that was associated with low budget exploitation films until the arrival of Hong Kong martial arts stars such as Jackie Chan and Let Li in US cinema during the late 1990s and into the 21st century. As I argue in the chapter on *Forced to Fight*, a prison film that incorporates martial arts such as this one will still operate most clearly within the codes and conventions and traditions of the US prison movie. A work such as *Forced to Fight* has limited connections with the Hong Kong traditions of the martial arts film but may certainly also be read as an example of a US martial arts film. Examples such as this reveal the generic fluidity of the US martial arts film and in particular how it exists across other and in other genres. In this way I would argue they are

operating generically rather than exclusively being seen as a genre in itself. Therefore the section of this study on martial arts films reveals how the idea of an American martial arts film shifts enormously as the 1990s progresses and there is some significant success for the stars associated with martial arts action. Because of this the idea of stars across the variety of US produced MA films becomes another important factor in the second section of this study.

1.4 Stardom

If genre is one of the key approaches to popular cinema that informs this study, the analysis of stars is also of importance. In this case mostly for the second section due to the fact that Spanish horror cinema has not been traditionally closely associated with stars. The national and international marketing of that cinema was largely based upon the codes and conventions and key fictional characters linked to the horror genre rather than the performers who consistently appeared in the films themselves. Whilst Spanish horror cinema has produced stars, such as Paul Naschy, they remain rather isolated instances rather than typical of this style of cinema. Rather, the critical and fan interest in Spanish horror cinema has revolved around singular films such as *Vampiros Lesbos* (1970), or exploitation auteurs such as Jose Larraz and Leon Klimovsky. US Martial arts cinema has been much more driven by the appearance of well known actors who operate as stars and this drive has occurred within the production, marketing and consumption of these films. Stars therefore have become a key factor in the production of martial arts films in both the exploitation

context as well as those produced in a closer proximity to the mainstream of Hollywood's film production and from within that system.

As already noted, some of the film stars most closely associated with martial arts films have moved across the divide between exploitation films and lower budget mainstream Hollywood films, whilst others have been imported from national cinemas more closely linked in the public imagination with martial arts, in particular Hong Kong, whilst others still have remained in what I term the ghetto of exploitation. In all three cases the stars are used in a way that makes them the most significant element in the marketing of film. In a significant way this makes US martial arts films different from Spanish horror films. It reveals that the fact that idea of stardom does not always override that of genre and that when considering the martial arts film this study needs to utilise the two approaches together.

As with other genres, in the case of martial arts films stars have to appear in the right type of vehicle in order to make them appealing to their primary fan base. Of course this fan base may change as the chapter on the shifting nature of martial arts films in the USA reveals. In the case of a well known martial arts performer such as Jean-Claude van Damme the close association of his persona with martial arts action films meant it was more difficult to sustain a mainstream career away from this type of work. One might argue that Van Damme continues to suffer from criticism that assumes that whilst he can fight on screen he cannot act. Van Damme however has been able to continue a healthy film career by moving back into exploitation cinema,

making a series of films that have for the most part gone straight to video and DVD but have satisfied the expectations of his main fan base. A similar fate befell Steven Seagal during the same period, and he too still makes a large number of action based martial arts films finding an audience with direct to DVD releases. In both cases, they have now left higher budget martial arts films to established Hong Kong stars, such as Let Li. My analysis of the changes in US based martial arts films therefore pays close attention to the changing stars that headline them, and the transnational status of key figures such as Jackie Chan.

1.5 Cultural Exchange

Another concern that has proved important for this study is the way in which violent and melodramatic genres have appeared in national contexts that they are not most commonly associated with. It aims to challenge some of the commonly held assumptions that are in circulation regarding Spanish horror films and US martial arts films. In particular, that they are somehow lesser examples of these forms, and because of this are not worthy of any sustained critical engagement. For example, in the case of European horror cinema from the 1970s onwards, Italian films from the 1970s seem to have been elevated by both writers and fans to be the example par excellence of the genre. There are substantial works on a number of Italian directors such as Mario Bava[20], and Dario Argento[21]. However, as yet non devoted to any of their Spanish equivalents, apart from cult fan favourite, Jess Franco who has had a number of fairly detailed fan studies appear about him.

In the case of martial arts films, it is works produced in Hong Kong that seem to be accepted as the most authentic and culturally significant. It is these films that are seen as more authentic to the origins of these fighting forms and have been the focus of the studies of most martial arts films that exist[22]. In relation to these, US martial arts films are continually seen as mindless and certainly less interesting. As, what David Bordwell has termed, the 'Hong-Kongification of American cinema'[23] has occurred this marginalization of US produced martial arts films has continued and if anything increased. When US products have been analysed there has been a trend towards seeing the most interesting martial arts films produced in the USA as those that include direct Hong Kong styles or personnel or both. My study wishes to challenge such problematic assumptions and will argue for an approach that combines a contextualisation of specific films, alongside examples of detailed textual analysis. This will reveal that there is much more of interest in these works than commonly assumed.

1.6 A Note on Structure

What follows comes from my interest in popular cinema, or more specifically exploitation cinema. This has straddled the worlds of fan culture and academic research. Indeed, in some ways the project has been a way of showing that there is more to Spanish horror cinema and US produced martial arts movies than the images of gore and violence that instantly appear in peoples minds when they ask what kind of films you like. Underpinning this assertion is my conviction that low budget,

generic filmmaking has the potential to offer space for practitioners who want to 'say something' about the worlds they inhabit. Therefore certain chapters, in particular those on *Forced to Fight* and *Cannibal Man*, are devoted to such works, that is films that use their popular form to engage with serious social, cultural or political issues.

The world of popular cinema is now an established area of academia with an ever increasing body of work devoted to film analysis. However, that does not mean that most types of production have come under the searching eye of academia. In fact it is still the case that great swathes of film production are horrendously under researched. With this in mind I have chosen two case studies that I feel contribute to the breaking of new ground within the subject. I begin with Spanish horror cinema, an ignored part of global horror film production, but one that justifies further consideration even if one only thinks of the large number of works produced in that country regardless of their artistic merit social engagement. This is something that is all the more shocking when one considers, as Mark Jancovich argues, that horror has moved from the margins of academic study to being one of the most written about genres. He states that, 'In recent years, it could be argued, the horror film has taken over from the western as the genre that is most written about by genre critics.'[24] The section on Spanish horror cinema within this study will significantly expand that existing body of knowledge into a new and under researched area. I begin chapter 2 by arguing that the roots of Spanish horror cinema lay both outside Spain, in Latin America, and within the television rather than film industry. This starting point suggests that an insular, purely national or medium specific approach, will fall short of providing a

full understanding of both the particular manifestations of the genre, its wider cultural place and the influences that helped form its 'Spanishness'. This approach is maintained throughout the first case study where I go on to investigate a number of films and directors placing them firmly into their historical and cultural context. This emphasis ensures that the whilst the detailed analysis of both *La semana de asesino* (chapter 4) and *Angustia*,(chapter 5) that form subsequent chapters, utilise similar techniques of close textual analysis, the reading I offer is informed by a wider discussion of the changes in the Spanish film industry and the momentous social shifts marked by the end of the Franco dictatorship and the transition into democracy. In a similar way, the place of a director such as Agusti Villaronga, the subject of chapter 6, is discussed in light of the re-marginalization of the horror genre within the Spanish film industry and the critical desire to articulate a discussion of his work that removes it from a genre with an increasingly low cultural status. The final chapter in the opening case study brings the discussion of Spanish horror cinema up to date, arguing that more than any other popular form, the genre has been a site of contestation between those who wish to acknowledge its more serious history and those who want to simply play with the pleasures it offers. In a sense these recent trends within Spanish horror can be read as updating the struggle that the genre has aroused throughout its existence within the cinema of Spain.

The case study on Spanish horror cinema is followed by one devoted to martial arts films produced in the USA. Again this group of films has been broadly ignored by the majority of film scholars interested in martial arts cinema at the expense of the

films produced in Hong Kong. Whilst the general approach to these works is similar to that adopted in relation to Spanish horror cinema there are certain differences as I have already suggested. As the production of hand to hand martial arts films have a clearer link to one specific national cinema, that of Hong Kong, the first chapter (chapter 8) in this section outlines the specific interaction between these industries, before going on to argue that the contexts of each have meant that such general content can take very particular forms. Here, the translation of stars such as Jackie Chan and Cynthia Rothrock becomes important as they allow for a detailed exploration of the different emphasises within the construction of action on screen. The inclusion of close textual analysis of the films produced within these contexts reveals the differences of each. For that reason both chapter 9, on *Forced to Fight*, and chapter 10, on Cynthia Rothrock, offer such an approach. Chapter 11 focuses on the television series *Martial Law*, this is included because, as with the case of Spanish horror on television, it reveals the wider cultural impact of the form. I place the television show alongside, and consider it in relation to, the increased presence of Hong Kong performers and practitioners within the US film industry. By expanding into television I am able to more clearly illustrate their cultural impact. Chapter 12 draws the second case study to a conclusion by looking at recent developments in US martial arts cinema. It argues that the creation of a 'hip hop' and 'kung fu' hybrid cinema suggests that this style of filmmaking can still offer the sorts of critical space for the representation of marginalized communities that mainstream big budget Hollywood productions cannot. Again, detailed textual analysis combined with a

more contextual approach reveals films that offer a more liberal take on society than such violent forms are associated with.

The fact that both these forms have been overlooked by critics, or worse seen as of little interest to 'serious' film scholars, simply encouraged me to look again at films I had enjoyed in my youth. I would argue that, whilst both styles of filmmaking have had little academic attention, they reward more detailed study. This occurs on a number of levels and my chosen case studies allow the opportunity to explore two distinct types of popular filmmaking, revealing challenging and exciting work. This interest in the potential to be radical within popular forms of filmmaking has also led to a concern with the way in which we may approach popular films. Elsewhere I have championed an approach to analysis that explores works from both a textual and a contextual angle[25]. I therefore employ detailed textual analysis of individual films at certain moment throughout my study. However, I always endeavour to place that analysis alongside a concern with the contexts in which these films were produced, and the shifting consumption contexts that operate as they enter the world of distribution and exhibition.

Notes:

[1] Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: a structural study of the western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

[2] Andrew Tudor, *Theories of Film* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973), 132.

[3] Douglas Pye, 'Genre and Movies'. In *Movie*, 20, 29.

[4] Barry Keith Grant, *Film Reader III* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), xvii.

[5] Grant, *Film Reader*, xv.

[6] Grant, *Film Reader*, xx.

[7] Peter Hutchings, 'Genre Theory and Criticism'. In Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (eds.), *Approaches to Popular Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 74.

[8] Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau (eds.) *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[9] Christopher Frayling, *Spaghetti Westerns* (London: RKP, 1981).

[10] Jim Hillier and Aaron Lipstadt, *Roger Corman's New World* (London: British Film Institute, 1981).

[11] Eric Schaefer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: a history of exploitation films, 1919-1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

[12] V. F. Perkins, 'The Atlantic Divide'. In Dyer and Vincendeau, 1992, 194-205.

[13] Sally Faulkner, *A Cinema of Contradiction: Spanish Film in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 8.

[14] Nuria Triana Toribio, *Spanish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[15] Steven Marsh, *Popular Spanish Film Under Franco: comedy and the weakening of the state* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[16] Jo Labanyi, 'Race, Gender and Disavowal in Spanish Cinema of the Early Franco Period: the missionary film and the folkloric musical'. In *Screen*, 38: 3, 1997, 215-31.

[17] Eva Woods, 'From Rags to Riches: the ideology of stardom in folkloric musical comedy films of the late 1930s and 1940s'. In Antonio Lazaro Reboll and Andrew

Willis (eds.) *Spanish Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

[18] Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: from Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 4-11.

[19] David Desser, 'Martial Arts Film in the 1990s'. In Wheeler Winston Dixon (ed.) *Film Genre 2000: critical essays* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 77.

[20] Troy Howarth, *The Haunted World of Mario Bava* (Goldaming: FAB Press, 2002).

[21] Chris Gallent (ed.), *Art of Darkness: the cinema of Dario Argento* (Goldaming: FAB Press, 2000) and Alan Jones, *Profundo Argento: the man, the myths and the magic* (Goldaming: FAB Press, 2004)

[22] For example, Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters.*

[23] David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: popular cinema and the art of entertainment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19.

[24] Mark Jancovich (ed.) *Horror: the film reader* (London: Routledge: 2002), 1.

[25] Andy Willis, 'Cultural Studies and Popular Film'. In Hollows and Jancovich, *Approaches to Popular Film*, 1995, 173-191. Antonio Lazaro Reboll and Andrew Willis, 'Introduction: film studies, Spanish cinema and questions of the popular.' In Lazaro Reboll and Willis (eds.) *Spanish Popular Cinema*, 1-23.

2. León Klimovsky and Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador: the origins of the Spanish Horror Cinema of the early 1970s.

Spanish horror cinema, and directors who have been associated with it, have had a much higher international profile in recent years than they, arguably, ever have. The international success of *Los otros / The Others* in 2001and the consistent flow of products from Filmax's Barcelona based fantasy and horror arm, 'The Fantastic Factory', [1] suggest that this is likely to continue at least for the foreseeable future. This attention is also likely to continue with the expanding career of directors associated with horror in Spain such as Jaume Balagueró, who's *Darkness* (2004) received a rare US theatrical release for a Spanish horror movie and who's *Fragile* (2006) continued that trend. Of course, this would not be the case if a number of these horror films had not been successful at the international box-office, and perhaps more significantly on DVD. This small but significant revival in horror has even seen the seemingly beached career of Spanish horror stalwart Paul Naschy, perhaps best known as Wolfman Waldemar Daninsky, kickstarted by a minor but pivotal role in *School Killer* (2001). Naschy's revival was taken to another level with an eye catching, self-reflexive starring role in *Rojo Sangre* (2004), which drew its inspiration from the actor's career. All of these factors have contributed to the fact that people are finally taking notice of Spanish horror, a style of cinema that has had a long and engaging history, beginning in the late 1960s.

It is worth noting that amongst this recent revival in Spanish horror film production are a number of directors with strong Latin American links: Alejandero Amenabar was born in Chile, although he moved to Spain at a young age; and one of the most internationally successful films of the mini-revival, *The Devil's Backbone*, was directed by Mexican director Guillermo del Torro. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that significant Latin American influences can be identified within recent Spanish horror cinema. In this chapter, I want to argue is that this transatlantic traffic is in fact not something new, with my focus on an earlier cycle of horror production, from the late 1960s and early 1970s, that was also marked by the influenced of filmmakers with roots in Latin America.

2.1 The Spanish Horror Boom: 1969-1975

Whilst a range of academic work has now appeared on a number of Spanish popular genres, for example, the folkloric musicals of the 1940s and the sexy Spanish comedies or *Landinismo* of the early 1970s[2], the boom in horror film production of the 1960s and early 1970s remains an under-explored part of Spanish cinema history. One of the few surveys that have appeared was part of the San Sebastian film festival in 1999[3], but it's publication has not heralded a flood of work on the area. However, there is a substantial history of horror cinema production in Spain.

Horror became a key popular genre or sub-genre as they are often labelled within film criticism within in Spain, in the late 1960s. It is widely acknowledged that

whilst there were sporadic films with horror elements made before the 1960s, such as *La torre de los siete jorobados* (1944), the revival of the genre took hold in the late 1960s. The Paul Naschy vehicle, *La marca del hombre lobo / Mark of the Wolfman*, a West German co-production, appeared in 1968 to moderate success. The following year the horror genre really found its audience in Spain. Firstly, with the success of *La residencia /The Finishing School,* this was released towards the end of 1969, and then consolidated with the success of La noche de walpurgis / Shadow of the Werewolf in 1970. Both of these films were made by directors from Latin America. It is worth considering how surprising it is that this was the case. Maybe not that shocking when considers that there had been a long tradition of horror production in a number of Latin countries, such as Mexico and Argentina, that pre-dated the expansion of generic production in Spain. Alongside this, there had long been a transfer of creative and technical personnel between Latin America cinema and that of Spain.

2.2 Horror and Latin American Cinema

In Mexico there had been a number of horror films produced in the 1930s and 1940s. However, what genre fans often refer to as, a 'golden age' of horror occurred in the late 1950s. This period included a string of films from Abel Salazar's production company ABSA. These were produced in the wake of the success of its *El vampiro / The Vampire* (1957), and included: *El hombre y el monstruo / The Man and the Monster*, *El mundo de los vampires / The World of the Vampires* and *El barón de*

terror. The latter was released internationally in an English language version known as *The Braniac*, and is still renowned as a landmark of Mexican horror. Similarly, there had been a number of successful horror films produced in Argentina. Diego Curubeto claims that the first was *Una luz en la ventana / A Light in the Window* made in 1942 by Manuel Romero. This was followed by works such as *El estraño caso del hombre y la besta / The Strange case of the Man and the Beast* in the 1950s.[4] Many of the technicians who worked in Latin American horror cinema had undergone some training in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, some making Spanish language versions of horror films at studios such as Universal. However, not all of those directors who ended up working in Spanish horror cinema came from this background in Latin American exploitation cinema.

One of the major figures to leave Latin America in the 1950s to work in Europe was director León Klimovsky. Klimovsky had established himself as a writer and then director of films in Argentina in the late 1940s. *Marihuana*, his first major work, was released in 1950. On the surface *Marihuana* might seem to fit the idea of an exploitation movie: a surgeon decides to experience the nightmarish world of drugs after his wife, an addict, dies at a night-club. However, it was deemed to tackle its chosen issue with such a serious tone that it was selected to be screened in competition at the 1950 Cannes film festival. The serious ambitions of these early works is perhaps further reflected by projects such as an adaptation of Ernesto Sábato's novel *El túnel / The Tunnel* in 1951.

However, when Klimovsky arrived in Spain during the mid-1950s, following his direction of the Argentine segment of *Tres citas con el destino* (1954), he began to make films in a number of the commercially successful genres of the period. These included light comedies, westerns and war films. As the production of westerns began to tail off in Spain, and as he was now established as a genre director for hire, Klimovsky was soon attached by to horror projects. This is not surprising as he was seen as a safe pair of hands, and as that genre came into vogue, was beginning to find co-production investment from all over Europe.

During his commercial career Klimovsky gained a reputation for shooting fast and efficiently, often being credited on three or four films a year. Between 1970 and 1978 he directed 10 horror or horror related titles. His first horror film, *The Werewolf's Shadow* (1970), is important because it proved that there was a large and eager audience for horror within Spain. In his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Wolfman,* horror star Paul Naschy described him as 'fast and reliable' and someone who 'really knew how to move his camera'. Another of the key directors of the Spanish horror boom of the early 1970s, Carlos Aured, who had worked as an assistant to Klimovsky on six films, described him as a 'wonderful artisan of the cinema. He handled to perfection the camera, planning, editing and budget'[5]. These sorts of plaudits reveal a lot bout many of the films produced in this horror boom. They were low budget works made for the most part by efficient, if uninspired, technicians. Klimovsky is certainly someone who would fall into this category, and his films, whilst occasionally showing ambitions that suggest his more 'serious' career in Argentina,

are for the most part interchangeable with a number of other directors working within the Spanish commercial cinema of the time. Of course, this is not to suggest that all the directors associated with Spanish horror fall into this category. One of the other directors with strong Latin American connections, Narcisco Ibanez Serrador, made a much more interesting contribution to the horror boom. It is also this director who reveals the real origins of the Spanish horror boom, perhaps surprisingly on Argentine and Spanish television.

2.3 Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador: Argentina, Spanish television and Historias para no dormir

As noted above, the 1967 release of *La marca de hombre lobo / The Mark of the Werewolf* suggested that a domestic audience was available for Spanish horror and the huge box-office success of both *La residencia / The Finishing School* (1969)and *La noche de walpurgis / The Werewolf's Shadow* (1970) confirmed it. Whilst the director of *La noche de walpurgis*, Leon Klimovsky, was to contribute another 9 horror related titles to the boom, Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador, director of *La residencia* spent most of his career in television making only one further feature, *Quién puede matar a un niño / Who Can Kill a Child* (1975).

The fact that Ibáñez Serrador, arguably the most important and overlooked contributor to the Spanish horror boom of the 1960s, was working in television perhaps explains his critical neglect. If the horror genre is still marginalized within

writing about Spanish cinema, then the history of Spanish genre television is even more neglected. However, to understand the roots of the horror revival and boom within Spanish cinema I would argue one has to look outside the narrow confines of film production and include a consideration of horror on television before 1967. In particular the hugely successful series *Historias para no dormir*

Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador had originally developed his ambitions to make a series of horror style stories for television in Latin America. In 1958 he had been involved an anthology series called *Obras maestras del terror / Masterpieces of Horror* for Argentine television, writing and directing a number of episodes. A key element of the programme was the presence of his father Narcisco Ibáñez Menta, an actor who was very much associated with the horror genre in Argentina. Many of the episodes involved adaptations of, broadly speaking, horror stories written by the likes of Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Gaston Leroux and the more contemporary Ray Bradbury. A significant number of these scripts were undertaken by Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador himself under his writing name Luis Peñafiel. The programme ran for two successful years and was adapted for the cinema as *Obras maestras de terror* in 1960 and directed by Enrique Carreras from scripts by Peñafiel. This series provided Ibáñez Serrador with a blueprint he would revive in Spain a few years later as *Historias para no dormir.*

Spanish television had begun to broadcast in 1956 with the state run TVE. By 1966, when the first episode of *Historias para no dormir* was broadcast, there were 2

channels both operated by the state broadcasting company, TVE2 starting in 1965. Therefore the impact of popular programmes on the popular imagination could be quite enormous. This seems certainly to have been the case with *Historias para no dormir*. Lázaro Reboll quotes Sara Torres, who as part of a celebration of Spanish horror produced in conjunction with the San Sebastian horror film festival, states that 'the vast majority of Spanish television spectators who are now in their forties and fifties, the name Chicho Ibáñez Serrador is inevitably linked to horror stories.' [6]

Historias para no dormir was a wildly popular television series across Spain in the mid-1960s. On reflection its influence has been sorely overlooked; both in terms of its bringing horror to the Spanish mainstream and the way it wetted the appetite of a large audience for home-grown horror products, giving them credibility in the process. The brainchild of director, writer, producer and sometime actor, Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador, the series, which began production in 1965, and consisted primarily of suspense and horror stories.

Lázaro Reboll has argued that 'any account of Spanish television history must include the horror-suspense series *Historias para no dormir*.' [7] Indeed, if it were not for the problematic low cultural status of much horror within Spanish culture, in combination with that of television, the series would probably be much more widely regarded as, what it certainly is, a landmark in the history of not only Spanish broadcasting but of European television. Lázaro Reboll argues that the negative critical reception in Spain for Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador's first feature film, *La*

residencia / The Finishing School (1969) was largely due to his being closely associated with the television medium. The difference between the cultural status of film and television at this time had been behind Italian Director Dario Argento's decision to direct his contribution to *La porta sul buio*, a series he produced for RAI,, *Il tram*, under the pseudonym Siro Bernadotte. According to Luigi Cozzi, Argento felt it would undermine his theatrical reputation if he worked in television[8].

The popularity of *Historias para no dormir* with domestic audiences in Spain should not be seen in isolation, and it is fruitful to link it to the horror film boom that began in the late 1960s, particularly in terms of its cultural impact. By 1969 the strong association of the name Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador and the horror genre would have undoubtedly enticed audiences to consider going to see a film bearing his name. In that year they had the opportunity with the release of *La residencia*. With his introductions to each episode of the television series he had created a public persona for himself that was closely linked to the horror genre. Unlike most other television production staff at TVE at the time a mainstream popular audience knew who he was and could even recognise him in the street. This was in no little part due to the preamble to each episode which set the scene for each weeks programme, working to assist the audience in how to approach the material. Such an introduction was vital due to the variety of programmes on offer across the series, Ibáñez Serrador indicating if what was to follow, sometimes a weighty even philosophic intro, whilst others were more comedic suggesting a lighter story for that week. Certainly, the models for these introductions were once again those of popular US shows such as

The Twilight Zone and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. As in those cases, they brought the same level of public awareness for its voice of authority, Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador.

The variety of approaches accommodated by *Historias para no dormir* were one of its major strengths. This allowed the production team working on the programme to utilise a wide range of stylistic approaches, whilst some were naturalistic others operated in a more anti-illusionist mode. However, at the heart of the show was Ibáñez Serrador's commitment to the Gothic literary heavyweights and classics of the horror genre, something that had been maintained from the Argentine original. Matt Hills argues that the idea or concept of 'Gothic TV' was something that enabled the creation a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of television. As he puts it, 'those producing, publicising and writing about television can also produce cultural distinctions, suggesting that "Gothic TV" is superior to devalued (or culturally inappropriate) TV horror'[9]. Hills suggests, as does Helen Wheatley[10], that 'gothic' allows for a connection with literature and the associated middle-brow respectability, that horror is usually denied. In the case of *Historias para no dormir* the gothic stories may be seen as the more 'respectable' episodes that made space for the more challenging and original stories that the show also produced.

It is not surprising then that *Historias para no dormir* often adapted well known writers with established gothic reputations. For example in 1966 the first series included *El pacto* which was taken from *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* by Edgar Allan Poe, who also provided the original story that was the source of the

episode *El tonel*. The work of Poe was also the base for *El cuervo* in 1967 and *El trapero* which was made in 1966 and remade in 1982. Poe himself was the subject of *El cuervo* from 1967. Another established literary figure, Henry James, was adapted for the *El muñeco* episode in 1966 and W. W. Jacobs' story *The Monkey's Paw* as *La zarpa* in 1967. The sources of these episodes of the programme were significant as they provided it with a foundation drawn from the already acceptable literary tradition within the genre. The importance of the cultural capital provided by these established works was a vital component to the acceptance of the series within the institution of Spanish television. It is also likely to have helped the programme reach the culturally snobbish middle-class audience usually resistant to the fiction output of the television medium.

However, whilst many of the episodes of *Historias para no dormir* were conventional adaptations of horror 'classics' as the Argentine originals had been, perhaps the most memorable were those that were the most formally challenging. Such episodes stretched the boundaries of how television told stories at the time. For example, *El asfalto*, which was broadcast in 1966, might on reflection best be described as almost experimental. Taken from a story by Carlos Buiza, the episode opens with a man who has his right leg in plaster walking along the street on a hot day. He crosses the road and finds that the tarmac is melting in the sun and his feet and walking stick are sticking. When he next tries to cross the road he finds that he becomes totally stuck and as the sun heats up slowly sinking. The plot then unfolds as he attempts to engage a number of people to assist him, most of who ignore his pleas.

Each person he asks for help refuses. Slowly he becomes more desperate as he sinks further and further into the melted road surface.

As with most episodes of the programme *El asfalto* is completely studio bound. However, it makes a virtue of this fact by creating a completely theatrical rather than naturalistic setting. The street, the sun and the cars that pass are all created as if sets for a music hall performance, and the acting styles of those involved further enhances this non-naturalistic feel. Narsisco Ibañez Menta, who plays the increasingly desperate lead, is made up as if for the stage or silent screen, and his expansive performance style further reflects this. The music used for the episode is also like that commonly associated with the accompaniment of popular theatre or silent cinema.

2.4 Revival in the 1980s: nostalgia and horror in Spanish cinema

Ibáñez Serrador himself was not to sustain his horror output in the early 1970s as the production boom developed. Instead, he continued his successful television career, this time as the man behind the highly popular light entertainment show, *Un, dos, tres*. He made only one other film *Quién puede matar a un niño / Who Can Kill a Child* (1975), as noted above. However, his horror reputation was sustained in the 1980s by the hosting of a season of 32 classic horror films from across the globe under the umbrella title *Mis terrores favoritos*. The films were broadcast from 12 October 1981 to 17th May 1982 on TVE and helped maintain his position as Spain's premiere television horror personality. The series also made a significant intervention

with its inclusion of Spanish titles from the 1960s and 1970s boom period. Placing Claudio Guerin Hill's *La Campana del infierno / The Bell of Hell*, Eugenio Martin's *Pánico en el transiberiano / Horror Express,* Jorge Grau's *No profanar el sueño de los muertos / The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* and his own *La residencia* alongside accepted classics of the genre such as *Psycho*, *Dracula* and *The Mummy* made a bold statement regarding his opinion on the status of Spanish horror. Such programming also argued for these films to take their rightful place within the genre's canon.

Historias para no dormir was also revived in the 1980s, further revealing the lasting potential of the format. Basically, the revival revisited the basic concept of the 1960s series, television adaptations of classic and original horror stories. Once again Ibáñez Serrador offered an introduction to each edition, and once again genre stalwarts were adapted such as *El trapero* from the work of Edgar Allan Poe which had already been adapted in the earlier incarnation of the series. This was an example of a significant new trend in this version of the series, the re-making of earlier episodes that had proved popular or had stayed with the public in their imagination. This reveals that the producers were aware of the place of *Historias para no dormir* in the popular Spanish imagination. Indeed, this may well indicate that TVE, who commissioned the series, were aware that in the politically charged, post-Franco Spain there was already a stirring of nostalgia for the simpler, entertainment television of the past. Whilst the re-imagined series was less well critically received

than the originals, the lasting power of the *Historias para no dormir* concept was to reveal itself once again almost twenty years later.

2.5 Into the 21st century: Peliculas para no dormir

However much it might still be ignored by critics and academics writing the histories of Spanish film and television, the horror genre remains an important part of the Spanish film industry. In August 2004 John Hopewell reported in *Variety*[11] that Filmax, one of Spain's major film production companies, were in the process of making a series of horror films for television. They were to be known collectively as *Peliculas para no dormir / Films that won't let you sleep.* A name that would, as I have argued, have great resonance for many people in Spain. Significantly, not only had Filmax taken the name of Ibáñez Serrador's legendary television series, they had also hired the ageing producer to oversee the operation and direct one of the films: *El ser* himself. The influence of Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador and *Historias para no dormir* on a generation of Spanish directors is further reflected by the fact that an impressive roster of established figures such as Alex de la Iglesia, Jaume Balagueró, Enrique Urbizu and Paco Plaza have all made contributions to this latest incarnation of the series. It is certainly about time that those writing the histories of Spanish cinema and popular culture woke up to the enormous impact of *Historias para no dormir*. More precisely, it should be acknowledged as a key European horror text whose influence is still undoubtedly on-going.

Considering the level of interest in horror cinema amongst audiences, fans and academics, and given the particular social, political and economic circumstances of Spanish cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s it is surprising that its horror output remains an under-explored area. Why might that be so? There remains a critical orthodoxy regarding the Spanish popular cinema of the early 1970s. Much of this is based on the potential for the films to be read simply in relation to national identity. Horror, perhaps due to many of the films being international co-productions (like the western) for some reason has fallen outside this. In conclusion then one must look beyond the films that make up the horror boom in Spain to fully understand it. Perhaps this is another reason for its marginalization. The contributions of television, along with the desires of a mass audience living under a dictatorship, are clearly key elements in any study of Spanish horror in the 1960s, so an inter-disciplinary approach is needed. The long horror related career of Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador intersects with a number of key moments in the history of Spanish horror. It also offers the opportunity to trace the genres peaks and troughs since the late 1960s, and therefore is a useful starting point for a study such as this one, which wants to take it seriously.

Notes:

[1] For more on 'The Fantastic Factory' see, Xavier Mendik, 'Trans-European Excess: an interview with Brian Yunza'. In Ernest Mathijis and Xavier Mendik (eds.)

Alternative Europe: Eurotrash and exploitation cinema since 1945 (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 181-190.

[2] Nuria Triana Toribio, *Spanish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[3] Carlos Aguilar (ed.) *Cine fantástico y de terror Español* (San Sebastián: Donostia Kultura, 1999)

[4] .For more on this see for example, Diego Curubeto, Diego, "Meat on Meat!" In Pete Tombs (ed.) *Mondo Macabre* (London: Titan Books, 1997).

[5] Paul Naschy, *Memoirs of a Wolfman* (Baltimore: Midnight Marquee Press, 2000),105-106.

[6] Antonio Lazaro Reboll, ' Screening "Chico": the horror ventures of Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador.' In Antonio Lázaro Reboll and Andrew Willis (eds.) *Spanish Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 155.

[7] Lazaro-Reboll, 'Screening Chicho', 152.

[8] Luigi Cozzi makes this argument in an interview on the German DVD release of *La porta sul buio.*

[9] Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror*, (London: Continuum 2005), 119.

[10] Helen Wheatley, '*Mystery and Imagination*: anatomy of a gothic anthology series'. In Janet Thumim (ed.) *Small Screens, Big Ideas: television in the 1950s* (London: I. B Tauris, 2002),165-180.

[11] John Hopewell, 'Hot Helmers set to roll on vet's horror wheel'. In *Variety* 26/7/2004 np.

3. Spanish Horror and the Flight from 'Art' Cinema, 1967-1973

One of the areas most readily given the label 'cult cinema' is European horror, and in particular those films produced in the 1960s and 1970s[1]. In many ways these products fit certain notions of 'cult' perfectly: they are often low budget, sleazy, exploitation fare; they have devoted fan groups; they often circulate through specialist video and DVD outlets, some legal, but others at best semi-legal or downright illegal. Even in the era of internet searching, examples of these films are still often difficult to find for those not initiated into the world of cult cinema. Within the stock of such outlets one will always find a smattering of Spanish horror films from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their cult status further secured by references to them in fanzines and internet sites devoted to horror and sleaze such as *Flesh and Blood*, *Is it Uncut?*, *Shock Cinema* and *DVD Maniacs*[2].

Indeed, it was in my pursuit of just such cult films that I stumbled across the titles that suggested I further consider the issues that form the focus of this chapter. Amongst the Spanish horror titles available from cult sources are a number of films that bear the names of directors who have reputations that extend far beyond the field of European cult cinema, or exploitation films generally. Crucially, these directors had established critical reputations as serious filmmakers *before* they made low budget horror films, and significantly, made films that sustained or enhanced those reputations *afterwards*[3]. This marks them out as different from those 'cult' works that are early, low budget efforts made by directors who would later seek to establish

more mainstream reputations. For example, US directors associated with exploitation producer Roger Corman such as Jonathan Demme, Joe Dante, Martin Scorsese and Francis Coppola[4]. This aspiration to mainstream success also shows a very different career trajectory from those 'cult' directors who have existed exclusively within the sphere of low budget filmmaking. For example, in the Spanish context, Jesus Franco and José Larraz who have built reputations through remaining on the fringes of European film production.[5]

In order to consider these films further they need to be placed firmly into their broader historical and social context: Spain and Spanish cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here, rather than seeing them simply as examples of an unspecific, exotic and loosely defined 'European cult cinema', I want to consider them as particular reactions against the approaches of what has become widely known as the 'New Spanish Cinema' of the 1960s. As this 'New Spanish Cinema' is often discussed in terms of its artistic merit, in this instance, a clear separation of 'art' cinema and 'popular' cinema provides a useful starting point. It certainly begins to indicate a different set of responses and strategies adopted by those filmmakers working in the field of horror.

Despite the important work they have done few of the works that look at the New Spanish Cinema touch upon the more popular films made by established Spanish directors with serious critical reputations, let alone consider why these directors chose to work in genres associated with low budget, exploitation, filmmaking[6]. However,

equally problematically, few of the predominantly fan based works mentioned earlier that address the low budget European horror film place these works into their context of production. Rather, they seem to simply explore or merely celebrate their generic qualities. What I want to do here is suggest reasons why certain directors, associated with some of the most challenging films produced within Spanish cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, elected in the early 1970s to work in the field of horror, this at a time when this was a genre that was undoubtedly one of the most popular of the day.

3.1 Spanish cinema in the 1960s

Following a period of arch conservatism, after the nationalist victory in the civil war, Spanish cinema in the 1960s is marked by a clear liberalization of the government's attitude towards films that might be seen as critical of the regime. John Hopewell argues that 'from 1962 part of the Spanish regime attempted to rejuvenate the national film industry from above. The resultant 'New Spanish Cinema' was part of a cautious attempt at political liberalisation'[7]. One of the key moves in this liberalization was the re-appointment of Jose Maria Garcia Escudero as Under Secretary of Cinema. He is often presented as someone who encouraged artistic ambition within the Spanish film industry. He modified the board of film censors, pushed through changes at the national film school, the *Escuela Oficial de Cine*, and increased the funding for films that were deemed officially to be of 'special interest'[8].

Both Hopewell and Marsha Kinder [9] see these moves as an attempt to create a more internationally visible Spanish cinema. This process included supporting directors and films that were lauded at international festivals even if they were received with caution or criticism by the authorities in Spain. Carlos Saura's *Los golfos* (made in 1959 but not released in Spain until 1962) is representative of this as it displeased the official censor but was shown at the Cannes international film festival as the official Spanish entry[10]. Hopewell sees this as a move to 'Europeanise' Spanish cinema, making it seem contemporary, modern and relevant[11]. Whilst Kinder argues that such films can be seen as 'taking an important step toward developing an innovative cinema with international appeal'[12]. This was certainly part of Garcia Escudero's stated aim to create a Spanish cinema of ideas. The aim of which is reflected in his much quoted statement that, 'If you can't beat Hollywood on its own ground (a commercial cinema), you can, and Europe has actually done this, on Europe's home ground: intelligence.' [13] Part of this process was the establishment of specialist 'art' cinemas where these 'intellectual' films could be shown. In 1967 a series of '*Salas de Arte y Ensayo*' were opened to exhibit these 'special interest' films alongside subtitled foreign works and for the most part, they where established in major cities and tourist spots frequented by foreigners, neither of which where usually attended by ordinary, working class filmgoers.

These moves towards an intellectual, international 'art' cinema resulted in two very significant problems: firstly, that supposedly radical and ideologically challenging films and filmmakers became, arguably, international representatives of

the regime. In other words, the creation of 'art' cinema meant that such films and their directors became easily assimilated by the regime. As Kinder observes, 'Saura could be transformed into a cultural commodity that would help sell the liberalized reinscription of *Franquismo* in international markets'[14]. Secondly, that these films, through the official distribution and exhibition policies, were restricted to specialist cinemas. In this case, films that wanted to be socially engaged were consigned to what Hopewell describes as the 'cultural ghettos of 'art' cinemas'[15].

So, whilst the championing of 'art' cinema offered a model of the creative, committed, oppositional auteur, that supposed figure of resistance was easily assimilated by the interests of the regime as an example of their increasingly liberal attitudes. For some filmmakers, not willing to be assimilated by this process, another direction had to be found, one that lay outside the realm of officially sanctioned 'art' cinema. John Hopewell begins to suggest what this alternative might be with his observations about the so-called 'Barcelona School' of filmmakers. He argues that directors, such as Vicente Aranda and Gonzalo Suarez, chose to 'distract attention from covert political implication by the use of stock film genres'[16]. However, he fails to explore the implications of this in any great detail. Indeed, most of the critics who articulate the inherent contradictions of 'New Spanish Cinema' still focus their critical attention on the works of 'compromised' auteurs such as Carlos Saura.

However, 1967 was not only the year in which the *Salas de Arte y Ensayo* were established, it is also acknowledged as the breakthrough year for Spanish horror film

production. More specifically, this was the year that *La Marca de Hombre Lobo / Mark of the Werewolf* was released and found an eager audience for it's gothic trimmed horror. With this embracing of popular genres by audiences in Spain, it is possible to argue that those politically oppositional filmmakers who wanted to seek an area of filmmaking that was less clearly controlled by the government potentially found it. This occurred, in particular, within one of the most popular genres of the day, the horror film.

3.2 Spanish Horror in the late 1960s

Internationally, the 1960s had been a period of sustained production and popularity for the horror film. Films produced in England, Italy and the USA had found audiences throughout the decade, and as already noted Spain joined the ranks of horror producers with the success of *La Marca de Hombre Lobo*. A West German co-production, shot in 3D and 70mm and starring Paul Naschy, it was successful enough internationally - including the US version *Frankenstein's Bloody Terror* - to kick start horror genre production in Spain. This success was consolidated in 1969 with the release of the enormously popular *La Residencia / The Finishing School*, directed by Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador. Joan Hawkins has noted the potential of these genre pictures to address contemporary issues, arguing that 'even when horror films were not especially graphic, they served to make strong political points.'[17].

It is therefore no surprise to find the names of directors and writers who had previously been closely associated with oppositional filmmaking on the credits of some of the most politically engaged horror films of the period. As they attempted to find a space to work that existed outside the 'art' cinema assimilated by the regime they arrived in the arena of popular genre filmmaking. In this context they were able to continue to explore contemporary social and political issues in their films. The need for such directors to embed, almost camouflage, themselves in popular genres was made more apparent in 1969 when the government, reacting to what they perceived as increased social unrest, tightened censorship and began to move away from the more liberal tendencies of the mid-1960s. A new minister for Information and Tourism, Alfredo Sanchez Bella, was appointed, and in 1972 he called for the censorship board to 'accentuate its vigour in classifying films'[18]. Certainly, this increased repression after the period of supposed liberalization can also help explain why certain directors chose to continue to submerge themselves in popular genres. Again, as Hawkins argues 'The existence of these films is extraordinary, given the social and political climate of the time. Even the tame, domestic versions...hint at illicit sexuality, lesbianism and other activities officially designated as perversions by General Franco's government'[19]. Whilst Hawkins goes on to consider the case of Jesus (or Jess) Franco, a director already associated with low budget exploitation filmmaking by the late 1960s, I want to focus on directors who had more clearly established 'art' film reputations in earlier periods and therefore, it might be argued, more consciously reject that 'art' cinema in favour of the freedoms offered by genre

production, in particular, the already mentioned Vicente Aranda, Claudio Guerin Hill, as well as some from an earlier generation, such as Juan Antonio Bardem.

Juan Antonio Bardem was one of the major figures in the anti-fascist film movement within Spain. A graduate of the national film school and a member of the illegal Communist Party, he had helped establish the film magazine *Objectivo* in 1952. In 1955 he made his famous address at the University of Salamanca that asserted that, 'Spanish cinema is politically ineffective, socially false, intellectually abject, aesthetically nonexistent and commercially crippled' [20]. His cinematic reputation was established with socially engaged films like *Muerte de un Ciclista* (1955) and *Calle Mayor* (1956), both influenced heavily by the style of Italian Neo-Realism. In 1972 Bardem seemed to change tack when he directed the psychological horror film *La corrupcion de Chris Miller*. This work deals with issues of power and sexuality through its story of two isolated women who are visited by a mysterious young man. To simply dismiss this work as lowly horror is naïve. As Bardem shows, for committed filmmakers in this period of Spain's history, the generic codes and conventions of the horror film could be utilised in order to explore social and political issues. The fact that certain directors consciously turned to popular forms is further suggested by the fact that Bardem later returned to more directly political subject matter once the regime had fallen. For example, with works such as his 1978 film *The Warning*, which he shot in Bulgaria and tells the story of the communist leader, Dimitrov.

Eloy de la Iglesia was another Spanish filmmaker who was a Communist party member and chose to work in popular genres[21]. Like the others his horror films carried clear engagements with the social injustices of Franco's Spain, in his case showing horrific acts as the result of the repression and alienation of the working class. de la Iglesia's work is marked by a strong sense of social realism. Whilst many of the Spanish horror films produced in the 1960s and 1970s involved supernatural elements, he maintained a strong fidelity to the reality of the repressive atmosphere that engulfed Spain during the Franco years. His most widely known film of this period, *La Semana del Asesino* (1971), certainly side steps supernatural causes for the horror in the film in favour of believable, socially rooted causes for 'real' horrific acts. This film was marketed internationally, and built a cult reputation as *Cannibal Man* even though it contains no direct cannibalism. The horror genre, or perhaps more specifically the psychological horror film, offered de la Iglesia space to explore an array of contemporary issues such as masculinity, sexuality and class. Later in his career, after the end of the Franco regime, he turned his attention to more directly political melodramas that focussed on youth, sexuality and corruption. Once again, showing his awareness of how popular forms offer the potential to talk to ordinary people in a language they understand.

3.3 The Blood Spattered Bride

Like Bardem, Vicente Aranda also had a strong filmmaking reputation before he turned to the horror genre [22]. His experimental 1966 feature film *Fata Morgana* had

been well received and was seen as a key work in the short lived 'Barcelona School' of the period. After establishing his art house credentials he to turned to the horror genre in the late 1960s and early 1970s, making *La Novia Ensangrentada* in 1972. Clearly, Aranda was personally committed to the project as it was the first film made by his own production company, Morgana. The film achieved a wider cult status as *The Blood Spattered Bride*. The film, a vampire story, offers a scathing critique of Spanish machismo, linking it to the established male social order of Franco's Spain. This is achieved through the careful association of the central male character, played by Simon Andreau, with the ideas, values and beliefs of Francoist patriarchy. Indeed, it seems that inviting the audience to be critical of these values is one of the major aims of the film. The setting of the story of two newly weds in the world of the horror film allows Aranda to reject the constraints of social realism in favour of an approach that invites the audience to question the reality of what they see. In turn, alternative views of the world, in particular relating to gender and sexuality, become something that it is possible to suggest and represent. Indeed, Aranda's work in this period is marked by a willingness to embrace excess as a way of moving away from the codes and conventions of social realism and representing an alternative world.

Soon after the arrival of the newly weds at the husband's family home in the countryside he goes hunting with an old family retainer who refers to him only as master. As they walk through the countryside the pair discover a female fox caught in a trap and the master shoots the helpless creature. Following this encounter we see the man walking in the countryside with his wife. He begins to embrace her romantically

but then suddenly aggressively forces her to perform oral sex on him. Shortly after this he again attacks her, this time in an aviary. The bride, like the birds, is trapped by the social conventions that privilege men, because of this even when attacked she does not know how to help herself. As John Hopewell has observed, machismo played an important part in the creation of images of masculinity that were prevalent in the Franco era. He argues that,

> *Machismo* mixes a sense of male honour with shows of physical valour; in practice, it has become a hotchpotch of right-mindedness and wrong-headedness, unsophisticated male chauvinism, a petty and petulant insistence on getting one's own way, a tendency when challenged to round on your enemy, puff out your chest like a pouter pigeon, and dare your antagonist to throw the first punch. Franco encouraged *machismo*: sexual chauvinism went hand in hand with political and national chauvinism.[23]

This idea seems to directly inform *The Blood Spattered Bride*. It is a film that links 'sexual chauvinism', as shown in the sequences mentioned, with wider social and political ideas. It is certainly critical of the sexual machismo prevalent at the time but uses this as a way of also subtly criticising other social and political ideas and beliefs. The film therefore can be read as a critique of the wider ideological beliefs of the dominant social order in Spain at the time. Aranda may well have found it difficult to offer such critiques of Spanish society outside popular genres, in this case the horror film. Following this, Aranda went on to achieve a level of notoriety with his post-Franco film *Cambio de Sexo* in 1976. Once again showing his desire to explore social and political issues, something his career has continued to do since.

3.4 The Bell of Hell

Claudio Guerin Hill was another filmmaker who had begun to establish 'art' film credentials. Educated at the national film school in the 1960s, he had contributed to the three part *Los Desafios* in 1969 alongside José Luis Egea and Victor Erice, and then directed *La Casa de la Palomas* (1971), an Italian co-production, before choosing to work in the horror genre. His first, and only, film in that genre is an ambitious work, *The Bell of Hell / La Campaña del infierno*. It is also a clear critique of the established political order. This is achieved through the clear opposition between the young lead and the corrupt middle aged characters who inhabit the Galician village where the film is set. The films opening sequences show John, the films young lead, leaving a mental institution and heading back to his village. He is asked to report back to the institution in 6 days but rips up his appointment card as he passes through the hospital gates suggesting at the outset that he has rejected the order of the authorities. We soon learn that John had been placed in the institution at the behest of his Aunt in order for her to spend his inheritance. The films perspective on authority is suggested through the way it represents John's actions, in particular, his constant playing of practical jokes and his challenging attitude to the sexual mores of the older generation. Indeed, it is possible to see John's placement in a mental institution as more symbolic of the efforts of the older generation to suppress the more radical, new ideas of the younger generation. John's actions can be read as a rejection, even rebellion, against the values of a generation that was victorious in the Civil War and enthusiastically supported the Franco regime in the years that followed.

Guerin Hill creates a clear opposition between John, who is continually associated with the trappings of 1960s rebellious youth (long hair, a motorbike, smart answers, sex) and the older figures of authority (his aunt, the priest, the town elders). He also practices that archetypal 1960s alternative, artistic medium, photography. This generational opposition, which is clearly signified in the early part of the film when John returns to the village, also operates to suggest that perhaps he had been committed to the asylum for more than financial reasons. Indeed, upon his return to the village John systematically attacks characters that represent the existing social order, while John's only friendly encounter is with an old man who lives on the margins of society deep in the woods. This is made more significant by the fact that he is old enough to have been part of the resistance to the Franco regime, and therefore is not implicated in the corruption endemic in the system and its oppressive practices. Indeed, by the end of the film the old man seemingly helps in the destruction of the films most Francoesque character, Peter.

In the early stages of *The Bell of Hell* the mental institution is clearly represented as part of the authoritarian system. The doctor is being paid to keep John institutionalized and it his greed, not medical ethics, that dictate his actions. The link between mental institutions and the interests of the state has, of course, been forcefully made by Michel Foucault in his *Madness and Civilization*[24]. Considering the way in which Guerin Hill represents the mental institution within *The Bell of Hell* it is likely that he may have been familiar with this work, first published in French in the early 1960s. Foucault, broadly, argued that 'madness' was that which lay outside

the realm of 'reason', and that this 'reason' was identified by those who were most powerful within society and therefore in a position to do so. In the preface to *Madness and Civilization* he writes that, 'We have yet to write a history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbours, and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness.'[25] In this sense then, the clinic is somewhere those who do not embrace the socially constructed, accepted patterns of behaviour are placed. Within *The Bell of Hell* this is explicitly shown as those who refuse to accept the values and beliefs of the ruling Franco regime, based as it was on ideals of family, nation and the Catholic church. The character of John represents a rejection of those values and is someone who refuses the behavioural norms of Spanish society at the time. John continually plays practical jokes that push the boundaries of 'good taste'. For example, in his suggestion, in a note to Peter's wife, that he has raped her whilst she was unconscious which play with the accepted sexual mores of that fiercely Catholic society.

It is central to the radical edge of *The Bell of Hell* that John continually acts outside the accepted moral codes of Spanish society at the time. Here it is possible to see the influence of R. D. Laing and the anti-psychiatry movement. If John is a character who represents much of the 1960s counterculture, his 'madness' can be read as a rejection of the morals and values of the state. As Kenneth Cmiel states, Laing argued that '...it was the 'normal' people who were the real crazies. In such an insane world, precisely those who knew enough to ignore the rules – the schizophrenics – were the sane ones'[26]. This aspect of John's character also plays with the generic

codes and conventions of the horror film. As the film progresses the audience is presented with a character that is a monstrous outsider, yet is also the most sympathetic character due to the fact that society, as represented in the film, is not something one would want to be part of. However, the character of John, with his particularly troublesome attitude to sex and notions of consent, may also be seen as challenging any simply liberal rejection of the values of the established order.

One of the other central elements in the film that contribute to the critical edge of *The Bell of Hell* is the casting of Alfredo Mayo in the role of Peter, a local building contractor who is the focus of John's revenge. The generational oppositions, which I have already argued structure the film, take on an even wider resonance when one considers the casting. Mayo, according to John Hopewell a '40s heart-throb', was closely associated with pro-Franco roles, in particular through his playing the central role in *Raza* (1941) a film which was supposedly based on the dictators experiences. Whilst he later became involved in more critical works, Mayo is clearly used in *The Bell of Hell* as a persona associated with the regime either through his earlier work or the roles he took in the 1960s. This has the effect of overlaying meaning onto sequences that on the surface might be seen to simply work generically. For example, a hunting sequence occurs about 20 minutes into the film. It is there to reveal information about the village leaders and their morals but due to Mayo's presence takes on wider significance. His costume echoes photographs of Franco on his many hunting trips and his appearance in Carlos Saura's art house film *La Caza / The Hunt*. Indeed, hunting is a traditionally masculine pursuit, and its use as a symbol of the

older order is based upon linking such leisure activities to the ideological position of the right in Spain. One of the ways that Guerin Hill does this is through the casting of Mayo and the assumption that audiences will make links between the actor's persona and the regime. John Hopewell discusses the reasons for the use of the hunt as an image in critical Spanish cinema from *La Caza* to Borau's *Furtivos / Poachers* (1975). He states that 'hunting also has specifically political connotations as the favourite sport-cum-slaughter of Franco and many of his ministers. And the high society hunt, a several day shoot for bankers, businessmen, aristocrats and politicians, provided an important scenario for establishment power struggles.'[27] I would argue that Guerin Hill clearly uses these connotations in *The Bell of Hell*. Whilst in *La Caza* the hunters pursue animals before turning on each other, in Guerin Hill's film the hunters turn on an innocent young girl. This makes their exploitation and corruption even more explicit. It is significant that the hunting party is made up of characters who we later see sitting on the front row of the church acting piously and acting as respectable members of the community. Within the structure of a psychological horror film there is a clear critique of the establishment. It is highly likely that a film less immersed in these generic codes and conventions would have suffered from the same limited release that befell *La Caza* in the mid-1960s. Whilst Guerin Hill is unable to articulate his criticism of the social order in an overly explicit way due to the state censors, he is able to use the audiences' knowledge, particularly in relation to the social significance of hunting and the history of the featured performers, to create links between narrative, character and the ideology of the Franco regime. I would argue that the codes and conventions of the horror film provide him with a

perfect vehicle for exploring the contradictory value system of Spanish society in the early 1970s and those who administered it.

Whilst clearly not all the horror directors of this period had the same political agenda as those I have mentioned, some of the works produced can clearly be seen as enormously subversive. This subversion not only comes from the content of their works but also their use of popular genres as a way of escaping the assimilating tendencies of a regime as it attempted to present a more liberal face to the outside world. They also choose to work in forms that were popular with working class audiences and therefore were not restricted to the government sanctioned 'art' house cinemas. Few of the films that I have touched upon in this chapter have received any sustained critical interest, perhaps due to the fact that many of the directors mentioned have produced more 'arthouse' works in their careers. However, as Spanish horror becomes of more interest to critics in the wake of the box office successes of *The Others* (2001) and *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) it is to be hoped that the products of the late 1960s and early 1970s receive more serious attention. What the works I focus on in this chapter suggest is that the historical context of production is something that should not be ignored, especially when considering cult cinemas. Indeed, as in the cases I have outlined, this context of production can contribute enormously to an understanding of 'cult' films.

Notes:

[1] On cult European horror see:

Joan Hawkins, 'Sleaze Mania, Euro – Trash: the place of European art films in American low culture'. In *Film Quarterly* vol. 53, no. 2, winter 1999.

Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: art-horror and the horrific avant-garde*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000).

Leon Hunt, 'A (Sadistic) Night at the Opera: notes on the Italian horror film'. In *Velvet Light Trap* 30, 1992.

Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs, *Immoral Tales: sex and horror cinema in Europe 1956 – 1984* (London: Titan Books, 1995).

[2] For more on this type of publishing see: Hawkins, 1999; David Sanjek, 'Fans' Notes: the horror film fanzine'. In *Literature / Film Quarterly*. Vol. 18, no. 3, 1990; Stephen Duncombe, *Notes From the Underground: ' zines and the politics of alternative culture* (London: Verso, 1997).

[3] To see writing that confirms these reputations see: Rob Stone, *Spanish Cinema* (Harlow: Longman, 2001) or John Hopewell, *Out of the Past: Spanish cinema after Franco* (London: British Film Institute, 1986).

[4] For more on New World, Corman's company see Jim Hillier and Aaron Lipstadt (eds.), *Roger Corman's New World Pictures* (London: BFI, 1981) and Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood.* (London: Studio Vista, 1992).

[5] For introductions to both their careers see Tohill and Tombs, *Immoral Tales*, and Hawkins, *The Cutting Edge*.

[6] Hopewell, *Out of the Past*, and, Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: the reconstruction of national identity in Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[7] Hopewell, *Out of the Past*, 63.

[8] Peter Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens* (Denver: The Arden Press, 1985), 72-74.

[9] Hopewell, *Out of the Past;* Kinder, *Blood Cinema.*

[10] Kinder, *Blood Cinema*, 87.

[11] Hopewell, *Out of the Past*, 65.

[12] Kinder, *Blood Cinema*, 89.

[13] Hopewell, *Out of the Past*, 65.

[14] Kinder, *Blood Cinema*, 93.

[15] Hopewell, *Out of the Past*, 65.

[16] Hopewell, *Out of the Past*, 68.

[17] Hawkins, *The Cutting Edge*, 94.

[18] Hopewell, *Out of the Past,* 80.

[19] Hawkins, *The Cutting Edge*, 93.

[20] Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens*, 40.

[21] De la Iglesia is the focus of the next chapter of this study.

[22] His career is detailed variously in Besas, *Behind the Spansih Lens*, and Hopewell, *Out of the Past*.

[23] Hopewell, *Out of the Past*, 31.

[24] Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (London: Penguin, 1971).

[25] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, xi.

[26] Kenneth Cmiel, 'The Politics of Civility'. In David Farber (ed.) *The Sixties: from memory to history* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 271.

[27] Hopewell, *Out of the Past*, 27.

4. Horror and Politics: Eloy de la Iglesia's *La semana del asesino*

In his 1993 book *Hammer and beyond: the British Horror Film*, Peter Hutchings argues that the products of Hammer Films and other British horror film producers need to be regarded as part of a *national* film culture, that is, one which addresses specifically national issues and concerns. He goes on to argue that, while there may be generic codes and conventions that are reproduced across national boundaries, horror cinema produced *within* particular national contexts will differ in significant ways. For Hutchings, much critical work on the genre abstracts it from these various contexts in its search for the essential elements of the horror film. Regarding such criticism, he argues that,

> Attempts that have been made, particularly in their insistence on the genre having either a fixed function or a central core of meaning...have necessarily lifted films out of the national contexts within which they were produced, thereby evacuating them of much of their socio-historical significance.[1]

Whatever the wider generic codes and conventions are, their actual manifestation at a particular historical moment and within particular national, political, and social contexts must inform any interpretation and understanding of the potential meanings of the texts at hand.

With this in mind, I now wish to discuss Eloy de la Iglesia's *La semana del asesino* / *Week of the Killer* (aka *Cannibal Man*), a film produced within the Spanish cinema of the early 1970s. Following on from Hutchings' observations, I intend to anchor my reading of this film in the historical moment of its production and consider how far it might be considered a radical critique of Spanish society at this time. In particular, I wish to discuss gender and the representation of violence within the Spanish horror cinema of the period. As I have already stated, my argument is that the horror genre's manifestation within Spanish cinema must be understood as part of a particular set of national

circumstances, circumstances that impacted greatly upon the use of the generic codes and conventions of the horror film by Spanish filmmakers of the period. I will also discuss, through a detailed analysis of *La semana del asesino* the ways in which horror offered directors the opportunity to challenge the dominant values of the Franco regime.

4.1 Horror and Spanish Cinema

It is widely accepted that the boom in horror film production in Spain began with the moderate success in 1967 of *La marca del hombre lobo / Mark of the Werewolf*, starring Paul Naschy as Daninsky the Werewolf. It was quickly consolidated by the huge popularity of Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador's 1969 film *La Residencia / The Finishing School*.[2] However, it is possible to see the origins of Spanish horror in earlier, internationally financed films that utilized a perceived mystery within Spanish locations and settings. One such example is *Pyro*, a film made by the US exploitation company, American International Pictures on location in Galicia in 1963. This film was shot with a Spanish crew and, apart from the lead performers such as Barry Sullivan, a largely Spanish cast. Directed by Spaniard Julio Coll, the film tells the story of a British architect who is seduced by what he sees as the exoticism of Spain. The mystery of Spain is represented early in the film by the passion of Flamenco, shown in a nightclub sequence just after the characters first arrive in the country. The main drive of the narrative involves Sullivan's character, Vance, seeking revenge after he is disfigured in a deliberate fire. Whilst on the surface a psychological thriller, the burnt hero prefigures some of the disfigured characters who would later appear in films more clearly of the 'horror' variety.

Pyro also looks forward to the co-productions that would become a mainstay of the Spanish horror boom, in this case with American International Pictures, a company that

specialized in low-budget genre films that were easily marketed to a youth audience. The centrality of marketing to the successful distribution of these types of films explains the rather over-the-top alternative titles that many of them were sold under. *Pyro*, for example, also existed as *Pyro: the thing without a face* and *So a Cold Wind from Hell.* Indeed, Joan Hawkins argues that the Spanish horror films of this period were very much the product of economic necessity. She states that,

> When the government tightened restrictions on cheap co-productions, the Spanish film industry needed to find films they could make cheaply and expert... Horror seemed the perfect choice. These films were popular and they sold well. Drawing on the formulae already established by England, Italy and the U.S., the Spanish film industry churned out a large number of Hammer take-offs, psycho killer flicks and gothic supernatural thrillers. Most of the films were European and Euro-American co-productions. Some were filmed outside Spain.[3]

However, it would be wrong to simply dismiss these low-budget Spanish horror films *en masse*. Like many low-budget exploitation films produced within other national cinemas it would be short-sighted to see them as uniformly uninteresting, as there are films made during this period that offer significant reflections on the society within which they were produced. In what follows, I argue that some of the films that appeared during the Spanish horror boom offered a complex meditation on the genre, and may be seen as enormously subversive when placed within the context of Spanish cinema under Franco. In order to begin constructing this argument, I will now turn to the radical potential of exploitation filmmaking generally, before moving on to the specifics of Spanish horror.

Exploitation cinema has been widely written about in relation to the Hollywood film industry, and some of those observations can assist in an understanding of the Spanish horror film. Talking about the US film industry, Jim Hillier argues that, 'the term "exploitation" differentiates a certain kind of overly exploitative product from the supposedly non-exploitative product of the majors, and implies that movies thus labelled

take advantage of their audiences.'[4] Within European cinema, the distinction may be made between serious 'art' films and the more popular and exploitative genres that exist within and across particular national boundaries. One of the most obvious differences is the level of marketing that operates around popular forms. Indeed, marketing is central to exploitation cinema, as it is through this medium that generic classification can take place and the target audience be reached. The marketing of exploitation movies therefore demands a certain level of mutual knowledge on behalf of the filmmakers and their audience. The promotional materials produced for Spanish horror films both within and outside Spain had to acknowledge the age of the audience and their generic expectations, many of which were based upon familiar imagery and characters drawn from Universal 1930s horror, British Hammer, and Italian gothic and *giallo* films. Spanish horror can therefore be understand as attempting to exploit the international success of those products. Promotional posters of the period were adorned by images of scantily clad women, torture, mutilation, shadows, vampire cloaks and teeth, werewolves, caves, castles, and old dark houses.

It is the relatively low critical esteem in which the horror genre is held as compared to more serious art cinema within Europe that goes some way to explaining its gross neglect. Indeed, exploitation cinema is often viewed as simply delivering material that contains "the bizarre, the licentious, and the sensational"[5] and little of critical worth. This explains why so many of the recent works on Spanish cinema ignore it so completely.[6] However, some of the perspectives within these works offer useful ways of considering Spanish horror films of the period. For example, Marsha Kinder in her important 1993 study, *Blood Cinema*, devotes a chapter to violence in Spanish cinema of the 1960s, although her analysis concentrates on 'serious' rather than genre pictures. For this reason, she

chooses not to address the violence that appeared within the horror genre during this time. Her arguments do, however, shed some light on the violence within horror and its potentially subversive nature. Kinder argues that,

> Within the Spanish context, the graphic depiction of violence is primarily associated with the anti-Francoist perspective, which may surprise foreign spectators... During the Francoist era, the depiction of violence was repressed, as was the depiction of sex, sacrilege and politics; this repression helps explain why eroticized violence could be used so effectively by the anti-Francoist opposition to speak a political discourse, that is, to expose the legacy of brutality and torture that lay hidden behind the surface beauty of the Fascist and neo-catholic aesthetics.[7]

Violence therefore brings with it the potential to operate subversively, flying, as it did, in the face of the Francoist censors who wanted wholesome representations of Spanish life to be the norm. Kinder goes on to suggest that this was not a new thing, specifically arguing that within Spanish culture there is a strong model for politically-motivated images of violence, most significantly the paintings of Goya. Kinder makes much of works such as *Satan Devouring his Son*, arguing that they offer a radical and direct critique of society. But she goes on to indicate that Goya also offered more subtle versions of social criticism and critique within such established genres in painting as the court portrait and his rustic scenes of Spanish folklore.

It is Kinder's acknowledgement of Goya's work within already-established forms that is of interest to me here. Indeed, it is this tradition of using established genres as a vessel for politicized ideas and social critiques that I would argue offered a model for some of the Spanish filmmakers who consciously turned to the horror genre in the early 1970s on the heels of its newfound popularity. The violence that Kinder identifies as having a radical and subversive potential in earlier forms became central to the established codes and conventions of the horror genre. In particular, the horror genre conveys the 'eroticized violence' that Kinder specifically discusses; without a doubt, the appeal of the

horror film depended upon this being part of the marketing strategy. However, the genre also offered space for directors to find a way of articulating challenges to the dominant ideas and beliefs of Francoist cinema and its celebration of catholic family values.

Kinder goes on to argue that the question of violence is a key to understanding the cultural specificity of Spanish cinema in the late 1960s and 70s. She suggests that the Franco regime sought to repress images of violence because they operated counter to their vision of Spain's heroic past. When it did occur, she claims that, 'usually depicted as the consequence of a repressive society beset by poverty, violence was included...in genres that justified its presence.[8] Strangely given the period she is discussing, however, Kinder does not mention any films that would fit broadly within the horror genre and might constructively contribute to her discussion. This becomes even more of an oversight when one considers that she mentions Vicente Aranda's *Fata Morgana* (1966) and *Las crueles* (1969) but fails to discuss his violent and blood-drenched 1972 film, *La novia ensangrentada / The Blood Spattered Bride*. Kinder also spends time analyzing the violence in *Los desafios / The Challenges* (1969), but does not extend her discussion to include one of the contributors to that film, Claudio Guerín Hill, who as discussed in the pervious chapter, in 1973 directed the highly-regarded horror film *La campana del infierno / The Bell of Hell*. Both *La novia ensangrentada* and *La campana del infierno* use violence in the ways outlined by Kinder, offering within the codes and conventions of the horror genre clear critiques of aspects of Spanish society at the time. An acknowledgment of the potential of horror to critique social structures is central to understanding de la Iglesia's 1972 film, *La semana del asesino*. I now want to focus on this film in more detail.

4.2 Cannibal Man / La semana del asesino

Before moving into television and then cinema in the late 1960s, Eloy de la Iglesia had worked in the children's theatre, *Teatro Popular Infantil*. He has been a controversial figure within Spanish cinema, in particular his post-Franco melodramas which mixed politics and sexuality, such as *El diputado* (1978), eventually adding drugs and youth culture to the mix with *El Pico* (1983). Paul Julian Smith offers one of the few detailed studies of de la Iglesia's films in his 1992 book, *Laws of Desire*. Smith argues that 'the cinema of Eloy de la Iglesia is by no means academically respectable,'[9] later stating that, 'in Spain to speak of de la Iglesia is to risk ridicule or worse.'[10] However, his work has slowly begun to be reassessed. John Hopewell, who calls de la Iglesia's films 'refreshing,' and labels *La semana del asesino* "outstanding,'[11] was one of the first writers to offer a positive view of his work. Alongside Smith, Stephen Tropiano has offered a detailed analysis that focuses on the images of homosexuality in de la Iglesia's films.[12]

Tropiano also argues that de la Iglesia has received little critical attention due to the sensationalist subject matter of his films and his use of the commercial codes and conventions of popular genres, especially the melodrama. He argues that critics looking at post-Franco Spanish cinema have tended to focus on more clearly 'artistic' directors, such as Carlos Saura. Significantly, Smith too sees de la Iglesia's films as raising issues of 'taste and value', arguing that 'in order to address such a body of work at all we must confront problems of genre (exploitation) and historicity ("shelf life").'[13] As I have already outlined, and bearing in mind Smith's point, *La semana del asesino* must therefore be placed within the context of popular Spanish filmmaking of the 1970s, in particular the horror films produced during this period.

In his chapter, Smith chooses to focus on the films that de la Iglesia directed from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, a period whose start coincided with the end of the Franco regime. Apart from mentioning the fact that at the 1972 Berlin Film Festival the distribution company handed out sick bags as a promotional gimmick, his study does not include any detailed consideration of *La semana del asesino*. Nevertheless, some of his points about de la Iglesia's films more generally are useful. Smith points out that de la Iglesia's films have been critically attacked, and that 'critical abuse of de la Iglesia...has been motivated by an inability to 'read' his use of genre.'[14] This is certainly the case with *La semana del asesino* which, on occasion (as the Berlin anecdote shows), has been marketed as a gore-drenched horror film. However, in many ways the actual text resists this straightforward generic description. In the UK the film was certainly perceived in this manner, leading to its being placed on the list of prohibited films following the passing of the Bright bill, and labelled a 'video nasty' in the early 1980s.[15] In a similar vein, the British re-release of *La semana del asesino* on video, by the Redemption label, featured a meat hook on the cover clearly suggesting to potential purchasers that the film has obvious similarities to other horror movies of the period. For example, films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Three on a Meat Hook* (1973) which were marketed in a similar fashion using meat hook imagery.

La semana del asesino is certainly violent, and features a number of progressively brutal killings, but the film is better understood in terms of generic fluidity. The popularity of horror within the context of Spanish film production may explain the graphic images that would enable the picture to be marketed in this way to a fan and mainstream audience. However, unlike *La novia ensangrentada* for example, *La semana*

del asesino utilizes the conventions of social realism as well as horror. The horrific events that unfold within the film are always situated firmly within a contemporary setting and are clearly socially motivated, particularly through de la Iglesia's use of *mise-en-scéne*, which carefully constructs a believable social milieu. Indeed, the creation of a believable social reality through *mise-en-scéne* suggests that however extreme the events depicted are they can always be understood as having direct social and economic causes.

Although he focuses on a number of American horror films of the 1970s, Tony Williams' 1980 essay 'Family Horror' is of some assistance when considering the subversive potential of the horror genre in general. Williams suggests a way of thinking about cinematic horror which informs my reading of *La semana del asesino*. He argues that,

> reaction to personal oppression can take several forms. When the conflict between personal identity and socially allotted role becomes unbearable, the victim usually has feelings of guilt and inadequacy... Unless the decision is taken to acquiesce and vegetate another alternative path is found, a long road begins that can lead to torment and even insanity... In the horror film, the alternative to the norms of society is usually monstrous, a psychotic reaction against the conventions of everyday life, but also an attempt at beginning to articulate another way which has yet to be defined. At this stage, the alternative is usually destructive: its monstrous nature reflects that of the society which produced it.[16]

Marcos (Vicente Parra), the central character of *La semana del asesino*, is both constrained and tormented by society, and his frustration takes a particularly monstrous form. The only potential alternative hinted at in the film, homosexuality, was enormously problematic for an uneducated man in Spain in the early 1970s. The horror of this film arises from Marcos' brutal reaction to the demands of the society in which he is forced to live.

Skilfully played by Parra,[17] Marcos is a working class man who lives on the fringes of Madrid society. The film's credit sequence neatly establishes his outsider status by moving through a series of shots of the city that end with Marcos' home, isolated on a piece of wasteland, part of the city but also removed and on its edge. This follows a sequence showing Marcos at work in a slaughterhouse. After some graphic images of slaughter, we cut to a shot of him eating a meat sandwich, oblivious to the brutality going on behind him and essential for the creation of his meal. Marcos' inability to make these obvious connections suggests that he is also unable to make wider links concerning his position and exploitation within Spanish society. It is therefore possible to read Marcos as representative of the more lumpen elements of the industrial working class. This also, from the outset, begins to explain why Marcos reacts to the extreme and violent situations that follow in the confused manner in which he does. These opening sequences are essential to the film's potentially subversive approach to its subject matter and characters.

The plot outline of *La semana del asesino* certainly sounds like that of a horror film: a man living on the outskirts of a large city murders several visitors to his home, slowly disposing of their bodies in the slaughterhouse where he works. However, the film also has a rather downbeat feel, one that comes very much from its anchorage of the horrific events that unfold within a contemporary social reality, namely Madrid in the early 1970s. Marcos is not presented as a conventionally 'evil' character, but instead is shown fitting into his world and being liked by those around him. This is certainly reflected in the scenes taking place at his local bar, where he is always shown to be welcome. However, his life experiences and social position as a member of the working class have disenfranchised him, and the film explores how a seemingly 'normal' person such as Marcos can find himself in such a murderous position. The society in which he lives is

not excused for its involvement in and contribution to his actions. Indeed, de la Iglesia reinforces Marcos' social position through the way he sets up the film's first murder and its aftermath.

This murder occurs after Marcos goes on a date with his young girlfriend. Fearing that her father would disapprove of their differences, the pair are careful to keep their relationship discreet. On the surface it is suggested that this is due to their age difference, however Marcos makes clear his feeling that it might be due to his lower class status. At the end of their evening out, the couple get a taxi home. As they kiss in the back seat, however, the driver becomes very agitated and annoyed. He is clearly someone who does not approve of such public displays of sexuality. It is possible to read the taxi driver as representative of the social etiquette closely associated with Spain's older generation, a generation marked by their support for the Franco regime and its ideas, beliefs, and values. Indeed, the violent nature of this society and the way it kept people in line is reflected in the driver's comment that he will give Marcos' girlfriend the beating that her father should have given her. In the process of stepping in to defend her from the driver's assault, Marcos pushes him to the ground and hits him in the head with a rock. The next day, when reading the newspaper, they discover that the driver died from his injuries.

This marks the beginning of Marcos' descent into violence, as he cannot think of a way out of his situation. Significantly, he knows that his place in society ensures he will not be dealt with sympathetically by the authorities. His girlfriend wants him to go to the police and confess his role in the driver's death. Marcos, though, attempts to articulate (to the best of his limited ability) why he cannot go. He begins by noting that the police 'will never listen to someone as poor as I am… a nobody'. His girlfriend argues that he is

being ridiculous. For her the judicial system seems fair and just. Her more middle-class background has prevented her seeing the miscarriages of justice a person of Marcos' social status would be only too familiar with. He retorts by arguing that 'the police will listen to the rich only', and that he cannot even get a lawyer to represent him because 'a good lawyer costs money, too much money'. One challenge that de la Iglesia has to work around is the fact that the character of Marcos is inarticulate. The sequence with his girlfriend is as close as he can come to expressing his position in society verbally. At one level this limits the film's subversive potential, however de la Iglesia attempts to overcome this limitation by using *mise-en-scéne* to reveal Marcos' oppression, instead of relying on plot and dialogue.

For example, the impact of social forces on Marco is clearly indicated through mise-en-scene in the sequence that follows the opening credits, showing Marcos resting in his home. In particular, heterosexuality and the desire for sex with women is shown as a restriction that entraps him. We are shown successive shots of Marcos' apartment walls, which are decorated with pictures of bikini-clad, semi-naked women taken from magazines. The acknowledgement of the social pressures placed upon men in such a macho society as early 1970s Spain is a key to grasping some of the critical and potentially subversive aspects of *La semana del asesino*. Marcos literally lives with these pressures 'in his face', and the sequence displaying the photos of women is inter-cut with shots of Marcos restless and unable to get comfortable in his own apartment. Even his own environment no longer allows for peace of mind, as societal forces impact upon his personal life and space.

In this and similar sequences, Marcos is presented as an unhappy person. The cause of his discomfort is not made explicit through dialogue, but is revealed through a combination of *mise-en-scéne* and Parra's controlled, unsmiling performance— one which perfectly communicates Marcos' state of mental unease. The scenes that follow show Marcos at his local bar, at work, and again at home in his apartment, all emphasizing his increasing isolation. He does not engage people in conversation even when, as in the bar, they attempt to talk to him. Continually, as in the opening slaughterhouse shots, he is framed alone, even when in potentially social situations. His conversations with the barmaid Rosa (Emma Cohen) are uncomfortable as she flirts and makes very clear that she is available to him for sex. Marcos is once again depicted as uneasy in such situations, often excusing himself and leaving the bar and her company. Later in the film, when Rosa unexpectedly turns up at Marcos' home and they do have sex, he ends up murdering her.

Marcos responds in the expected heterosexual manner to Rosa's advances, but is shown as being far from pleased with the situation. Sex with women does not make him happy. Indeed, the only time in the film we do see Marcos smile is when he goes swimming with a man, Nestor (Eusebio Poncela), who lives in an apartment complex nearby and who for some time has been watching Marcos and attempting to befriend him. The potentially homosexual nature of their relationship, whilst not made explicit, is certainly clear. Nestor's pursuit of Marcos often takes place after dark in secluded settings as the former walks his dog. Marcos, however, represses this side of their interaction, often appearing uncomfortable and again excusing himself to be alone. It is possible to argue that this is because Marcos does not understand why his relationship with Nestor is the only one that makes him even remotely happy. Having been subjected to the

socializing process of Spanish machismo, as implied by the photos of bikini-clad women on his wall, Marcos is not able to escape its ideological structure, his frustration and confusion worked through symbolically via the murders he commits. He is alienated from the mainstream of society by his class, his apartment is run down, but he knows nothing else and has no political consciousness, even though middle-class housing developments are being put up all around him. Throughout *La semana del asesino*, de la Iglesia suggests that the middle classes were much better cared for than the working class in Spain under Franco's rule.

Similarly, Marcos cannot articulate his feelings of contentment, much less the reasons for it, when spending leisure time with another man. Although class and sexuality are not conflated in *La semana del asesino*, the inability of characters to do what makes them happy is revealed as having the same source: the repression working in the interests of a heterosexual, bourgeois elite. Certainly, heterosexuality was the only official option available within Francoist Spain. As Alberto Mira has noted, 'From the 1940s onwards an all-pervading censorship and keen mistrust for any kind of marginality (particularly where sexual dissidence was concerned) made the construction of homosexual identities virtually impossible.'[18] Marcos' lumpen position within the working class makes him unable to analyze his social position or act to change it. He is therefore as much a victim as the animals he kills and disposes of in the slaughterhouse.

The pressure placed on Marcos by the society in which he lives is most critically and explicitly depicted as he tries to rid his home of the stench of his decaying victims' bodies. After he has killed five people, four of whom lay decomposing in his bedroom; Marcos futilely attempts to use air freshener and cologne to remove the smell. The

structure of the film during this scene is very precise. The shots of Marcos spraying his house are inter-cut with a series of images representative of the social forces and influences that are working upon him to mould his identity and world. Not surprisingly from a filmmaker who was associated with the Spanish Communist Party,[19] these are, first and foremost, the media, as indicated by a shot of a television set. (On TV is the same type of family-based advertising shown earlier in a 'Flory Soup' commercial; ironically, Marcos works at the Flory factory and so after his disposal of body parts in the slaughterhouse the company's soup is likely to contain parts of his victims.), and secondly, the church, represented by the shot of a statue of Our Lady. Third, the family, represented via a photograph of Marcos and his brother standing with their mother. And finally, heterosexuality, indicated by a shot that further fragments the pin-up images on Marcos' wall, presenting women as mere sexualized bodies available for men to look at and desire.

Clearly then, through the juxtaposition of these shots, de la Iglesia seeks to remind his audience that Marcos is the product of a particular society, and that significant social forces have impacted upon him to create the 'man' he is— and by logical extension the person capable of the outrageous actions we have watched him commit. In Althusserian terms, the ideological factors listed above have served to 'position' Marcos within society. As Mark Jancovich argues in relation to Althusser's notion of 'interpellation', 'subjects are addressed by society. One takes up positions in society which are defined by the social structure. These positions are not natural and inherent to individuals, but individuals "misrecognize" or mistake these positions as being natural and inherent to themselves.'[20] Marcos wants to be a particular kind of (heterosexual) man. The kind that he continually sees represented by the ideological powers of the media, the church, the

family, and heterosexual machismo, but ultimately cannot be. Marcos' adornment of his home with girlie pin-ups, and his sexual encounter with Rosa, reveal his struggle to behave in a manner he thinks society expects. Of course, the film suggests that this brings him nothing but frustration, pain, and confusion.

The Madrid setting is another vital element in de la Iglesia's critique of Spanish society. The location is made clear through the shots of the underground and the locales characters inhabit at the beginning of the film. This distinguishes *La semana del asesino* from many other Spanish horror films produced during the same period. A large number of the horror films made between 1967 and 1975 were set outside Spain, for fear of upsetting the Francoist censors and authorities. For example, Paul Naschy's famous werewolf character, Waldemar Daninsky, was Eastern European rather than Spanish. Naschy, one of the most prolific figures of the Spanish horror boom, made a number of pictures set in medieval France rather than Spain, including his own directorial debut, *Inquisición / Inquisition* (1976). Other significant horror directors also chose to utilize foreign settings, including Amando de Ossario, whose *Las Garrasde Lorelei / Grasp of the Lorelei* (1973) was set in Germany.

One reason for the pan-European settings of these films was a desire to appeal to markets across Europe and beyond. As Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs argue,

> Spanish horror was born out of commercial necessity. The government had been clamping down on cheap co-productions. To recoup the costs of their bigger budgets, Spanish film-makers were being forced to find formula that appealed to overseas markets. Leon Klimovsky...recalls that foreign distributors were not interested in Spanish films— but they were interested in horror films, no matter where they came from. So, initially, the films were a combination of elements drawn from the successful markets at which they were aimed— the *Psycho*-style mad killer films from the US, for example, Hammer films, and the Italian Gothics of Bava and Margheriti.[21]

Whatever the reason, however, by setting the films outside Spain their potential subversiveness would be diminished for domestic audiences. Unlike some other commercial horror filmmakers, de la Iglesia chose to make his picture specific to contemporary Spain. Unable to be overtly critical of the Franco regime in his films of this period, one of the ways he was able to suggest his views was by setting *La semana del asesino* in a contemporary reality, one that would easily be recognized by Spanish audiences. Of course that did not mean the film could not be sold outside Spain, as is testified to by the English-dubbed version currently available.

Another of the ways in which de la Iglesia presents a critique of the mores and values of Spanish society at the time is through his depiction of the relationship between Marcos and Nestor. The latter, as mentioned above, is a young bourgeoisie man who lives in the recently-constructed apartment complex that overlook Marcos' home, and who walks his dog on the land surrounding it. In many ways he is a pivotal character within the film, as he offers a point of contact for Marcos but is also removed from him in terms of class. The relationship between the two men is certainly difficult to read. On one level, this is because it seems to be potentially homosexual in nature during a time when to explicitly depict such a relationship would cause problems with the censor. On another level, it is because Marcos is unable to fully accept the possibilities that seem to be open to him. Looking at *La semana del asesino* in hindsight, and especially in light of de la Iglesia's gay-themed melodramas (such as *El Pico*, 1983), it is possible to see the strong suggestion of a potentially gay relationship between Marcos and Nestor, one that offers Marcos a release from the pressures he feels. On one of the occasions that they meet, Nestor makes the point that 'we are both strange birds', and says that Marcos should have a home and a family and perhaps be putting a down payment on a car. Marcos' response

is telling, as he says that 'marriage is just not for me right now'. Upon hearing this, Nestor makes a link between the two men, noting that a friend of his would call them outcasts. On some levels, the film certainly seems to agree, visually linking the two men in a number of sequences.

The most significant of these sequences occurs after a meeting in the local bar. Marcos calls in for something to eat, and Rosa, the owner's wife, clearly makes a pass at him as she cleans up some spilt milk from his jeans. This seems to make him uncomfortable and he rejects her advances. As he leaves, Nestor picks him up in his car and offers to take him for a late night swim at his club. Marcos agrees and they leave. One might see this sequence as rather superfluous to the narrative drive of the film, but its significance lies in the fact that only here, away from his barrio and the factory, Marcos allows himself to relax and smile as he unselfconsciously splashes in the pool with Nestor. Released from the drudgery of his everyday life and in the company of another man, Marcos is finally at peace. This is emphasized when, upon the pair's return home later that evening, Marcos wakes up after sleeping in the car, saying that, 'I just can't recall when I slept so well'.

Later that morning Rosa appears at his house and offers to make him breakfast. As if to symbolically deny the happiness of the night before and to remove any confusion he may have about his feelings, Marcos makes love to her. Afterwards, she wants to clean the room containing the bodies and Marcos is forced to kill her to prevent her from discovering them. Following this, de la Iglesia once again frames Marcos with the women pin-ups, thereby linking his actions with the ideological forces that emphasize heterosexuality and which cause him so much anxiety, especially after his evening with

Nestor. He has had the opportunity to gain a new perspective on his life, but the power of the ideas and beliefs of the dominant ideology proves too much to overcome.

De la Iglesia does not ignore the class differences between Marcos and Nestor. One of the most striking aspects of the film's commitment to exploring the issue of class is the fact that, although Nestor does offer Marcos some potential to escape his background, he is also exploiting him. The immediate post-credit sequence has Nestor looking into Marcos' house with binoculars; he is clearly wealthy as his apartment and car show, and is therefore different, with different social needs, from Marcos. This is shown most clearly when the pair sit talking outside a bar. The local police walk past and ask them for identification, but when they see Nestor's address they leave them alone. The suggestion clearly being that if Marcos had been on his own, their reaction would not have been the same.

It is certainly possible to read Nestor as a middle-class 'tourist', excited by his brush with the working-class Marcos, and indeed sexually thrilled by him. His ability to watch and observe, as he is repeatedly shown doing, highlights his relative social power. Like Marcos' young girlfriend, Nestor feels that he has nothing to fear in this society. This in turn means that even if he has seen Marcos' murderous actions from his upper-story apartment vantage point, he does not view himself as a future victim. It is here that the futility of Marcos' actions is most obvious. He kills those closest to him—including Rosa and his own brother—rather than those responsible for his oppression. The brief moments of relief and happiness he gains when he is closest to accepting his repressed sexuality must therefore be set against the social and economic restrictions that the mere act of sex

would never relieve. It is this, crucial, fact which one might argue lies at the centre of de la Iglesia's later, more sexually explicit (in terms of content) melodramas.

It is often small moments such as these that reveal the ways in which de la Iglesia consciously utilizes the generic conventions of the horror film, alongside those of social realism, to create a work that stands as a direct challenge to the values and beliefs of mainstream Spanish society of that period. Made during a time when many working-class cinemagoers in Spain were choosing to go to see, or due to censorship were only able to see, horror rather than the more elitist, art-house fare produced by directors such as Carlos Saura, de la Iglesia's use of the genre for political means becomes all the more important. Its intervention into a particular social, historical, and cultural moment—that of the Franco regime and popular resistance to it—is especially significant because it was accessible to the very people it was concerned about and who populate its images. For this reason, *La semana del asesino* is a striking example of radical, popular filmmaking in Spain in the early 1970s, and one that certainly deserves much more critical attention than it has thus far received.

Notes:

[1] Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 17.

[2] See, e.g., Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs, *Immoral Tales: Sex and Horror Cinema in Europe 1956-1984* (London: Titan Books, 1995); and Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000).

[3] Joan Hawkins, *The Cutting Edge*, 93.

[4] Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood* (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 40.

[5] Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilizing of American Movies* (London: Unwin Hayman, 1988), 3.

[6] For example, Peter Evans (ed) *Spanish Cinema: The Auteurist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) contains no chapters on horror auteurs, or on the horror work of established arthouse auteurs such as Bigas Luna, or on maverick popular filmmakers such as Alex de la Iglesia.

[7] Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: The Reconstruction of National Identity in Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 138.

[8] Kinder, *Blood Cinema,* 155.

[9] Paul Julian Smith, *Laws of Desire: Questions of Homosexuality in Spanish Writing and Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 129.

[10] Smith, *Laws of Desire*, 159.

[11] John Hopewell, *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema after Franco* (London: BFI Publishing, 1986), 221.

[12] See Stephen Tropiano, "Out of the Cinematic Closet: Homosexuality in the Films of Eloy de la Iglesia," in *Refiguring Spain: Cinema / Media / Representation*, ed. Marsha Kinder (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 157-77.

[13] Smith, *Laws of Desire*, 130.

[14] Smith, *Laws of Desire*, 130.

[15] A concerted campaign was waged in Britain against the so-called "video nasties," which for the most part were low-budget horror films. This was led by a number of newspapers who fuelled a moral panic about the content of these pictures and the effects they were having on young viewers. For a more detailed study of the movement, see Martin Barker, *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1985).

[16] Tony Williams, "Family horror", in *Movie* 27/28 (1980): 117.

[17] Parra had been a popular actor in films and on stage throughout the 1960s; indeed, he was something of a matinee idol. His commitment to *La Semana del Asesino* is reflected in his producing credit. He went on to work with Eloy de la Iglesia again on the 1973 film, *Nadie Oyó Gritar / No One Heard the Scream.*

[18] Alberto Mira,"Laws of Silence: Homosexual Identity and Visibility in Contemporary Spanish Culture," in *Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies*, ed. Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas (London: Arnold, 2000), 244.

[19] See *Out of the Past*, 277.

[20] Mark Jancovich, "Screen Theory," in *Approaches to Popular Film*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 129.

[21] *Immoral Tales*, 66.

5. Angustia and the Self-reflexive Horror Film in Spain

After the high point of horror film production in the early to mid-1970s, the 1980s saw a sharp fall off in the number of horror films produced in Spain. In part this was due to the introduction of the 'S' certificate in 1977[1], a move which allowed for much more sexually explicit films to be distributed in mainstream Spanish cinemas and encouraged horror producers to include much more explicit material in their films. When the popularity of this cycle of sexually explicit horror and soft-core, pornographic films began to fade horror production more generally fell away.

Another factor in the slowdown of horror production in the 1980s was the support for more 'serious' films offered by the post dictatorship governments of the 1980s, culminating in the so-called Miro law. This legislation encouraged films that were seen as socially relevant rather than work that was identified too closely with popular genres. Horror production fell foul of this initiative, which saw genre filmmaking as somehow associated with the negative ideas and beliefs of the Franco regime. However, even though the Miro legislation had a big impact upon genre cinema in Spain, it did not totally stop their production, and a number of interesting horror films were produced during this period. The next two chapters of this study will focus on two of those instances. Next I will consider the work of Agusti Villaronga. But first, I want to offer an analysis of another significant example, Bigas Luna's *Angustia* which was released in 1987.

Angustia, possibly due to its failure at the box-office combined with the fact that it is a horror film, has been a severely overlooked film. Certainly, upon reflection, and bearing in mind more recent trends within the horror genre, it is a film that is due some serious critical reconsideration. I propose, in this chapter, to begin to undertake such a reconsideration. As with other Spanish films and directors of the 1980s, most notably Pedro Almodóvar, *Angustia* represents a willingness to play with the idea of genre, in this case the horror film, and create a cinema that operates both within popular genres as well as being, at the same time, about those genres. This is certainly in line with Bigas Luna's work more generally. His work is often discussed in terms of their interaction with stereotypical images of Spanishness, perhaps most famously with his engagement with the 'machismo' of Spanish masculinity in his best known work, *Jamón jamón* (1992). However, most of those who have considered his films have done so in terms of his interest in representation, and his interaction with a range of Spanish types. Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas see this as increasingly problematic as rather than critique these images, as they obviously would like him to, they argue that he 'appears to endorse, if not celebrate, their fantasies as well as their foibles...his Iberian archetypes are treated in a warm, indulgent, affectionate manner, which tends to undercut their parodic function'[2]. Critics and academics have then, for the most part, focussed their attention on the films that most obviously engage with issues of representation and regional and national identity, the aforementioned *Jamón jamón*, *Huevos de oror / Golden Balls* (1993) *La teta i la lluna / The Tit and the Moon* (1994). However, this has been at the expense of his other, equally interesting works that explore the world of images in other ways. One of the major omissions from critical work on Bigas Luna, as noted above, is his engagement with the horror

genre, *Angustia*. In its re-working of the concerns of much theoretical writing about cinema from the 1970s and the approaches of counter cinema from the same period, *Angustia*, proves to be a complex and stimulating film. In this chapter I want to consider the ways in which the film interacts with ideas about film as a medium and mainstream popular genres and the ways in which they operate and interact with audiences, something that Bigas Luna has consistently addressed in his work. As Anne Marie Stock argues, 'Bigas Luna has been dedicated to identifying and recuperating marginalized forms of cultural expression, and horror films, overlooked by many serious viewers and most film critics until recently, constitute one such marginalized form'[3].

In the way that it approaches the horror genre it is certainly possible to argue that *Angustia* is a film about film, offering a mediation on cinema, pleasure and voyeurism. As Stock identifies more generally, 'Bigas Luna insists upon identifying, analyzing and revealing the operative mechanisms of cinema'[4]. However, unlike the 1970s avant-garde cinema that is most often associated with this type of self-reflexive practice, it does not offer a surface seriousness. It is a horror film, using the codes and conventions of that genre, which is also about cinema, watching and the influence of violence and violent images. It also strikes me as a film that celebrates the links between the codes and conventions of the horror genre and the knowledge, humour and willingness of horror film fans and some elements of the wider audience to laugh at themselves and the generic codes and conventions they are so committed to. Within this chapter I wish to explore the ways in which the film can be usefully analysed

with these ideas in mind. I therefore want to begin by considering the generic status of *Angustia.*

5.1 Angustia and Genre: definitions and misconceptions

Clearly, *Angustia* is a film that can comfortably be placed within the horror genre. However, this does not seem to be the case for all of those who mention the film in their work on contemporary Spanish cinema. Therefore, it is useful to spend a moment considering where others have placed the film generically, and how useful these placements are. This reflection reveals how genres, whilst seemingly generally accepted, should not be taken for granted. This is especially the case when the work at hand is a product of the Spanish film industry. Whilst recent work such as Nuria Triana-Toribio's *Spanish National Cinema* [5] have looked at the place of genre within Spanish cinema, much of the earlier critical writing has focussed on more serious art cinema, this has meant that genre films have been marginalized within Spanish cinema studies and generic definitions have been occasionally problematic. In the case of *Angustia* this is certainly the true. In her work on Bigas Luna, Anne Marie Stock shows that critics were disappointed because *Angustia* was not 'straight forward' enough. However, most of the critics she mentions at least managed to identify the film as being within the horror genre[6].

However, this is not the case in relation to other writers who mention or discuss the film in their work. For example, in their chapter on popular genre in *Contemporary Spanish Cinema*, Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas put *Angustia* within

'the broad category of the thriller'[7], having earlier placed it within what they call 'the "serial-killer" film, a subtype inaugurated internationally by Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990) and continued in David Fincher's *Seven* (1995)'[8]. Strangely, they choose not to discuss the film within their section devoted to the horror genre and work that explores its generic boundaries[9]. This strikes me as highly problematic. Later they argue that we 'soon learn' that the film within a film, *The Mommy*, is a 'B movie'[10]. It actually takes almost twenty one minutes of *Angustia* before we are made aware it is a film within a film, and whilst it may well be a 'B movie' this label is a little unhelpful in relation to a fuller understanding of the ways in which the film uses the particular generic conventions of the horror film. *The Mommy* is presented as an Eastern European film about an overbearing mother, who is an expert in hypnotism, and her weak and impressionable son, and is clearly a horror movie. The mysterious, hypnotic and supernatural link between the mother and son in the film within a film clearly connect generically with horror films rather than simply thrillers, 'B' movies, or serial killer films. Stock mentions that the publicity poster for the film makes its generic status clear stating that 'Zelda Rubenstein of *Poltergeist* Returns to Create a Horror Classic'[11]. Whilst, of course, the murderous, characters in *Angustia* are multiple killers they have more in common with the supernatural stalkers of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) than the psychologically rounded characters of *The Boston Strangler* (1966) and *Manhunter* (1986), who probably fit more criminological definitions of the 'serial killer'. Indeed, the central premise of *The Mommy* self-consciously evokes Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), a film often seen as template for so many contemporary horror and, specifically, 'slasher' films. This reference is made

clearer by the use of the title, *The Mommy*, and further so by the poster for the film within a film, which we see later on. A poster which features a dark house on the top of a hill, and which is from a camera angle that imitates the one used to frame the Bates house from the motel in *Psycho*.

Another misconception about *Angustia* seems to be present within Marsha Kinder's *Blood Cinema*. She states that the film is an attempt by Bigas Luna, along with his *Reborn* (1981), to 'repeat Almodóvar's success in the North American market.'[12] However, the fact that *Angustia* was shot with the principle performers speaking their dialogue in English, and released in an English language version in certain territories, shows that rather than repeat the arthouse circuit success that Almodóvar had enjoyed, Bigas Luna was perhaps hoping to break into the US mainstream horror market. Indeed, Stock argues that Bigas Luna may be considered more of a trans-national filmmaker than simply a Spanish one, stating that he 'stands with one foot firmly planted on Spanish soil and the other strongly positioned in the United States. He successfully straddles two film industries, having worked within Hollywood and Spanish production circles'[13]. In a similar manner it might be most useful to see *Angustia* as a film that exists in both art and genre cinema.

With regard to the potential of *Angustia* breaking into the horror market, it is important to remember that 1987, the year of the film's release, is only three years after the release of Wes Craven's highly profitable *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) which, according to Ian Conrich, recorded receipts of $9,337,942, and the year of the release of *A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 3: The Dream Warriors* (1987) which took

$21,345,000. At this time the potential market for clever, generically aware horror was clearly great. The generic self-consciousness of *Angustia* therefore connects it to this dominant trend within the horror films of the period. To label *Angustia* as an attempt to break into the US marketplace following the model of Almodóvar therefore seems a misrepresentation of the film, and does not assist any effort to understand how it operates. It is, certainly, an attempt to create a genre film that will sell within the United States, not as an exotic Spanish film, arguably the reason for the international success of *Jamón jamón*, but as a horror film. It is useful in this regard to compare Bigas Luna's film to another European horror film of the same period, Lamberto Bava's *Demons* (1985), which was also an attempt to create a product that would sell internationally. In this instance from the Italian industry, which has a long history of creating works, from the peplum to the western, that exploited popular trends in international filmmaking.[14]

Demons is an interesting counterpoint to *Angustia* as there are many plot similarities. Like Bigas Luna's film, *Demons* is set in a cinema where sinister goings on occur as the distinction between on-screen action and off-screen events begins to blur. Both have films within films which seem to inspire or cause horrific events in the audience watching the screenings. However, whilst Bava's film seems to be clearly inspired by the special effects and gore of the internationally popular *The Evil Dead* (1983), and seems more than content to simply shock the audience through the graphic depiction of the transformation of humans to demons, *Angustia* is a much more rigorous and self-reflexive exploration of the codes and conventions of the horror genre.

This comparison leads me to consider *Angustia* in two contrasting, but rewarding ways. Firstly, it can be seen as an example of the strong self-reflexive tendency that exists within contemporary horror films. *Angustia* is playfully about being a horror movie, and it is therefore useful to place it alongside other horror films that have been labelled postmodern. Secondly, and here it is significantly different from *Demons*, it can be read as an example of a film that explores the art of film and may be placed within a tradition of cinema that explores film as film. This tradition includes films such as *Psycho* (1960) and *Peeping Tom* (1959) which both clearly influence *Angustia*'s interest in voyeurism and the act of looking. However, it also attempts to disrupt the idea that cinema audiences follow a central or single character's point of view. The film self-consciously shifts and challenges our viewing positions. This is achieved, in particular through the use of the film within the film and the variety of spectator positions represented by the various members of the audience we are introduced to.

5.2 Postmodernity, Spanish Cinema and the Horror Movie

Much has been written regarding the postmodern aspects of 1980s Spanish cinema. One of the most consistent comments has been that the work of Almodovar and others has been generically fluid, shifting between a range of generic sources and breaking down boundaries between genres and national cinemas. For example, Kathleen M. Vernon discusses the 'intertextual presence of Hollywood cinema ... in a selected number of Spanish films.' [15], arguing that the referencing of Hollywood

cinema within Spanish films works to break down the notion of discreet national cinemas. She argues that her approach to these moments of intertextuality 'seeks to foreground a process of transcultural exchange, producing new readings that question the underlying ideological assumptions of both cultures' [16]. Vernon sees Almodovar as an example of this intertextuality, arguing that, 'the eclectic jumble of sources...characteristic of Almodovar's films might stand as a defining example of postmodern pastiche'[17]. In a similar fashion, Vìctor Fuentes argues that 'With a total lack of inhibition and a properly postmodern sense of lucid, Almodóvar recycles styles and genre[18]s from different periods and directors. Parody, pastiche, *mise-en-abîme*, and intertextuality characterize all his films'.[19] However, this intertextual referencing is something that is not exclusive to Spanish cinema. Indeed, as postmodernity is a global phenomenon it is not surprising that it is a very strong presence in other national cinemas and cinematic forms, for example, the contemporary American horror film.[20] It is the presence of this intertextuality that is relevant when considering *Angustia* alongside American horror films.

Referencing genre classics has become an everyday occurrence in, for example, the Hollywood horror films written by Kevin Williamson, such as *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), its sequel *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* (1998) and *The Faculty* (1999). The self-conscious generic qualities of these films has led critics to label them as postmodern, and it is possible to identify other elements that broadly fit the generally accepted tenants of postmodern cinema within them. For instance, the Williamson scripted films in particular draw heavily on the history of the genre, as well as its codes and

conventions. They make references to generically familiar characters and plot twists, and perhaps most of all they acknowledge the interactive nature of horror as a genre. The young people who populate the world of these films are often fans of the horror genre, the most obvious examples being the 'caller' in *Scream* who asks 'what is your favourite scary movie', and the party where the teenagers discuss the plot and character conventions of the 'stalk and slash' horror movie before finding themselves re-enacting those generic plot conventions as they comment upon them.

These form part of what Dominic Strinati [21], amongst others, has labelled, 'retro-nostalgia', creating an insular cinematic world that does not engage with any kind of outside social reality. This has led to these films being dismissed as clever, but lacking in any real depth. *Angustia* is certainly a 'clever' film, an example of this is its use of the device of a film within a film, which towards the end, as mayhem ensues within the theatre and the son in *The Mommy* terrorizes his cinema audience as they watch a film contains three cinema screens. The jokiness of the violent excess of the first twenty-one minutes, the use of stock teenage generic characters, and the cinema setting, all loosely link *Angustia* with the self-conscious Williamson scripted films, and other similar films such as the later entries in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series. However, ultimately to see the film simply in terms of postmodernism, useful as this may be, is limiting. As a film by a director who, in other works, has shown a level of engagement with popular cultural images, *Angustia* might also be explored in relation to other traditions within what might loosely be labelled European art cinema.

5.3 Angustia, self-reflexivity and the European avant-garde

On the surface the primary aim of *Angustia* is to scare and shock. However, there is more going on within the film than simply this. This is clearly the case in *The Mommy* sequence where the son's first victim is slashed with a scalpel and then her eye is removed. The graphic nature of the attack on the eye evokes a range of cinematic connections. For example, with Bunuel's eye cutting in *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) which strongly links *Angustia* to traditions within the European avant-garde. The emphasis on the eye in the opening sequences also evokes themes and ideas often associated with art cinema, for example, looking and the status of cinema as a particularly voyeuristic practice. It also considers the pleasure gained by audiences who happily consume such violent images.

These concerns, as I have suggested, are often associated with more radical elements of European art cinema and the avant-garde. It is therefore useful at this point to introduce Peter Wollen's definitions of avant-garde practice. He argues, in his influential article 'Godard and Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est'*, that Jean-Luc Godard, 'has developed a counter-cinema whose values are counterposed to those of orthodox cinema.'[22]. He outlines what he calls the 'seven values of the old cinema' and contrasts them with what he sees as their '(revolutionary, materialist) counterparts and contraries'[23]. I now want to further outline some of Wollen's counterparts and see if they might fruitfully be considered in relation to *Angustia* and further assist an understanding of the cinematic strategies employed within. This will hopefully indicate the extent to which it is possible to argue that Bigas Luna, whilst

making an American genre film, is also clearly operating within the traditions of European art cinema.

Wollen identifies Narrative Intransitivity, which he labels as 'gaps and interruptions, episodic construction, undigested digression'[24], as a key element of counter cinema. Whilst *Angustia* may not be as radical break as *Vent d'Est*, it certainly, through the use of the film within film and the cross-cutting between different characters and different cinematic worlds, interrupts the narrative flow and forces the spectator to, 're-concentrate and re-focus his attention.' [25] In *Angustia,* the length (almost twenty one minutes) of the opening section, the beginning of what we later discover to be a film within a film (*The Mommy*), creates an acceptance that this is to be the world of the fiction. The break with this world, which is created through the camera pulling back from the screen to reveal the audience watching the *The Mommy* in a dark auditorium, is all the more shocking because of the length of the opening section. The sudden disruption of the cinematic world created on screen, and the introduction of another, the film theatre, breaks 'the emotional spell of the narrative.' [26] It is therefore possible to argue that this aspect of *Angustia* marks it out as a film that, like the work of Godard, Artaud and Brecht according to Wollen, is 'suspicious of the power of ... cinema...to "capture" its audience without apparently making it think, or changing it.'[27] Indeed, Bigas Luna makes the idea of the audience captured by the film literal when, both within the film being screened and the cinema of *Angustia* itself, the killers bar the exits and 'capture' the audience. It is possible to see this as one of a number of jokes that appear in the film about audiences and the way they consume cinema. Another 'joke' centres on the idea of identification, as

members of the audience become hypnotized by the mother in *The Mommy* in the same manner as her son the optician's assistant.

Identification is another key element of mainstream cinema that Wollen suggests is challenged by counter cinema, and he argues that a key aspect of Godard's work is the breakdown of this identification. *Angustia*, through the already mentioned film within a film *The Mommy*, draws our attention to the 'falseness' of the characters. Even when we are introduced to the cinema audience in the 'real' world of the film theatre they are such generic stock characters, the teenagers in particular, that, due to the earlier 'shock' of the revelation of the film within a film, we do not easily give them our empathy and emotional involvement. Again, whilst *Angustia* may not employ devices as radical as Godard's, it certainly does operate in such a way as to prevent the simple identification so often associated with Hollywood cinema.

Through its setting in a cinema and the layering of screens and actions within the frame as it moves towards its climax, *Angustia* continually foregrounds the mechanics of film. The viewer is continually reminded that they are watching a film and that what is on the screen is a construction. This is perhaps at its most extreme as the film nears the end when in both the world of *The Mommy* and *Angustia* the cinema projectionist becomes drawn into the action. Through this the mechanical process by which films appear on screens is highlighted. At this point the plots of the two films begin to twist and turn together, actions occurring simultaneously in both. This strategy highlights the construction of cinematic entertainment and explodes any

sort of 'reality effect' therein. For example, the police arrive in both films at the same time. Images from *The Mommy* are playing behind the killer as he holds a hostage at gunpoint on stage and begin to complement the action in the foreground of the frame. For example, the police announce their presence to the killer as images of flashing police lights appear on the screen behind. Examples such as this add layers to the self-conscious feel of *Angustia*, and operate to continually remind the audience that they are only watching a movie. Indeed, this mantra has become a generic stalwart itself following its use in the marketing campaign for Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1971), 'To avoid fainting keep repeating, it's only a movie...it's only a movie...it's only a movie...', a similarity that would not be lost on horror film fans.

Wollen further develops his argument about Godard by stating that within *Weekend* (1967) 'instead of a single narrative world, there is an interlocking and interweaving of a plurality of worlds'[28]. As it progresses *Angustia* layers world upon world and character upon character. Once the story of the eye collecting optician and his hypnotic mother is revealed as a film, *Angustia's* narrative continues. From now on the film cuts between the two cinematic worlds, even adding a third as the optician visits a cinema showing *The Lost World* (1925) to continue his search for eyes.

Wollen's fifth aspect of counter cinema is 'aperture', which he argues is in opposition to the 'closure' of Hollywood cinema. He describes this closure as 'A self-contained object, harmonized within its own bounds' and places this in opposition to 'open-endedness, overspill, intertextuality – allusion, quotation and parody.'[29] This is the point at which counter cinema texts appear closest to postmodern films. Certainly,

both contain elements of pastiche and quotation. Again, *Angustia*, on the surface seems to fit this category of counter cinema. It uses cinematic quotations, borrows generically, and is very self-conscious about its status as a horror film. It, as Wollen says of Godard, 'can no longer be seen as a discourse with a single subject, the film maker / auteur. Just as there are a multiplicity of narrative worlds, so too there are a multiplicity of speaking voices'.[30] However, in the case of *Angustia*, this radicalism remains on the level of form. Like the American underground films of the 1960s *Angustia*, at least in these terms, seems an exercise in formal experimentation, albeit within a mainstream genre. As with the American underground, this experimentation challenges the boundaries of the film, if only, in the case of *Angustia*, of a popular genre.

'Unpleasure' is Wollen's sixth element of counter cinema. He sees this as an 'attack on "entertainment" cinema, which is part of 'a broader attack on the whole of 'consumer society'. [31] The unpleasure of counter cinema is designed as an antidote to mainstream cinema which is, 'a drug that lulls and mollifies the militancy of the masses, by bribing them with pleasurable dreams, thus distracting them from the stern tasks which are their true destiny'.[32] *Angustia* clearly operates, on one level, as an entertainment film. It is here, however, that there is another fracture between the ideals of counter cinema and *Angustia*. It operates so clearly within generic codes and conventions that it offers pleasures to its audience. Many of these pleasures are bound up with audience knowledge of generic codes and conventions, and their willingness to engage this knowledge in a self-conscious way, acknowledging and celebrating generic clichés. It is only through this engagement that the humour of the film

becomes apparent. However, horror is not dismissed as a mere popular form and the film does not present its codes and conventions in a superior way. Part of the success of *Angustia* is that it celebrates the knowledge of the genre fan and sees it as a positive element within a potential audience.

5.4 Angustia, postmodernity and post-classical cinema

The audience for *Angustia*, a horror film produced in the mid-1980s, can be labelled fragmented, and this fragmentation is very much something associated with the postmodern condition. However, the work of David Bordwell introduces another perspective which might further inform an understanding of these, supposedly postmodern, aspects of the film. Bordwell uses the term 'post-classical'[33] in his attempt to understand the changes within the post-studio era of Hollywood production. According to Henry Jenkins, Bordwell argues that the contemporary cinema, 'has absorbed narrational strategies of the art cinema while controlling them within a coherent genre framework' Jenkins continues,

> what is fascinating about the elliptical narratives, the abrupt cutting, the unusual camera angles and movements, the jarring juxtapositions of material found in recent films ...is the way in which ... directors have taken formal devices which, in their original art cinema context, were used to establish distanciation and employ them to intensify our emotional experience of stock generic situations. [34]

Having explored at some length the links between *Angustia* and the strategies of counter cinema, thus placing it within particular traditions within European art cinema, I would argue that Bordwell's argument enables an understanding of how these strategies may lose some of their historically, radical aspirations and meanings, becoming mere stylistic games. Specifically, this approach explains how once radical

techniques can become assimilated within popular genre filmmaking. Rather than challenging audiences to acknowledge critique and ultimately reject the oppression of classical Hollywood storytelling, these post-classical films merely take these formal strategies and make them palatable. They no longer offer 'unpleasure', but rather pleasure for an audience increasingly made up of cine and media literate members. They are very conscious of things such as auteurs, generic codes and conventions and special effects. This knowledge and understanding means that the traditional divide between popular forms and a radical avant-garde practice is broken down by the audience. The divisions become no longer tenable. Following on from, and because of these arguments it is possible to see *Angustia* as a challenging and important film.

5.5 Breaking down distinctions between the avant-garde and the popular

Angustia represents a bringing together of these two traditions. As I have noted, traditionally avant-garde film practice has been associated with the rejection of mainstream codes and conventions, particularly those of Hollywood. However, recent developments have seen this distinction break down. A blurring of the boundaries traditionally associated with these forms is markedly part of the aesthetic strategies of *Angustia.* It is certainly possible to classify it as an art film as well as a popular genre film. It has the formal properties that are associated with radical forms of filmmaking. In particular the interest in the 'look', and the continual focussing on eyes within its *mise-en-scéne*, suggest that director Bigas Luna has self-consciously constructed a film that is clearly aware of the developments concerning these issues in film theory during the 1970s and 1980s. On one level then, *Angustia* is an example of a

theoretically engaged form of filmmaking. Like more commonly acknowledged radical filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Godard and Alexander Kluge, with *Angustia* Bigas Luna has created a film that is critically engaged with the properties of film as a medium.

However, *Angustia* is also representative of a shift within recent filmmaking towards the collapse of traditional divisions, one that has become much more familiar as it has become more commonplace. Rather than setting itself up as being in opposition to popular film, a film produced by and for an informed, politicized elite, *Angustia* is immersed within the popular genre it is operating within, the horror film. It clearly draws on the cultural competencies of those familiar with the generic form. Part of the pleasure of the text is afforded by its celebration of the excesses of the genre. Furthermore, *Angustia* may be seen as a film that indicates the integration of traditionally radical elements within contemporary genre filmmaking. In 1987 this strategy was new and challenging, today it may seem more familiar and commonplace. Historically, *Angustia* must therefore be seen as a film that is representative of significant cultural shifts within international filmmaking. These shifts may remain under explored as their most interesting and stimulating occurrences appear in popular genres that still remain critically marginalized.

Notes:

[1] For a detailed examination of the 'S' certificate phenomenon in Spanish cinema at this time see Daniel Kowalsky 'Rated S: softcore pornography and the transition to

democracy, 1977-82'. In Lazaro Reboll and Willis eds. *Spanish Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester Universiy Press, 2004) 188-208.

[2] Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, Rikki, *Contemporary Spanish Cinema*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 78.

[3] Anne Marie Stock, 'Eyeing Our Collections: Selecting Images, Juxtaposing Fragments, and exposing Conventions in the Films of Bigas Luna' In Jenaro Talens and Santos Zunzunegui (eds.) *Modes of Representation in Spanish Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 180.

[4] Stock, 172.

[5] Nuria Triana Toribio, *Spanish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[6] Stock, 184

[7] Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, 167.

[8] Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, 102-103.

[9] Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, 107-110.

[10] Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, 167.

[11] Stock, 1998, 184.

[12] Kinder, Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: the reconstruction of national identity in Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 414.

[13] Stock, 1998, 183.

[14] For more on the exploitation side of the Italian film industry and their willingness to 'copy' popular genres see Kim Newman, 'Thirty Years in Another Town: the history of Italian Exploitation pt1'. In *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no.624 January, 1986, 20-24.

[15] Kathleen M. Vernon, 'Reading Hollywood in/and Spanish Cinema: from trade wars to transculturation'. In Marsha Kinder,, (ed)., *Refiguring Spain:_cinema / media / representation* (Durham USA: Duke University Press, 1987), 36.

[16] Vernon, 1987, 37

[17] Vernon, 1987, 43.

[18] Vernon, 1987, 37.

[19] Fuentes. 'Almodóvar's Postmodern Cinema: a work in progress...'. In Kathleen M. Vernon and Barbara Morris, Barbara, (eds.) 1995. *Post-Franco, Postmodern: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar.* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 159.

[20] Andrew Tudor explores this aspect recent American horror cinema in 'From paranoia to Postmodernism? The Horror Movie in Late Modern Society', in Steve Neale *Genre and Conteporary Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 105-116.

[21] Dominic Strinati *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[22] Peter Wollen, *Readings and Writings: semiotic counter strategies,* (London: Verso, 1982), 79.

[23] Wollen, 79.

[24] Wollen, 80.

[25] Wollen, 81.

[26] Wollen, 81.

[27] Wollen, 81.

[28] Wollen, 85.

[29] Wollen, 85.

[30] Wollen, 86.

[31] Wollen, 87.

[32] Wollen, 87.

[33] David Bordwell, David, *On The History of Film Style*, (Cambridge USA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[34] Henry Jenkins, 'Historical Poetics'. In Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich (eds.), *Approaches to Popular Film*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 114.

6. Agustí Villaronga: Horror, genre and authorship in Spanish cinema re-visited.

As this study has already noted, Spanish cinema studies has recently begun to recover and take seriously popular genres and the directors and other practitioners who work or have worked within them. This has occurred after a long period when the main focus of academic work undertaken in this field has traditionally centred on a number of well established auteurs such as Carlos Saura and Victor Erice, and has more recently discovered the likes of Julio Medem. However, this recent shift towards more popular works has meant that a number of directors have been overlooked as they and their films fail to fit easily into these polar approaches. On the one hand they don't fit an already well established auteur model, one that in Spain is usually, very much associated with what may be labelled art cinema and exists within the approaches established within studies of European cinema since the late 1950s. On the other, whilst they engage with genre in their work they are not simply ensconced within the more commercial parts of the Spanish film industry, producing what might be labelled merely populist works. Films that allow critics to discuss them in a manner that simply reads them as symptomatic of wider cultural shifts and concerns within Spanish society, and not actually grappling with their textual detail.

Amongst these overlooked directors there have been a number whose works are certainly worthy of being taken seriously, like the more established auteurs, but whose works exist within, or more often than not on the fringes of, popular cinematic styles, forms and trends. Often these directors are responsible for films that utilise

many of the codes and conventions of popular cinema, but do not reproduce them in a manner designed to simply satisfy the demands of mainstream audiences and desires of commercial producers. Instead, they use them as a way of engaging intellectually with a series of issues and ideas (and in true European auteur style these are big themes and ideas) through cinema. Their existence in-between these two, admittedly problematic, poles of commercial popular cinema and arthouse auterism has meant almost total critical neglect for a number of the most interesting Spanish directors, who in recent years have produced a string of striking films. In this chapter I want to focus on one such case, Mallorcan filmmaker, Agustí Villaronga, a director who has worked consistently since his debut feature in 1986, but a figure who has been ignored almost completely within critical writing on contemporary Spanish cinema.

This neglect is reflected by Paul Julian Smith who has noted that Villaronga is 'Spain's unluckiest and unlikeliest auteur' and that his 'name is absent from the reference books on Spanish cinema'[1]. Smith is certainly correct as Villaronga warrants only a few lines in Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas's *Contemporary Spanish Cinema* and no mention at all in Stone's *Spanish Cinema* or Triana-Toribio's *Spanish National Cinema*[2], all major English language works in the field. Here, I want to argue that whilst this filmmaker has failed to appear in such works on Spanish cinema, this should certainly not be taken as an indication of the significance or value of his work when discussing trends and developments in recent Spanish cinema or identifying major practitioners. Indeed, Villaronga's films have won a number of awards at international festivals such as Cannes, Berlin and Venice but it seems that

these accolades have failed to turn into any sustained serious critical examination. In undertaking what I hope is such a study I will discuss how Villaronga's films intersect with genre, notably the horror film, and argue that they are overwhelmingly 'serious' works made by a 'serious' filmmaker and should be addressed as such, whilst acknowledging the centrality of genre to his work. Certainly, when interviewed Villaronga comes across as a director who takes his work very seriously.[3] The marginalization of his films leads me to ask questions regarding how far this is due to the fact that his work simply does not fit easily into international notions of an 'essential' Spanish cinema. Ideas that in turn inform critics in their choices of what directors and films to discuss in their writings.

Agustí Villaronga was born on Mallorca in 1953 and began making short films, including the fantasy film *Anta mujer*, in the mid-1970s. His first feature, the controversial *Tras el cristal / In a Glass Cage*, was released in 1986 and the impact of that film has since somewhat overshadowed his subsequent output. Indeed, most critical references to him concern that debut. In terms of theatrical features, he followed *Tras el cristal* with *El niño de la luna / Moonchild* in 1989; *99.9* in 1997; *El mar / The Sea* in 2000; and co-directed 2002s *Aro Tolbukhin: en la mente del asesino / Aro Tolbukhin: in the mind of a killer*. Whilst not a prolific director, he has however created a body of work that on reflection screams out to be acknowledged as a significant contribution to the recent history of Spanish cinema. Alongside this work, Villaronga has made a number of documentaries and worked for television, most notably directing the international TV movie *El pasajero clandestino / The*

Clandestine Passenger in 1995, a film which brought together an international cast including well known British actor Simon Callow. With five features bearing his name to date, Villaronga is a director who has produced a body of work that rewards close examination, however as noted, for the most part that consideration has yet to be forthcoming.

Tras el cristal is the one film by Villaronga that has awakened some level of critical interest. In one of the most sustained engagements with the film Marsha Kinder labels *Tras el cristal,* along with other Spanish films of the mid-1980s *La muerta de Mikel* (1984) and *Matador* (1986), as 'three outrageous melodramas from the Socialist era that blatantly eroticize violence within a homoerotic narrative and that challenge...the genre's traditional privileging of heterosexuality, family, and motherhood.' [4] Of course, many films contain elements that may be labelled melodrama, but to claim this violent and extreme work simply as an example of a melodrama seems rather unhelpful. Indeed, recent scholarship has again argued that melodramatic elements exist in a range of established film genres [5]. Whilst many have focussed on the Hollywood family melodrama as the highpoint of the genres cinematic manifestations, a more general usage is reflected by the idea, taken from Peter Brooks[6], of films that exhibit a more general 'melodramatic imagination'. Following on from this, elements of melodramatic expression are clearly to be found in a wide variety of films from westerns to war films. Thus, simply labelling Villaronga's *Tras el cristal* as generically a melodrama seems to me to do little to assist a wider understanding of the film. Of course, it may utilise melodramatic

elements and I now want to consider how else *Tras el cristal* has been discussed by critics.

Moving away from Kinder's notion of the film as a melodrama, others have more commonly associated *Tras el cristal*'s extreme violence with the horror genre. Writing in the horror genre fanzine *Eyeball*, Stephen Thrower has argued that '*Tras el cristal*, on the other hand, uses the excitement of a loose horror film format to suggest our complicity with abomination.'[7] The e-journal *Kinoeye: new perspectives on European film* has included a piece on the film by Chris Gallant within its horror section, with the author claiming that, 'Like so many examples of European horror, *Tras el cristal*'s reputation has grown largely through the underground press.'[8]. Indeed, most of the references to any of Villaronga's films can be found on websites devoted to cult, extreme and horror cinema, rather than in the pages of academic books and journals. I now want to move on to consider how far it is actually useful to consider Villaronga as, to a certain extent, a horror director, rather than one of melodrama or any other genre.

As this study has argued, Spanish cinema has had a strong association with horror for many years. Like the UK and Italy it was at the forefront of a sustained roster of European horror film production from the late 1960s until the mid-1970s, a period that Carlos Aguilar has usefully divided into three phases: 1968-70 the start, 1971-3 the explosion and 1974-76 the period of saturation. He goes on to argue that 1976-83 marked a dispersion of horror into other styles of film notably sex films with the

establishment of the S certificate.[9] This led to an association of the horror genre and some of the directors working within it in Spain with low budget, often hardcore, movies as horror elements were combined with sexual content. However, whilst gaining a rather disreputable reputation, horror film production in this period also produced a number of directors who have gone on to become cult figures for cult movie and genre fans. These have included Jess Franco, Paul Naschy, Amando de Ossorio and Narcisco Ibáñez Serrador. All of who are the subject of sustained career interviews in Carlos Aguilar's book *Cine Fantástico y de Terror Español 1900-1983*[10]. This period also operated in a highly commercial manner and the low budget, exploitation sheen of many of the horror films produced did nothing to endear them with critics and academics who were busy looking for supposed serious engagements with contemporary society, particularly the Franco regime and the transition period that followed. The plethora of gaudy colours, werewolves, vampires and mad doctors that inhabited these films can be taken as a signal to critically disregard these works as simply popular trash and marginalize them from serious film histories. An added effect of this was that anyone wanting to work even on the fringes of the horror genre following this period had to work hard against this prejudice to be taken seriously. The saturation that Aguilar speaks of ensuring that horror became a troublesome area for critics who negatively associated it with the works of this period. Perhaps this explains Kinder's willingness to label Villaronga's first film as melodrama rather than horror. In order to take it seriously she performed a critical slight of hand and re-presented the film as a melodrama. However, this is still more than others writers

discussing Spanish cinema of the period did: they simply ignored his work unable to think critically about Spanish horror.

In light of this critical gap, it may therefore be useful to consider how we might define Spanish horror as a genre, attempting to widen its scope beyond the werewolf films of Paul Naschy and the exploitation 'horrotica' of Jesus Franco. As Mark Jancovich has noted, horror is now the site of perhaps the most sustained body of film genre analysis. However, this expansion of scholarly work has yet to result in a sustained reclamation and reconsideration of Spanish horror cinema. However, with the publication of work by people such as Antonio Lazaro Reboll and Tatjana Pavlovic[11] this is slowly changing. If Jancovich is correct in his assertion that 'In recent years...the horror film has taken over from the western as the genre that is most written about by genre critics. In many of these accounts, the horror genre is claimed to be interesting because of its supposedly marginal, and hence subversive, status as a disreputable form of popular culture.'[12], then perhaps we have a further clue to Villaronga's virtual neglect. He is simply not trashy enough, his sophisticated *mise-en-scéne* and the lack of opportunistic sensationalism within his films meaning that he cannot be claimed as subversive 'bad cinema' or 'paracinema' by academics and cultists. In other words he does not adhere to the model of Spanish horror cinema epitomised by the likes of Jess Franco. However, this does not mean that his films do not fall within the broad boundaries of the genre. Rather they demand an extension of how one understands the various ways that the genre's codes and conventions have been utilised by filmmakers in Spain.

Those marketing Villaronga's films have clearly been happy to suggest his films are indeed horror movies of some sort. For example, the video covers for all the films clearly include horror elements. The Cult Epics release of *Tras el cristal* uses an image from the credit sequence of the film that is strikingly similar to the promotional poster for John Carpenter's 1982 film *The Thing* and includes the line 'They don't make art-shockers like this anymore!', a line reflecting the double existence of the film as both an art and a horror 'shocker'. Ciudad's DVD release of *99.9* goes a little further adding the subtitle 'the frequency of terror' to the film, something which is not present on the actual film print, and clearly suggest the horror elements in the film. The images that accompany it on the cover, including actress Terele Pávez looking like a possessed character from a 1970s satanic horror movie, leaves the potential audience in no doubt about the genre of the film. Peccadillo Pictures DVD of *El mar* has a child looking upwards in shadow their face looking fearful. Both the quotes on the cover here mention violence and sex. Mystery, suspense and horror are all suggested by such cover art. The Spanish DVD release of *Aro Tolbukin: en la menta del asesino* has black and white negative images combined with red writing. This combination, along with the title of the film, again offers the potential viewer murder and mayhem, this time with a with clear a psychological angle. The only exception to this general horror trend within the marketing of Villaronga's films is that for *El niño de la luna.* Here, the cover is simply confusing, perhaps suggesting Buñuel, with an image of an eye with a plane wing cutting across an eyeball, perhaps reflecting the fact that the film itself is very difficult to easily allocate generic

qualities to. Of course, some critics have suggested that the horror genre itself is particularly difficult to define.

In his recent book on the horror film, Peter Hutchings usefully, in relation to this case, asks 'How do you know a horror film when you see it?' In response to his own question he says that it should be easy to answer but unlike genres such as the western, with its specific geography and historical setting, defining the horror film is a much more slippery proposition. To begin with, whilst certain cycles within the genre may have, the horror film generally does not have a specific setting or iconography. He goes on to argue that many films rather than being easy to allocate generically rather show 'how indeterminate or ambiguous the generic identity of certain films can be'.[13] It is certainly true that within the horror genre certain cycles that are dominant have become synonymous with the genre as a whole: the demonic possession cycle of the mid-1970s; the 'slasher' films of the 1980s, and what has become labelled as the postmodern horror of the late 1990s, are all examples of this trend. Villaronga's films, whilst clearly expressing strong elements of horror, rarely fit into the dominant cycle of production within the period they were made. In this manner his films also raise issues of definition, and here once more we may have a reason for his works marginalization; the films are just too difficult to easily tie down. Again, as Hutchings notes,

> Defining what a horror film is becomes rather more difficult than might originally have been supposed. In part, this has to do with the fact that the numerous definitions of horror cinema do not fit together into a cohesive whole. But it also has to do with the way in which a significant number of films are constantly being reclassified so far as their generic affiliations are concerned, with the industry,

> critics and sectors of the audience all working to construct their own versions of horror.[14]

In this context then, Villaronga's films may seem more like horror the further away we get from their first release. More recent critical work in this area such as Joan Hawkins'[15] work on art horror and the horrific avant-garde has further developed an understanding of works that exist in these particular shifting contexts. Here, the horror genre is not simply made up of the low-budget 'popular' films it is often most associated with but also includes work that fits more readily into some of the definitions of art cinema. This work provides a useful model and here it proves useful to consider Villaronga's films as art/horror rather than simply horror and the director himself as creating work that is self-consciously artful, if not wholly arthouse in the traditional sense of the use of the term in Spanish film studies. Villaronga here becomes a director often working within the horror genre but outside its dominant cycles.

Precèdents for such a combination of art and horror cinema are available from the early days of the medium. Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Dreyer's *Vampyr* of course, being considered art films from their initial release onwards yet now ensconced in the canon of great horror films. Perhaps, due to its combination of violent imagery and interest in exploring the legacy of fascism, Georges Franju's *Les yeux sans visage* (1959) bears a strong similarity to a number of Villaronga's films, most notably *Tras el cristal* and *El niño de la luna*. Later, the Italian Dario Argento has been seen as a director whose films combine generic qualities with arthouse sensibilities. Leon Hunt argues that Argento is 'virtually unique as an 'art' horror director who has

transcended the cyclic, production-line, spin-off genre system.'[16] Hunt also links Argento's work to the definition of art cinema offered by David Bordwell when he says that his films,

> often embody features of the art film as described by David Bordwell. Argento's work frequently displays "patterned violations of the classical norm...an unusual angle, a stressed bit of cutting, a prohibited camera movement...[a] failure to motivate space and time in a cause-effect logic." Prominent as well are enigmas of narration –"who is telling the story? How is the story being told? Why tell the story this way?"[17]

His sentiments about Argento are very close to Paul Julian Smith's comments on *El mar* which suggest Villaronga's work has some of these same art cinema traits. He says in his *Sight and Sound* review that Villaronga seems 'unconcerned by characterisation, Villaronga is equally uninterested in plot'.[18] How far then do the actual films reflect this idea of the art/horror auteur?

Villaronga's first film *Tras el cristsal* is undoubtedly powerful with strong images that mix sex and violence. It tells the story of an exiled Nazi torturer and sadist, Klaus, who after abusing a young boy has a strange accident (the film asks us: did he fall or was he pushed?) whilst in exile in Spain and is now only alive due to the assistance of an iron lung. A young man arrives at the isolated manor where Klaus stays with his wife and young daughter and persuades Klaus to allow him to become his nurse. Slowly the narrative unveils the fact that as a boy he was also the subject of sexual abuse and experiments by Klaus. The boy now assumes the role of abuser as Klaus lies helplessly. The story could easily be the stuff of a sleazy Jess Franco, Nazi sexploitation film, but Villaronga's mise-en-scene raises it far above being such a work. For example, like Franju before him, Villaronga is heavily influenced by

Battaile, and indeed, the idea for the film came from his work on Giles de Rais, the 15th century soldier and sadist[19]. Like Franju, Villaronga is interested in the hidden stories of Nazi experiments. Namely here, what happened to torturers after the war. Klaus is in exile, but clearly this has not stopped his practices. He has still got his notebooks and a telling piece of dialogue informs us that the iron lung was acquired by a doctor who is still practising and assisted Klaus in the concentration camps. This is at the centre of what I find interesting and what links the work to other European horror films. Kinder suggests that the film was dismissed by some critics as 'not Spanish' enough when it was released.[20] Such a reaction seems strange when one considers the actual film itself. I would argue that the settings and costumes suggest it is clearly set in Spain. The dialogue tells us it is 8 years since the family have been in exile, presumably since the end of World War II. The obvious question is how far such 'exiles' were allowed to carry on their activities, and possibly were even supported by the host governments. The fact that he young man who turns up at the house is called Angelo clearly indicates that he has been selected by Klaus since his arrival in exile. This seems a very pertinent question to ask and the film does not shy away from implying that the family are far from in hiding. For example, they have a maid from the local community.

The films *mise-en-scéne* enhances the feelings of insularity that will pervade his work as well as the repression and denial of feelings that will lead to terrible consequences. As the latter part of the film progresses Angelo recreates the camp he has read about in Klaus's journal. He continues to abduct children as he was abducted

and in the end induces Klaus's daughter Rene into his role as he assumes that of his tormentor in the iron lung, the cycle repeating itself unless the issue is addressed. In this instance the violence of the film – actually not that graphic – perfectly in tune with the content. The audience invited to consider the issues from a distance as the film disallows any real constant point of identification with none of the characters evoking much sympathy from those watching. Indeed, this distanciation creates interesting moments. For example, when Griselda is killed by Angelo we are placed in a strange position. She knows all about Klaus's experiments in the camp – she talks of them on the phone earlier – and so illicit little sympathy, but Angelo is an strange young man who we are aware is torturing Klaus, the artful construction of her stalking and killing further working to distance us. In particular, the careful creation of the *mise-en-scene* is cold and un-engaged. It contains cold colours, shadows, costume, precise movement by the actors; in contrast to for example, mainstream US horror where we are often shocked by being placed within the action not at arms length from it.

Villaronga's next feature *El niño de la luna* extends a number of the thematic and stylistic traits found within *Tras el cristal.* The story concerns a young boy who is taken to a centre that studies the paranormal and has collected gifted people to research on. The period is the 1930s – indicated carefully by *mise-en-scene*: costume, make-up, settings and in particular hairstyles – and the fascistic nature of the group running the centre made clear through their desire to create super people. The plot however seems secondary to the creation of a strong visual style. More fantastic that

horror, the film is long and the narrative rambling. Here more than before Villaronga seems to move closer to Argento and his continual bravura settings and shot transitions stunning to look at. As he moves away from the narrative drive of genre filmmaking, Villaronga begins to seem more like a director who Peter Wollen would admire. In particular, in light of his saying that, 'to me, the most exciting...directors always had an experimental edge...I am a great admirer of the few film-makers who have managed to balance a professional career in the industry with an on-going commitment to experiment.'[21]

In *El niño de la luna* there is continual visual connections between character and place through the repeated circle motifs that pervade the screen throughout. These reoccurring circles, here most associated with the young hero David, creating a clear contrast with the sharp lines of the fascistic centre for experiments. The modernism of the medical discourses spouted by the doctors at the centre in opposition to the more organic nature of David's belief in the power of the moon. This leads to the films finale in Africa where the tribes people of the desert represent a society unhindered by the aspirations of the west and in particular the fascistic ideas about to sweep across its borders. The politics of Villaronga's films allowed a much freer reign to explore issues than if he worked in the more socially realistic, 'political' cinema of Spain in the 1980s. In *El niño de la luna* it is character and *mise-en-scene* combine to offer a political perspective in relation to the material at hand rather than historical specificity.

It is a sense of historical specificity that has played a significant part in many of the films that critics have championed as being socially relevant in Spain as they were seen to engage with the historical and political realities of everyday life, even when symbolically as in Victor Erice's films. *El niño de la luna* however, deals with something that has concerned Villaronga before, experimentation on humans. Here, ESP and the mind. The far right are widely believed to have undertaken a vast amount of experiments in these areas in concentration camps and Nazi doctors were part of the post-war US programmes into mind control. Villaronga's centre suggests that they may have started earlier. Selective breeding, imperial adventures, determination and absolute self-belief are all part of the organisation. And the *mise-en-scene* leaves us in no doubt with its futuristic sets and colour co-ordinated uniforms. Therefore this connection allows us to see links across his films. However, the generic input remains important as it gives a sense of structure to the films, and assists an audience in approaching them.

99.9 is perhaps the most generic of Villaronga's works but in being so seems too only slightly develops his ideas and concerns, revealing even more the tension between genre and art in his films. A more obvious horror tale, combined with a search narrative, *99.9* follows a woman who searches for a former lover who has gone missing after undertaking experiments into the paranormal. The film contains a number of horror set pieces and creates a strong atmosphere in its small village, complete with suspicious locals. However, the energy of the film seems to be

stretched a little too far between delivering horror set pieces and attempting to create the visually striking images of the directors other films..

El mar is a return to the visual pre-occupations he had shown in his earlier works, hence Paul Julian Smith's comments. The style here begins to swamp the story and one stunning visual image replaces another. Here Villaronga's work may be understood in a similar way that Paul Willemen suggested we may look at the great western director Anthony Mann. 'Mann's stories are mere excuses to replace one image by another, pretexts for the renewal of visual pleasure...The image and the figure in it are simply there to be looked at, to be enjoyed as pure pictoriality.' Discussing *Man of the West* (1959) which begins with a striking image of Gary Cooper on horseback he says, 'While the following drama generates the rationale for changing the images, the image-track itself provides endless variations of that initial picture.'[22] *El mar*, like *El niño de la luna* continually uses circles within the frame. These include: caves, wells, eyes, the moon, shadows, and wheels. Villaronga's concern here seems to be with putting one striking image in front of us after another. The impact is again distancing. *El mar* has central characters that refuse to deal with their situation. Their illnesses may be read as due to their not accepting their sexuality and their actions become self destructive. Tur turns to religion, thus damaging himself, Ramallo turns on himself by having a tattoo, and on others through his criminal activity. The *mise-en-scene* again is an integral part of the way in which the film forces us to think about what we see. The seeming concern with image rather than character or plot development reveals a rejection of the logic of mainstream

cause and effect narrative. Horrific, fantastic and supernatural images are, once again, being used in a way that challenges the audience to engage with the challenging themes and concerns of the film.

El mar is perhaps the most strident of Villaronga's films in this manner and perhaps took him as far as he wanted to go in this direction. His next work, the co-directed *Aro Tolbukin*, approaches its material from a very different angle, but with similar effect. Still within the wider scope of horror, this film attempts to create something that is perhaps best termed a drama documentary. Here the story focuses on a supposed serial killer in Latin America, the Aro Tolbukin of the title. The film presents a variety of styles and approaches in its attempt to offer various takes on the character and his mysterious actions. Using a number of actors in the central roles and mixing the styles of fiction and documentary the film marks a break for the director. It moves away from the combination of art cinema and genre that had marked his earlier films. However, it also reveals a filmmaker who is willing to try and do something unexpected. *Aro Tolbukin* is a film that still asks the audience to think about what they see on the screen and one that, once again, challenges their expectations.

Villaronga remains a director whose work, whilst seriously self-conscious at the level of construction and content, particularly their highly stylized use of the elements of mise-en-scene, lacks the so-called parodic postmodern self-consciousness that marks recent, much commented upon, Spanish directors such as Almodóvar, Alex de

la Iglesia and Santiago Segura. This has meant that when critics such as Barry Jordan have attempted to identify any unifying and overriding traits in recent Spanish cinema and, in particular, international audiences expectations of them, Villaronga's work seems somewhat removed from the centre. Jordan argues,

> Foreign audience expectations of what post-Franco Spanish film ought to offer were thus established in a large part by Almodóvar's postmodern refiguring of the clichés of the traditional *españolada*. Moreover, Almodóvar and by implication Spanish film, became synonymous with sex and plenty of it, the steamier and more explicit the better.[23]

Villaronga's work does not offer the Iberian 'sexyness' of such filmmakers as Almodóvar and Bigas Luna, whose *Jamon Jamon* found a large international audience based on this factor. Although Villaronga's films do contain plenty of sex it is tied into dark stories and therefore falls outside what is widely perceived as the kitsch taste of typical Spanish directors. His films also fall outside the more social realist style of directors such as Borau, and more recently Bollaín. He remains then an auteur who has yet to be fully acknowledged as such due largely to the fact that his films exist beyond many of the established paradigms used within critical work on Spanish cinema. As already noted, this is a great pity as his work is endlessly interesting and he is clearly a politically conscious director who is in control of what appears on the screen. The idea of Villaronga as the unifying presence in his work is further reinforced by the visual consistency that is present across his films when he works with different cinematographers and set designers. However, it would seem that he operates too closely to the critically marginalized horror genre to find a place alongside the feted auteurs of Spanish cinema.

It is hoped things may change. Recent developments in genre filmmaking in Spain, the work of Amenábar: *Tesis / Thesis*, *Abre los ojos / Close Your eyes* and *The Others*, and Balagueró: *Los sin nombre / Nameless* and *Darkness*, in particular, have shown a revival in 'serious' approaches to horror and the supernatural. Perhaps their success and the increased critical investigation of their work and the knock-on effect of a reassessment of the genre will lead to an overdue reconsideration of Villaronga's back catalogue. In the next chapter I want to turn to some of the more recent developments within the horror genre in Spain.

Notes:

[1] Paul Julian smith, '*El mar*'. In *Sight and Sound*, Aug 2001, 11: 8, 51-52.

[2] Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas, *Contemporary Spanish Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998)

Rob Stone, *Spanish Cinema* (Harlow: Longman, 2002)

Nuria Triana Toribio, *Spanish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[3] Interview on DVD of *Tras el cristal.*

[4] Marsha Kinder, *Blood Cinema: the reconstruction of national identity in Spain*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 183-184.

[5] See for example, John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: genre, style, sensibility*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2004).

[6] Peter Brooks, Peter, *The melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James and the mode of excess*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

[7] Stephen Thrower, *Tras el cristal*. In Stephen Thrower (ed.) *Eyeball Compendium*, Godalming: FAB Press, 2003), 348.

[8] Chris Gallant, Chris 'Power, paedophilia, persition: Agustín Villaronga's *Tras el cristal* (*In a Glass Cage*, 1986). In *Kinoeye: new perspectives on European film*. 2: 17 (www.kinoeye.org, 2002), np.

[9] Carlos Aguilar, *Cine fantástico y de terror Español 1900-1983* (Donostia: Semana de Cine Fantastico y Terror, 2000).

[10] Aguilar, *Cine fantástico*.

[11] Antonio Lazaro Reboll, 'Screening "Chicho": the horror ventures of Narsisco Ibáñez Serrador'. In Antonio Lazaro Reboll and Andrew Willis (eds.) *Spanish Popular Cinema*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 152-168. Tatajana Pavlovic, *Deapotic Bodies and Transgressive Bodies: Spanish culture from Francisco Franco to Jesus Franco*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003).

[12] Mark Jancovich (ed.), *Horror: the film reader* (London: Routledge, 2002), 1.

[13] Peter Hutchings, *The Horror Film* (Harlow: Longman, 2004), 2.

[14] Hutchings, *The Horror Film,* 4.

[15] Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: art-horror and the horrific avant-garde*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[16] Leon Hunt, 'A (Sadistic) Night at the *Opera*: notes on the Italian horror film'. In Ken Gelder (ed.) *The Horror Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 328.

[17] Hunt, 'Sadistic Night', 328.

[18] Paul Julian Smith, '*El Mar'*, 52.

[19] Villaronga explains this on the interview contained on the DVD of *Tras el cristal.*

[20] Kinder, *Blood Cinema*, 185.

[21] Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema: expanded edition*, (London: BFI, 1998), 167.

[22] Paul Willemen, 'Anthony Mann: looking at the male'. In *Framework* 15/16/17, 1981, 16.

[23] Barry Jordan, 'How Spanish is it? Spanish cinema and national identity.' In Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-Tamosunas (eds.) *Contemporary Spanish Cultural Studies.* (London: Arnold, 2000), 73.

7. From the Margins to the Mainstream: trends in recent Spanish horror cinema

This chapter focuses on horror films made in Spain or by Spanish filmmakers since 1990. The recent revival of the genre within Spain has led to the production of a significant number of, broadly, horror films in recent years. Here, I want to identify different strands within this recent generic production. Certainly, after the international success of *The Others / Los Otros* (2001), there have been a small but significant number of films trying to repeat that productions huge international success over the next few years, such as *La promesa* (2004). However, *The Others*, rather than being a catalyst for this cycle of horror production, can be seen as the peak of a general trend that saw a significant number of horror films made in Spain throughout the 1990s and into the early 21st century. Importantly, these ranged from short films to features. My aim here is to come to an understanding of the trends within this cycle of generic production. In particular I want to consider the ways in which these strands link to wider developments in the production of Spanish popular cinema.

7.1 Spanish horror in the 1990s

Before embarking on my analysis I feel it is useful to outline the development of horror cinema in Spain in the 1990s and to indicate the sorts of films that I am considering in this study. Without doubt, the horror genre has had a significant impact upon the Spanish film industry. As we have already seen the high point, at least in

terms of numbers of productions and co-productions, of the late 1960s and early 1970s saw horror films produced by a varied array of directors. These ranged from Vicente Aranda, who would later establish himself as an arthouse staple, to Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, perhaps best known as the figure behind the successful television programme *Un, dos, tres*, to Javier Aguirre, who also created a reputation as an experimental filmmaker in the early 1970s. Without forgetting Paul Naschy, who became a key genre figure often playing the character of Daninsky the werewolf and would appeared once again in the 2001film *School Killer*. Some of these films received international exhibition in the 1970s in versions dubbed into various languages, often providing the lower halves of double bills in urban, exploitation orientated cinemas. They often featured stock generic figures such as The Werewolf (*La noche de Walpurgis / The Werewolf's Shadow*, 1970), Dracula (*El gran amor del conde Dracula / Dracula's Great Love*, 1972) and The Mummy (*La venganza de la momia / The Mummy's Revenge*, 1973). However, following the loosening of censorship laws around Europe in the late 1970s, marked in Spain by introduction of the 'S' certificate after the restoration of democracy[1], many distributors looked for products that were more directly sex orientated rather than the previously popular blend of horror and sex, sometimes labelled 'horrotica'. Following a shift into sex films some distinguished horror directors, such as Carlos Aured who had made *Apocalipsis sexual* in 1982, found themselves forced economically into the ghetto of hardcore pornography as producers demanded more explicit scenes. From which many of them, due to their new 'bad reputations' would never be able to escape. However, whilst some of these horror films, such as Ibáñez Serrador's *La Residencia*

/ *The Finishing School* (1969), were financially very successful, as a genre they would remain on the critical margins of Spanish film culture. This marginality was heightened when democracy was restored and critical interest began to focus on how filmmakers would negotiate and engage with that historical moment. The horror film and its place in Spanish film history quickly became forgotten. Arguably, that would not change until the end of the 20th century.

This change began when from the early 1990s, a generation on from the return to democracy; critics such as Carlos Aguilar[2] began to reconsider the horror genre by tracing its history and significantly, its influence. This re-evaluation seemed even more significant as a number of young Spanish filmmakers began to reassess the value of working within the horror genre, many influenced as much by US and other European films as those previously produced in Spain. Importantly in the same period, Sitges and San Sebastián hosted well respected international horror and fantasy festivals, which allowed for an exuberant celebration of the genre, and provided a place for young filmmakers to screen their work and more importantly meet each other and share ideas and aspirations. Many of those who were interested in the horror genre and attended these festivals had been involved in the world of underground fanzines where obscure generic knowledge would be championed and celebrated.

In the early 1990s a number of filmmakers released work that was in, or engaged with the horror genre. These included: Alex de la Iglesia with *Acción mutante* /

Mutant Action (1993) and *El día de la bestia / Day of the Beast* (1995); Santiago Segura with the short films, *Evilio* (1992) and its sequel *El Purificador: Evilio vuelve* (1994); Nacho Cerdá with *Aftermath* (1994) and *Génesis* (1998), also short films; and Jaume Balagueró with his short *Días sin Luz* (1996) and later the very successful feature *Los sin nombre / The Nameless* (1999). However, they were significantly different in their approaches and simply classifying them generically as 'horror' is in some ways reductive. It is therefore important to discover a way of making distinctions within contemporary Spanish horror productions in order to embrace these different works. One way of beginning to do this is by using work that has attempted to look at strands within contemporary genre filmmaking in other contexts.

7.2 Genric trends in the 1990s: irony and sincerity

One such work is Jim Collins' 1993 article 'Genericity in the nineties: eclectic irony and the new sincerity'[3]. Here, Collins proposes that there were two main trends within Hollywood genre production in the 1990s. The first of his categories is based around what he terms 'an ironic hybridization', where traditional generic divisions are collapsed and films begin to playfully cross boundaries, creating weird and wonderful mixes. The second category, 'new sincerity', seeks to find a 'lost purity', in terms of genre, and esquews the irony that marks out the former. Both types of genre film have, according to Collins, 'emerged within the past decade as reactions to the same cultural milieu – namely, the media-saturated landscape of contemporary [American] culture'.[4] He goes onto argue that the circulation of older generic texts and a growing

awareness of patterns of distribution and the various mediums of exhibition have impacted upon recent genre products. With the rediscovery of Spanish horror over the past few years, in both Spain and beyond, it is possible to argue that this situation, that is one marked by an array of film savvy producers and consumers, exists in relation to the production and consumption of these films. So, whilst work that focuses on US film production might not address the specificity of Spanish cinema, it does offer approaches that can begin to inform our understanding of contemporary horror films. Here, I want to argue that similar trends to those outlined by Collins might usefully be acknowledged as existing in relation to recent Spanish horror productions, and that his analysis can assist in our understanding of Spanish genre production a great deal.

As noted, Collins labels one of the main trends in contemporary generic production as 'eclectic irony'. Marked by a jokey, irreverent take on genres and their codes and conventions, these films are playful in the extreme. His example is *Back to the Future III* (1990), within which, he argues, 'we enter a narrative universe defined by impertinent connections, no longer containable by one set of generic conventions'[5]. In the context of popular Spanish cinema, this seems an excellent way of describing Alex de la Iglesia's *Acción mutante* (1993), a strange mixture of science fiction, slapstick comedy, the western, and horror. In drawing from such a wide range of generic influences and styles this film, which one might describe as operating within Collins' framework for eclectic irony, highlights the diverse nature of these works. The resultant film might be explained by the rampantly 'cinefile' approach

adopted by Alex de la Iglesia and his collaborators, where references to their favourite generic works and characters abound. However, this is not simply an exercise in creating in-jokes. I would argue that these self-reflexive aspects of such Spanish films mark a rejection of 'accepted' critical criteria, in particular of what makes a film worthy and of value, which of course really represents a very particular set of taste formations. The excess present within much of these films, in particular the 'horror' elements seem designed to distance those concerned with 'good taste'. As Núria Triana-Toribio puts it 'Spanish critics who cherish fond memories of the days of Erice and Saura will sigh with despair...when they see such productions'[6]. One of the main ways to upset such establishment film critics is to reject the traditional generic boundaries that they often hold so dear, thus leading them to reject new work and label films such as *Accion mutante* as incoherent. An irreverent, eclectic approach to genre is often seen as 'bad' filmmaking by commentators more used to well-established critical models of genre, ones that celebrate a sense of generic unity. Whilst older audiences may have a desire for generic unity, younger audiences have no problem with the boundary breaking and genre mixing of such works. For example, *El día de la bestia* uses satanic horror as its starting point before throwing in slapstick comedy, conspiracy theories, chases, shoot-outs, and hallucigenic drugs. Replete with in-jokes, grotesques, and comedic excess, the film creates the impression of being made by an over- excited, over-stimulated group of fans who do not take genres seriously and choose to 'celebrate' their fandom on screen. Again, as Collins has argued, in doing so, they present an 'unmanageable textuality that refuses to play by the old rules'[7], creating works that, as financially successful films as well

as generic hybrids, are successfully breaking down old boundaries and attacking traditional arguments about 'good' films and 'good' taste. These films are also part of a wider movement within Spanish cinema that celebrated excess, aiming clearly at a more youthful audience. In his comparison of critical responses to popular horror and 'worthy' horror films in the US, Jeffery Sconce has noted that what is at stake is often 'the taste of the 'elite' audience of critics'. Arguing that such writers feel culturally justified in dismissing 'low' brow fare, usually those films enjoyed by young audiences, as unsophisticated[8]. As noted above, in Spain this has been evident in the mainstream critical rejection of massive popular box-office successes such as *Airbag* (Juanma Bajo Ulloa, 1997), *Torrente: el brazo tonto de la ley / Torrente: the dumb arm of the law* (Santiago Segura, 1998), *Año mariano* (2000) and *Torrente 2: misión en Marbella* (Santiago Segura, 2001). These Films, which in their excessive storylines, characterisation and *mise-en-scène* seem to be 'self-consciously rejecting the Miró legislation model of "good films."'[9]

However, if we utilise Jim Collins' approach to such excessive, generically mixed, self-reflexive films it opens up a more interesting and rewarding way of thinking about them. Indeed, such films, rather than being incoherent, become a sophisticated and understandable response to contemporary media saturation. With a vast array of generic products, from a variety of contexts and historical moments, being much more easily available through a variety of sources such as DVD, video, the internet, as well as cinema, this eclectic irony seems an understandable response. Spanish films utilising elements of horror, such as those of Alex de la Iglesia and

Santiago Segura, can be seen as celebrations of the genre, and ones that are very conscious that much of their, predominantly young, audience are very generically aware as well. Segura's short films from the 1990s, *Evilio* (1992), *Perturbado* (1993) and *El Purificador: Evilio vuelve* (1994), revel in a high level of self-reflexivity that depends upon the audience sharing a sharp generic knowledge with the filmmakers. As Andrew Tudor has noted in relation to contemporary horror, 'the use of pastiche and humour is seen as inviting the audience to be complicit and self-aware'. However, he goes on to argue that this playfulness has, according to some commentators, removed much of the genres potential for subversion and critique[10]. In the case of Santiago Segura's short films, however, the potential for subversion exists in relation to very specifically Spanish notions of what 'good' films are. Many such works were directly related, as noted above, to the period of the transition to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the cinema that was lauded at that time. Segura uses the horror genre, and an excessive take on its codes and conventions, as a way of rejecting these values. He also acknowledges the audiences' knowledge and understanding, as a way of celebrating that rejection and indeed opposition to the critical establishment's sense of 'good taste'.

Evilio introduces a psychopathic killer who fits a generic stereotype; he wears a shabby overcoat and dirty T-shirt, unwashed and has unkempt hair and a dirty looking beard. The film opens with him dragging three schoolgirls to his apartment den. He ties them to chairs and whilst hearing voices, getting headaches and singing to himself brutally kills them one by one, blood spattering over a picture of Julio

Iglesias pinned on the wall. In one of the films self-consciously gore drenched moments, Evilio feeds one of his victim's ears to his pet mouse who is watching the proceedings from a sink in the corner of the room. After he has killed his three victims, Evilio leaves only to be attacked by three, Hitler T-shirt wearing, fascists. Whilst they beat him in the street two middle clash youths spot what is going on and rather than stopping it join in, hitting Evilio with baseball bats. None of the five who beat him have any idea what he has done, they are therefore beating him because of what he looks like. The film through this ending asks us to consider what is the real evil, the fascists or the genre?, the horror genre being one that has often been cited, due to its content, as the cause of aberrant behaviour in society. In a rather interesting way, then, Segura manages to use the genre to communicate ideas about the genre. An audience aware of the generic codes and conventions is likely to be aware of these discussions and therefore will appreciate the point being made. Those critical of the genre will just repeat the unease at the films violent images, thus proving exactly the point Segura seems to want to make.

Segura followed this short film with another that played with generic knowledge: the Goya winning *Perturbado*. This film is about a sex maniac and like *Evilio* much of the horror genre atmosphere comes from the score by José Luis Cid. However, here Segura blends horror elements with slapstick comedy. Driven insane by lust and pornography, the central character begins to see sexual innuendo in everything from hand wash to chicken. The maniac is tipped over the edge by his misinterpretation of an innocent cartoon as highly sexual, resulting in his killing a woman with a cleaver.

He is found clinically insane and committed to an asylum where a doctor tries to cure him. The cure fails and he is given shock treatment. The final shots of the film once again celebrate generic knowledge as the maniac sits alone in a room whilst a fly lands on his hand repeating the end of *Psycho* (1960). Another joins it and they begin mating, his arousal revealing that he is far from cured. Here, the maniac is seen as the product of society, developing from a Benny Hill like comic character, who's looking up women's dresses is supposedly innocent, into something more sinister. The audience is implicated in the earlier 'smut' by the knowing look given by Segura's central character to the audience as he comically looks at women as sex objects. We are invited to laugh along at this point but one wonders how far the audience are able to laugh by the end when he seedily tries to paw one of the nurses. Following the final credit sequence the maniac has escaped to enjoy the pleasures of the modern world once again. The excesses of the genre, and the audiences' knowledge of them, are used once again to raise important issues in relation to representation within popular cinema, in particular, asking when images stop being 'funny' and become 'sinister'.

El Purificador: Evilio vuelve marks the return of the Evilio character. The film opens with a typical middle class family arguing as they drive through the night. They almost run over Evilio who asks them for some help and food. They reject him and drive out of the frame leaving Evilio in a mid-shot; he slowly turns to look directly at the camera (and the audience) and laughs in a sinister manner. His look and laughter inviting the audience to celebrate their generic knowledge, they know what horrific things are going to follow, and will be disappointed if they do not. What unfolds

certainly delivers. It includes the family being killed one by one in a gory fashion, hands being cut-off, nails being hammered into heads, sick being eaten and a little kitten's neck being snapped, each incident being more blood drenched or outrageous than the previous one. Once again events are observed by Evilio's pet mouse that this time eats brains rather than ears. Segura's intention is here is much more clearly to shock, particularly after the Goya success of his previous short. He seems to have aimed clearly at upsetting the taste of those who bestowed that particular honour upon him. Hence the inclusion of such images such as Evilio eating fresh sick and his tweaking a young girls nipple with his knife. In many ways *El Purificador* rehearses the outrageous 'bad' taste that marked his first feature *Torrente: el brazo tonto de la ley*, which led to so many liberal critics being uneasy with what they saw.

Jim Collins argues that other approaches to genre within contemporary film-making have spawned another trend. This he labels as a form of 'new sincerity'. One of the unifying aspects of Collins' two filmmaking trends is that generic knowledge is central and brought to bear by the directors and their collaborators as well as being acknowledged by the audience. Significantly, what Collins calls the 'new sincerity' films are much more easily assimilated into established critical perspectives and taste formations as they respect generic unity in their striving for a pure form. These films may therefore be seen as ultimately much more conservative than the eclectic films of Segura and de la Iglesia. For Collins the 'new sincerity', like 'eclectic irony', is also a response to the contemporary media world. However, here rather than creating works that seem over stimulated and are clearly generic hybrids, what we have is an

'attempt to reject it altogether, purposely evading the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity, attainable only through a sincerity that avoids any sort of irony or eclecticism.'[11] Recent Spanish horror cinema has certainly produced a number of works that fit into this category. For example, *Aftermath,* a short film produced by Barcelona based director Nacho Cerdá, is one such work. Based on the dark goings on in an autopsy room, the film is excessive, it contains graphic scenes of body mutilation and necrophilia, and overwhelmingly serious in tone. Whilst the subject matter and excessive gore effects of *Aftermath* are clearly intended to challenge mainstream limits of what is acceptable, it is a film that offers a very sombre take on the horror genre. It certainly does not want to engage its audience on the level of in-joke quirkiness that marks the cinema of Segura and de la Iglesia. Cerdá himself has stated that 'I wanted to do a movie that was hard. I wanted it to be one of those films that you still think about once it's over. That's what I wanted to get across because it's a subject matter that is really, really important to me, and it's nothing to joke about or take lightly.'[12] This approach clearly shows that in developing the project Cerdá saw the genre as a way to make a serious point. The film itself reflects this attitude from the outset. It begins with the off screen sounds of a car crash as the credits run, followed by a shot of a dismembered dog. Over these images solem classical music is played. The overall effect being very different from the Segura horror shorts of the same period. The shots of clinical rooms and equipment that are interspersed amongst the credits that follow the shot of the mutilated dog create a strong sense of foreboding. The credits end and we see a body being taken to the morgue. A crucifix has been removed and is handed to relatives

echoing the shape made by the 't' in Cerdá's writing credit. The religious and spiritual undertones that will pervade the work are established at the outset, again, enhancing the feeling that this is a horror film that wants to be taken very seriously. There follows an FX driven sequence where a body is cut up as part of an autopsy. The sequence is very graphic, the horror coming from the showing. This explicit display links Cerdá's work to a tradition of European horror films that have been very explicit in their bloody images and that attempted to use the genre and its potential for excess to challenge bourgeoise morality such as Franju's landmark, *Les yeux sans visage / Eyes without a Face* (1959). Having established its horrific credentials at the outset, *Aftermath* goes further. Another body is brought to the autopsy room but the mysterious man who undertook the earlier work goes further here committing necrophilia as the corpse lies on the bench. Cerdá is clearly intent on going further than mainstream cinema could possibly go. This is something that many horror fans will desire and celebrate, their status as being able to 'stomach' such images all important within their own circles. Once again, however, Cerdá does not want his work to be simply seen as celebratory of its excess, here once more *Aftermath* is in sharp contrast to the bloodletting of Segura's shorts. Cerdá has stated that for him, 'this is not a film that condones violence, and it is not a bloodfeast movie. I want people to really think about it...I think it's a film against violence. It's a film against the manipulation of the human body, that's it. But in order to get that point across I had to show the true violence that was going on.' [13]

7.3 Generic Unity and Realism

Perhaps the most interesting of the films that I would argue fall into the category of 'new sincerity' is Jaume Balagueró's *Los sin nombre / The Nameless*. On the surface the film contains a number of elements that seem new and 'trendy', in particular the stylised film and sound editing techniques, which might suggest a more ironic approach. However, underneath that surface it is a serious, almost old-fashioned, genre film. Adapted from a 1981 novel by British horror writer Ramsey Campbell, also called *The Nameless*, the film is an exercise in psychological terror. From the outset, with its dark lighting helping to create a suspense filled *mise-en-scène*, the film is designed for the audience to take it seriously, which is essential to the way in which this particular type of 'sincere' horror works. If the audience is laughing and joking too much, they are not going to be unnerved or disturbed by the images in front of them. Certainly, *Los sin nombre* is a film that aims to unsettle its audience and, of course, this is traditionally the role of horror films. In this way, then, it is possible to argue that Balagueró wishes to return to a mythical generic purity of the type outlined by Collins. This aim is also reflected by his use of a novel that was nearly twenty years old as his source, revealing his commitment to the older values of the genre, updating, but also looking backwards to the horror genre's past. Alongside this Balagueró's *mise-en-scène*, which, as already noted, is shrouded with darkness, also contributes to the atmosphere and feeling of seriousness and unease. The overall effect of *Los sin nombre* is of a film that is sincere and genuine in its embracing of the

horror genre. It is a film that accepts the boundaries of the psychological horror film and attempts to offer depth in order to say something about the human condition. In all of this the film seems to want to lay claim to being a 'pure' or 'authentic' version of the horror film. The world created in *Los sin nombre* is offered to the audience through accepted cinematic codes of realism, allowing the horror to exist in our world rather than the comic book world of the ironic strand. Whilst there might well be a supernatural element to the plot, the overwhelming choices in terms of the film's form focus on the creation of an overriding sense of realism. Formally, through a strong sense of temporal and spacial unity within the *mise-en-scène*, there is a clear logic to the world created. The eclectic irony strand does not work in this way, for example, *Acción mutante* continually works against unity with its shifting generic worlds that refuse the temporal and spacial logic of genre and narrative. The performance styles present in these films also reflect this difference. In *Los sin nombre* performance technique aims to create characters that are psychologically rounded, or 'realistic', with actors seeming to submerge themselves in their roles, foregrounding character rather than performance. In *Acción mutante*, and the like, where the films are not striving for an overall effect of realism, actors are able to use performance styles that much broader, self conscious and comedic. Certainly, in *El día de la bestia*, dominant acting styles, based on 'believability', are rendered secondary to more excessive styles that are drawn from cinematic comedy traditions. Of course, when mainstream critics approach these varied 'horror' films they tend to champion those that stick to the generic rules as opposed to those that break them. Fanzine based writers, however, are able to shift between the two as they have less

invested in middlebrow notions of 'good cinema' and more in the various manifestations of 'horror'. Fanzines seem more able to accommodate and celebrate both tendencies alongside one another than the mainstream press. Notions of value based on 'good' taste are broken down in such publications where the vulgar or lowbrow sits comfortably with the sombre and serious.

7.4 The Victory of the Serious

2001 saw the release of two successful horror films, both of which I would argue fall into Collins' category of 'new sincerity'. Both *El espinazo del diablo / The Devil's Backbone* and *The Others / Los Otros* had a more international element than the other films discussed in this chapter, the former by a Mexican director, the latter shot in English. Significantly, they were both made by directors who had already achieved some level of critical kudos with their previous works. In a sense this explains the films' critical acceptance, but, I would argue, this is greatly accommodated by their perceived serious approach to the boundaries of the horror genre. Both films reveal a new acceptance of horror, a previously marginalized genre, in the mainstream. No longer simply the focus of fans and fanzines, Spanish horror films had gone mainstream, winning awards internationally as well as filling cinemas. The international success of *The Others*, in particular, brought Spanish horror to a wider global audience. Indeed, many of the films discussed in this chapter have had a reasonably high level of financial success, if not in quite the same league as Amenábar's work, which according to *Screen International* was the highest grossing

Spanish film of all time when released[14]. Whilst still not approaching anywhere near the volume of output as in the 1970s, the numbers of recent horror productions does suggest that far from existing in the margins of Spanish film production, horror films have now moved firmly into the mainstream. Indeed, this was confirmed by the release in Spain of Balagueró's follow up to *Los sin nombre, Darkness,* with 300 prints, a large number for a Spanish film even in its home market. *Darkness* has been produced by the Barcelona based Filmax's horror off shoot, The Fantastic Factory, whose aim is to produce around six international products a year. The additional fact that US mini-major Miramax weighed in with 40% of the final $12m budget reveals that Spanish horror is no longer seen in terms of national markets but potentially a global ones, particularly when shot in English. The distribution patterns of some recent Spanish horror, particularly those shot in English, show that they are now handled as mainstream crossover products and no longer films that will only appeal to cult audiences made up exclusively of horror fans. Spanish horror has now truly moved from the margins to the mainstream. How long it stays there may depend on the fickle tastes of those mainstream moviegoers. The overwhelming success of these films has meant that critics have had to address their prejudices and find a way of discussing recent horror films. Interestingly, critical reception of *Los otros* and *El espinazo del diablo* has seen them try. How they have done so is telling, as they have evoked the more respectable gothic tradition within the genre. Not surprising when one considers that this is probably the most critically assimilated part of the genre, due heavily to its literary sources and precedents. For example, if one looks at the *Sight and Sound* reviews for *The Devil's Backbone* and *The Others* [15] you find

references to Hitchcock, Val Lewton, *The Innocents*, *Spirit of the Beehive*, *Vertigo*, and the seventeenth-century artist Valázquez. Critically then, Spanish horror seems, increasingly, to be becoming assimilated into the world of serious cinema. Or rather, one strand of Spanish horror cinema, the one that maintains the values of the critics who write about them. The assimilation of the 'purer' horror films of the recent revival continues to mark out the irreverent, excessive films of Segura, de la Iglesia and others as still, potentially, the most subversive as they remain outside accepted critical ideas of 'good taste'.

Notes:

[1] Daniel Kowalsky, 'Rated S: softcore pornography and the Spanish transition to democracy, 1977-1982'. In Antonio Lazaro Reboll and Andrew Willis (eds.) *Spanish Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 188-208.

[2] Carlos Aguilar, *Cine fantástico y de terror español* (San Sebastián: Semana de Cine Fantástico y de Terror, 1999).

[3]Jim Collins, 'Genericity in the nineties: eclectic irony and the new sincerity'. In Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (eds.) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1993) 242–64.

[4] Collins, 'Genericity', 243.

[5] Collins, 'Genericity', 249

[6] Nuria Triana Toribio *Spanish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003), 151.

[7] Collins, 'Genericity', 250.

[8] Jeffery Sconce 'Spectacles of death: identification, reflexivity, and contemporary horror'. In Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (eds.) *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, London: Routledge, 1993), 105.

[9] Triana Toribio *Spanish National Cinema*, 151.

[10]Andrew Tudor 'From Paranoia to Postmodernism? The horror movie in late modern society'. In Steve Neale (ed.) *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, London: British Film Institute, 2002), 113.

[11] Collins 'Genericity', 257.

[12] Totaro, Donato (1997) 'Nacho Cerdá Interview'. *Off Screen*,(www.horschamp.qc.ca/offscreen/nacho.html. 1997), 2.

[13] Totaro, 'Nacho Cerdá', 3.

[14] Jennifer Green, 'Spanish house of horror'. *Screen International*, September 27, 2002, 12.

[15] Smith, Paul Julian Smith (2001a) '*The Others*'. *Sight and Sound*, November, 2001, 54.

Paul Julian Smith (2001b) '*The Devil's Backbone*'. *Sight and Sound*, December 2001, 38–39.

8. The Changing Face of Martial Arts Movies in the USA

In this chapter I wish to initiate my discussion regarding the changing face of martial arts movies in the west. The martial arts movie has been critically undervalued for some considerable time. Recent work on the cinema of Hong Kong in the pages of academic journals such as *Screen*[1], and in significant books such as Stephen Teo's *Hong Kong Cinema: the extra dimensions*[2], Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover's *City on Fire: Hong Kong cinema*[3] and Leon Hunt's *Kung Fu Cult Masters: from Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger*[4], have begun to address this in relation to Hong Kong martial arts movies. However, little work has been produced that concerns itself directly with martial arts movies produced within the American film industry. The one notable, book length exception to this is M. Ray Lott's *The American Martial Arts Film*[5]. As Lott acknowledges[6], the specificity of American production has impacted upon the visual style, content and distribution of martial arts movies in the USA. This is difference is evident from the differences between Jackie Chan's Hollywood produced box office success, *Rush Hour* (1998) and the films that he had previously produced within the Hong Kong industry. For this reason, centrally in this chapter I will consider Chan's impact on the conception of the martial arts film in the USA. I will also identify the ways in which that his persona has shifted and changed since he began making films in Hollywood. I will begin by tracing some of the differences between Hong Kong and the USA by touching upon the contrasting cinematic traditions from which martial arts movies appear in both territories. I will also discuss the ways in which Hong Kong kung fu films have influenced the western

conception of martial arts cinema before going on to look at the dominant trends in US produced martial arts films.

8.1 The Popular Image: martial arts and Hong Kong cinema

For many filmgoers martial arts are most commonly associated with the cinema of Hong Kong. Of course, there are other national cinemas that have traditionally used genres that centre upon martial arts. For example, Kurosawa's Samurai epics, whilst often discussed in terms of 'art' cinema, are also generic martial arts films based around swordplay. Equally, more popular Japanese films such as the *Baby Cart* series[7] and the *Streetfighter* films that starred Sonny Chiba, memorably evoked by Quentin Tarantino in his script for *True Romance*[8], are further examples of Japanese martial arts films. Due to this status as an international genre, martial arts cinema have taken a variety of forms and undergone a range of changes historically. Like other film genres, martial arts films need to be considered in relation to historically specific contexts of production and distribution. The Hong Kong kung fu film has had a number of important cycles which have assisted in re-inventing the genre in this particular national context. These changes have, in turn impacted in a variety of ways on the development of the US production of martial arts films and audiences expectations of what a work bearing that label might include.

Whilst the first notable period of success for martial arts cinema in the United States coincided with the international stardom of Bruce Lee, within the Hong Kong

film industry a long history of martial arts centred films existed. I want to now briefly outline some of this history as it directly influenced Bruce Lee, and later Jackie Chan and Jet Lee, who in turn were to influence US martial arts and action films. The single strongest influence on martial arts films within the Hong Kong industry was undoubtedly Chinese, or Peking, Opera. Many of the personnel both behind and in front of the cameras in Hong Kong kung fu films throughout the 1970s and 1980s had trained with, or had familial connections to, institutions specialising in the practice of Chinese Opera. These schools provided students with a range of performing skills including, acrobatics, singing, dancing, make-up and a range of martial arts skills such as unarmed combat, weapons skills and lion dancing. As Bey Logan argues in the opening of his book *Hong Kong Action Cinema,* 'The influence of the indigenous Chinese art-form of Peking Opera on the development of Hong Kong action cinema cannot be underestimated. In terms of sheer style, the most visually stunning of the kung fu flicks owe more to the flashes and bangs of the opera.' [9]. The practical skills and techniques students of such opera schools gained would have a direct impact upon how performers were able to act in front of the camera.

By the mid-1960s the popularity of the Cantonese language melodrama had begun to wane. Stephen Teo argues that 'The sudden interest of Hong Kong film-makers in the action genre can be seen as a reaction to changing times and tastes'[10]. Alongside this shift in audience taste the physical and mental skills of the opera performer meant that they were ideally placed to move into the rapidly developing Hong Kong action film industry. The pace of this transfer increased as the popularity of the travelling

opera troupes began to dip. The most logical place for these Opera performers with their acrobatic skills and display martial arts was within the increasingly popular kung fu films. Here they were quickly able to fill the roles of stunt person and bit part actor. If the opportunity arose their acting skills meant they were also able to move into more substantial parts.

The Chinese opera had also played a pivotal part in the development of a very significant cycle of kung fu films that had begun in 1949, and which were to prove highly influential on the development of the genre in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This was the famous Wong Fei-hung series, named after the legendary martial artist and starring former Chinese opera performer Kwan Tak-hing. The series began in 1949 with *The True Story of Wong Fei-hung*, and as well as Kwan, a number of the cast were drawn from the ranks of Chinese opera. The series ran until 1970, and in all 99 Wong Fei-hung films starring Kwan in the title role were produced. David Bordwell argues that these films were a major part of the Cantonese film industry, identifying them as 'a training ground for many of the leaders of kung-fu filmmaking in the decades to follow'[11]. Other important and influential personnel who contributed to the Wong Fei-hung series included amongst others: Lee Hoi-chuen, the father of Bruce Lee; Yuen Siu-fin, the father of fight choreographer and director Yuen Woo-ping who would go on to work on *The Matrix* (1999); and Lau Charn, the father of *Drunken Master 2* (1994) director Lau Kar-leung.

The character of Wong Fei-hung would appear again and again within Hong Kong cinema, often marking an influential moment or turn that reinvented and re-popularised the kung fu genre. For example, Jackie Chan played him as a young man in *Drunken Master* (1978), one of his major breakthrough films, whilst Jet Li played an older version of the hero in *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991) and two of its' sequels (1992 and 1993). So associated had he become with the character that Kwan Tak-hing returned to the role to play a more elderly version of the legend in *The Magnificent Butcher* (1979) and *Dreadnaught* (1991). During the 1970s, for many cinema-goers outside the primary East Asian distribution area of these films it was these historically set epics that became the accepted version of Hong Kong kung fu action cinema. Such films were often presented to the public in poorly dubbed prints and played in rundown city centre theatres

However, whilst the majority of Hong Kong action films of the 1960s and 1970s were often seen as laughable and critically ignored[12], some did manage to gain a level of critical acceptance. One director who achieved some level of critical interest outside East Asia was King Hu. This despite the fact that throughout his career King Hu worked almost exclusively within the codes and conventions of a popular historical martial arts genre, the *wuxia pian* or swordplay film. Some of these films, in particular *A Touch of Zen* (1973) and *The Valiant Ones* (1975), were distributed internationally on the arthouse circuit and gained a number of awards at prestigious film festivals such as Cannes. The fact that King Hu's films were not simply dismissed as 'junk' is partially explained by the fact that they were released in sub-

titled rather than dubbed prints. This seemingly small, but highly significant fact, meant that they were considered worthy of critical consideration by middle-brow critics in the West. The poorly dubbed films of other directors of the early 1970s, in particular those associated with studios like Shaw Brothers such as Zhang Che, were consigned to the critical dustbin and 'flea-pit' distribution. Directors like Chang were widely conceived of as studio hacks, and it is only more recent studies that have elevated their work to the level accorded to King Hu's more independent work. When released in their dubbed versions in the west, these studio titles were not reviewed in the taste making broad-sheet newspapers and were therefore invisible to all but hardcore fans of the kung fu genre, fans who, at the time, were often seen and dismissed as mindless hooligans and violence obsessed 'boot boys'[13]. The international critical acceptance of non-English language cinema therefore depends greatly upon the format in which distributors choose to release such material. I will return to this important point later in relation Jackie Chan when I consider the attempts to break him into the US marketplace.

The studio most closely associated with the production of historical kung fu films in Hong Kong was Shaw Brothers. Like the Hollywood studios in their golden era, Shaw Brothers kept a tight fiscal rein on their contracted artists, many of who were producing very successful films. This financial policy began to cause tensions in the 1970s when some performers attempted to break their contracts and the studio entered into legal action to prevent them. This was the situation that Bruce Lee entered when he decided to embark upon a career in the Hong Kong film industry. Lee had

achieved some, limited, success in the United States during the 1960s playing Kato in *The Green Hornet* television series. However, Lee felt that resistance to casting him due to his racial origins was limiting his opportunities in Hollywood. The Hong Kong industry offered him the chance to star in his own films. Shaw Brothers offered Lee their usual player's contract which he immediately rejected, finally signing with rivals Golden Harvest who had been founded by former Shaw Brothers employee Raymond Chow. The 1970s Hong Kong film industry would be marked by this rivalry as studios vied to be the premier producer of action cinema. As Leon Hunt argues, 'The kung fu film's 1970s "Golden Age" can partly be attributed to the competition between Shaw Brothers, Golden Harvest, and, to a lesser extent, Ng See-yuen's Seasonal Films'[14]. Beyond East Asia it would ultimately be Golden Harvest's Bruce Lee who would have an enormous and long lasting impact on the ways in which kung fu films were conceptualised in the west. In particular his penultimate film *Enter the Dragon* (1973), a US co-production, would become a major, and long lasting, influence.

8.2 Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan: martial arts most recognisable stars

Even today the most widely recognised face of any martial arts star is still arguably Bruce Lee. Whilst Jackie Chan has broken through at the box-office he has not yet transferred into the popular imagination in the same manner achieved by Lee, perhaps due to the comedic side to his star persona and his increasing appeal to children. As Leon Hunt puts it, 'While Jackie Chan is arguably Hong Kong cinema's

most globally successful star, Bruce Lee remains its undisputed "Legend"; like Elvis, he is the "King" of an ambiguously defined domain'[15]. The recent revival of interest in all things 1970s in the UK has once again seen Bruce Lee's image adorn countless students' walls and clubbers' T-shirts. For many, their idea of a martial arts movie star still begins and ends with Bruce Lee and the perfect martial arts film remains *Enter the Dragon.* This has had a great impact on the success of other Hong Kong based martial arts film performers when they have attempted to move into the US marketplace.

Bruce Lee made only five feature films in which he played the leading part. These were *The Big Boss* (1971), *Fist of Fury* (1972), *Way of the Dragon* (1972), *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and *Game of Death* (1973/1978). The latter completed after Lee's on-set death using stand-ins. In fact Lee's death in 1973 ultimately meant that the Hong Kong film industry lost one of its major talents and biggest box office draws. Internationally *Enter the Dragon* had been an enormous success, signalling the vast potential international market for Hong Kong style kung fu films world wide. Due to this fact producers were still keen to cash in on that potential even if Lee was dead. However, as he could no longer make films they had to quickly seek a replacement. In this regard they were not that concerned with the quality of the films as long as they had a product to sell. The desire to cash in quickly led to performers with names such as Bruce Li, Bruce Le, Bruce Laing, Dragon Lee and Bruce Leung, appearing in a string of films with titles such as *The Secret of Bruce Lee* (1976), *Bruce the King of Kung Fu* (1976), and *The Clones of Bruce Lee* (1977). Ironically, the inferior quality

of the Lee-a-likes, along with the low production values employed in the films in which they appeared, meant that this market was to evaporate very quickly. Most of the performers quickly vanished from view as their bid to become the new Bruce Lee failed to ignite the box-office. However, alongside these there was another performer who was also initially sold as the 'new' Bruce Lee, but who did manage to maintain some level of success after his period trying to re-create the success of Lee, he was Jackie Chan. Significantly, as an international replacement for Lee Chan was a failure, and it was only when he was able to establish his own, more distinct, persona that he was able to achieve a notable level of success. However, even when he became the number one box office performer in Hong Kong and other Asian territories success in the United States market eluded him. For Chan the comparisons between him and Lee that critics were quick to draw were a burden. As he began to establish and develop his own persona he moved further away from the western conception of the martial arts movie performer as epitomised by Bruce Lee in his small number of starring roles. It would take three major attempts before Chan was able to break into the North American market, and success would only be achieved internationally when the image of the martial arts film star had substantially changed. This shift would be due to a number of factors.

8.3 Jackie Chan in Hong Kong and the USA

The main difference between Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan was the latter's ability to develop a more comedic persona. As Stephen Teo notes, whilst the use of the kung

fu films generic codes and conventions linked the two actors, 'Chan's movies in the 80s were practically alone in preserving Bruce Lee's tradition of kung fu as an instinctive but disciplined art linked to a cultural national identity', they were also very different. He goes on to argue that, 'whereas the late star possessed all the hallmarks of a kung fu master, being vigorous but solemn, strong but flexible, solid but mobile, Chan was basically an acrobatic character actor who emphasised versatility in play-acting, displaying facets of both clown and master.'[16] Jackie Chan had been signed to a contract by producer/director Lo Wei in the mid-1970s. Lo had been responsible for directing Bruce Lee's *The Big Boss* and *Fist of Fury*, and wanted to create a Lee clone out of Chan, placing him in a number of generically conventional films such as *New Fists of Fury* (1976). None of these films were particularly successful in Hong Kong or internationally, although Chan did well enough to continue as a featured player.

In 1978 things changed for Chan. This was the year he starred in two films directed by fight choreographer Yuen Woo-ping, *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* and *Drunken Master*. Both proved to be major Hong Kong hits and finally established Chan as a star performer with box-office appeal. *Drunken Master* saw Chan playing the character of Wong Fei-hung as a mischievous young man, and it was this persona that chan was to develop over the next few years. In 1980 Chan signed to the Golden Harvest studio and began to wield more influence over the content and production of his own films. By 1982 he had begun what Teo labels his 'mature phase as a multi-hyphenated film-maker (actor-stuntman-director-stunt co-ordinator-kung fu

choreographer).'[17] Following an impressive list of hit films, including *Project A* (1982), Jackie Chan was well established as the number one box office draw in Asia. However, during this period one major market that eluded him was North America, although there had been attempts to transfer Chan into this elusive territory.

By this point in his career Jackie Chan had already tried to break into the US market with *The Big Brawl* (aka *Battle Creek Brawl*) (1978). Golden Harvest had thought that, following the Asian success of Chan's films in the late 1970s, and the failure to find a 'new' Bruce Lee for the US market, the time was right to launch him into the US market place. They hired Robert Clouse as director for this project, hoping that he would be able to repeat the success he had achieved earlier with the Bruce Lee vehicle *Enter the Dragon*. *The Big Brawl* was a relative box-office failure and Chan was rejected at this point by North American audiences for not being this 'new' Bruce Lee. As Bey Logan notes the main problem with the production was widely thought to be differing working methods. The Hong Kong industry was very stunt orientated, with performers highly skilled in arranging stunt action. He quotes Chan who stated that, 'In Hong Kong, I can hit one of my stuntmen, bam-bam-bam, and he will block every punch...American stuntmen are so slow! I hit bam-bam-bam, and, he will have blocked the first punch!'[18] This difference was probably heightened by the fact that an American stunt co-ordinator, Pat Johnson, worked on the production rather than Chan's usual Hong Kong team.

Jackie Chan returned to Hong Kong after the North American failure of *The Big Brawl* and continued to make hit films. This continued success led to the belief that, once again, the right vehicle would break Chan in the USA. On this occasion he teamed up with a well established action/exploitation director, James Glikenhaus, to make *The Protector* (1984). However, again, a US director was reluctant to allow Chan a free hand with regard to the action choreography on the film. This fact is evident in the action sequences so central to the film, which have non of the inventiveness that had begun to mark Chan's work in Hong Kong. Indeed, Glikenhaus's reluctance to give any control to the actor is reflected by the fact that he retained the rights to the final cut of the film. Very disappointed with the official final cut of the film, Chan added a sub-plot and more action sequences, creating a version he was happier with for release in Asia. However, this version was one that Glikenhaus, according to Logan[19], was totally unaware of. According to many observers his experience on *The Protector* led directly to Chan selecting *Police Story* (1985) as his next project, in order to show how *The Protector* could, and should, have turned out. The relationship between the two films is reflected by actor Steve James, who was a co-star in *The Protector* and stated that, 'We all knew when the first *Police Story* came out that *that's* what *Protector* should have been!'[20] Following the disappointment of *The Protector* Chan now embarked upon the work that established him as the unchallenged, number one Asian film star. Films that included martial arts in the United States were left to the likes of Chuck Norris and later, Jean Claude van Damme and Steven Seagal. All three were actors fitted the more serious action personas that had become fashionable in Hollywood at the time and is

probably best reflected in stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. The fact that both of these stars had strong European connects perhaps further explaining the difficulty of translating Chan's Asian persona to the USA in this period.

The fact that most of the discussions about *The Protector* focus on the ways in which the film failed to do justice to Jackie Chan's potential is telling. As Leon Hunt explains, Chan's US films, such as *The Protector* 'have come to symbolise the failure of "American hacks" to recognise Chan's abilities as a filmmaker rather than simply a martial arts performer'[21]. This emphasis on the films failings falls into the realm of the dominant dismissal of US produced martial arts films in many quarters: they don't look or sound like, indeed they are not Hong Kong martial arts films. In a sense then, *The Protector* was dismissed for not being what it isn't, a Hong Kong martial arts film. However, as Hunt observes '*The Protector* has more in common with the films of Chuck Norris and other "White Warriors"'[22]. This suggests then that Chan's US films of this period should be placed alongside other similar films, not films produced in a different production context and whose primary audience had different expectations of martial arts based action films. As Hunt observes that the fights in *The Protector*, 'follow the "realist" conventions of North American martial arts films.'[23] So what are the codes and conventions of the US martial arts film?

8.4 The Problems of Definition and Boundaries: martial arts films in the USA

As noted in the introduction to this study, David Desser, in one of the few systematic studies of the US martial arts film, dates the origins of this type of film to 1979 and Chuck Norris' *Good Guys Wear Black.* Desser's definition of the US martial arts film is closely linked to an understanding of Hong Kong films and their influence on production in the USA. He argues that,

> The American martial arts film owes its origins and the majority of its defining characteristics to Honk Kong martial arts films. It is quite possibly the most derivative genre in Hollywood's history and amounts to nothing less than a virtual stealing, a cultural co-optation, of another country's popular cinematic imagination.'[24]

However, Desser's emphasis on the connections between Hong Kong and US martial arts films leads him to marginalize some important works. One such is *Billy Jack* (1971) directed by and starring Tom Laughlin. This film was an enormous box-office success when it was re-released, after the director had bought back the rights from distributor Warner Bros. The film tells the story of an ex-Green Beret who after much provocation comes into physical conflict with the reactionary inhabitants of a small town. The character of Billy Jack is closely associated with the developing counter culture and ant-war movement through his connection with The Freedom School. This is a place that attracts societies outsiders and rejects mainstream values and beliefs, something that is enhanced by its presence on a Native American reservation. The appeal of *Billy Jack* to the increasingly youthful film-going audience was undoubtedly that fact that, as Yvonne Tasker notes, it, 'offered an explicitly counter-cultural – and contemporized – version of martial arts'[25]. It was a surprise hit making around $18 million and established martial arts skills as part of the counter cultural heroes make up. The selflessness of the characters, and their rejection of the negative

values of contemporary America personified by their links to the East and alternative belief systems. Laughlin revived the character of Billy Jack for a sequel in 1974's *The Trial of Billy Jack.* Even at over three hours in length, this film surpassed the box-office of the previous one, making $28 million.[26] Laughlin would make a final Billy Jack film, *Billy Jack Goes to Washington*, in 1977. This could not repeat the success of the characters earlier incarnations and the character was not to make another screen appearance. Whilst the actual martial arts content of the films is limited, certainly by the standards of later examples, the character and his counter cultural credentials has had an influence, even if they are rarely acknowledged. The most obvious of these is in the environmentalist films of Steven Seagal. For example, in *On Deadly Ground* (1994) his character is a spiritual one, aware of the importance of maintaining ancient Inuit culture. The rejection of western consumerist values as much a part of the character's make-up as his martial arts skills. In this factor, Seagal's character seems to be a direct descendant of Billy Jack, and the significance of Laughlin's films more apparent. However as the 1970s progressed the link between martial arts and the counter culture faded as audiences turned to dubbed versions of Hong Kong and Japanese films for their martial arts action. It is this outburst of interest in Hong Kong martial arts films that seems to lead Desser to his problematic assertion that he can date US martial arts films to 1979. However, he is certainly correct in his identification of Chuck Norris as perhaps the most significant in such works.

Chuck Norris had been a world karate champion before he had found fame on screen as Bruce Lee's opponent in the climax of *Way of the Dragon* (1972). His

breakthrough film as a lead player was, as Desser suggests, *Good Guys Wear Black*, which had been developed as a vehicle for him and was directed by Ted Post. Post had directed a number of Clint Eastwood films including the Dirty Harry sequel, *Magnum Force* (1973). This connection is important, as Norris's films tend to be generic fare spliced with martial arts action as opposed to out and out martial arts films in a Hong Kong fashion. The film also included one of Norris's most iconic images: he performs a kick through the windscreen of a moving car. This stunt became so associated with him that it was later included in the opening sequence of his hit television show *Walker: Texas Ranger*[27]. In 1981 Norris made a film that was to overlap and exploit one of the most overlooked cycles in US martial arts films: the Ninja film. This film was *The Octagon*, and saw the American actor play a character who had been raised to be an expert in the Japanese assassins' skills. Cannon films saw the potential in utilising Ninjutsu and the supposed mystery of the Ninja way further.

In 1982 Cannon released *Enter the Ninja*, starring European exploitation actor Franco Nero. The casting of Nero marks the ambition of the film. He had built a career in quickly produced films that appealed to what were, identified by many as, unsophisticated audiences. This fact suggests that with their Ninja films Cannon had little aspiration towards mainstream credibility, and were happy for western martial arts films to languish in the exploitation field. The next Cannon film, *Revenge of the Ninja* (1883), was similarly un-ambitious in its realisation. However, the film did introduce actor Sho Kosugi to western audiences. Kosugi was to have some

considerable influence on the development of low budget martial arts films. In particular, he starred with a newcomer Jean Claude van Damme in *Black Eagle* (1988). Typically for a US martial arts film, the *Time Out* critic found that, 'this is a movie that defies classification: it's either a spy thriller without glamour, gadgets, or twists, or a martial arts movie with only two real fights'[28]. As the likes of Van Damme and Steven Seagal became the leading performers in US martial arts films in vehicles that existed in already defined genres this problem of definition would not disappear.

Throughout these cycles in US martial arts films production Hong Kong remained the most prolific producer of martial arts orientated action cinema. Whilst this led to some US performers going east in an attempt to become action film performers, eventually those producers in the USA once again would try and incorporate Hong Kong performers into their products.

8.5 Conclusions: Jackie Chan and Hollywood (again)

Whilst Jackie Chan had failed in his first two attempts to break into the US market, the third effort was to prove a success. Ironically, after studio heads felt the need to attach an American director to his earlier efforts, Chan's breakthrough came in the form of a Hong Kong film, directed by long time associate Stanley Tong and shot on location in Vancouver, Canada, *Rumble in the Bronx* (1994). When the film was released in North America, in a re-scored and re-dubbed version, it shot to

number one at the US box-office. This led to the same process being applied to another Tong film, *First Strike* (1996). However, this time the film was heavily re-edited which led to complaints from Tong who was told by New Line, the US distributors, that 'we know the American market better than you'[29]. The extent to which Chan had become a box-office success is reflected by the fact that New Line re-titled the film, *Jackie Chan's First Strike*, leaving the audience in no doubt about who the star of the show was. Chan, with his comic action persona, contributed to a significant change in the tone of action movies in the late 1990s. As Mark Gallagher has noted, the late 1980s and early 1990s Hollywood action character is one whose traits are, 'associated with traditional western definitions of masculinity: physical size, strength, charisma, pronounced facial features, aggressive behaviour, and the ability to generate action.'[30] By the time that Chan's films were finding an audience in the USA that had shifted somewhat to accommodate his 'acrobatics, hand-to-hand-combat skills, self-deprecating wit, and psychological and physical vunerability.'[31] However, that is not to say that Chan's persona itself did not change to enable that transfer. Certainly, his films leading up to his cross-over contained more action and stunt orientated scenes than the extended fight scenes of much of his 1980s output[32].

The change in Hollywood action cinema is further reflected in the casting of comedian Chris Rock and Hong Kong martial arts star Jet Li alongside established stars Mel Gibson and Danny Glover in *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998). In a similar fashion, Chan's first post- breakthrough Hollywood produced film, *Rush Hour* (1998) cast him alongside African American comedian Chris Tucker, and *Shanghai Noon* (2000)

with Owen Wilson. The knock on effect of this success has been an increased interest in Hong Kong cinema within Hollywood. Directors such as Ronny Yu and Kirk Wong have been invited to work in the US, but perhaps the most high profile martial arts transfer outside of Jet Li and Jackie Chan has been another Chinese opera trained star, Sammo Hung. Hung and director Stanley Tong found unexpected success with the television series *Martial Law* in 1998. Reflecting the new trends in action production, part way through its first season *Martial Law* teams Hung with comedian and talk show host Arsenio Hall. The rather po-faced action heroes of the 1980s and early 1990s now seemed to be well and truly out of fashion, and stars such as Stallone and Schwarzenegger found their films attracting smaller and smaller audiences.

In the cases of Chan, Leon Hunt sees the casting of his 'buddies' as assisting in Americanizing him[33]. This reveals that there seems still to be some resistance to the casting of an Asian male as the undisputed lead in a major Hollywood film. Whilst Gallagher argues that, 'The modification of Chan's image in the West represents US studios' attempts to align Chan's persona more closely with Hollywood conventions of active masculinity'[34], his more recent films suggest another development. There seems to have been an increasing infantalisation of the star in films such as: *The Tuxedo* (2002), *The Medallion* (2003) and *Around the World in 80 Days* (2004). This emasculation of Chan brings his comedic persona to the fore, but also means that his characters are no longer expected to act sexually. This might satisfy Chan's own perception of how he should appear on screen, but it also circumvents issues around Asian male masculinity, and in particular 'serious' inter-racial relationships. The

reduction of Chan to an energetic child seems to be confirmed by the popularity of the cartoon series *The Adventures of Jackie Chan*, and to a lesser extent the computer games that carry his name.

However, whilst we may now be able to pigeonhole Chan's new Hollywood persona as one increasingly targeted at children, in the East it seems more flexible. He has made *The New Police Story* (2004), harking back to one of his most successful series of films, and has also completed *The Myth* (2005) with long time collaborator, Stanley Tong. The reduction of Jackie Chan to the status of a children's entertainer and the fact that Jet Li's recent western films have involved a great deal of French finance, suggests that US based martial arts films may be about to enter a new phase. The assimilation of FX martial arts into mainstream action means that once audiences tire of this they will seek something new. The growing profile for Thai martial arts star Tony Jaa following the success of his film *Ong Bak* (2005), and critics focussing on his 'real' skills, perhaps means that this will be a return to the idea of 'actuality' and 'authenticity' in US martial arts cinema. Jaa is likely to be courted by Hollywood in the near future, and the resulting film may well tell us which way the next martial arts cycle lies.

Notes:

[1] For example, Julian Stringer 'Your Tender Smiles Give Me Strength: paradigms of masculinity in John Woo's *A Better Tomorrow* and *The Killer*'. In *Screen* 38: 25-52. 1997.

[2] Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema: the extra dimensions* (London: British Film Institute, 1997).

[3] Lisa Odham Stokes and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong cinema* (London: Verso, 1999).

[4] Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: from Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003).

[5] M. Ray Lott, *The American Martial Arts Film* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2004).

[6] Lott, *The American Martial Arts Film*, 1.

[7] Examples of the Baby Cart films are: *Sword of Vengeance* (1972) and *Baby Cart to Hades* (1973). The first two films in the series were edited together, and then dubbed into English, to make the bloody *Shogun Assassin* (1980).

[8] *Streetfighter* (1975) and its two sequels are tough and violent contemporary martial arts action movies. Sonny Chiba was a major star of Japanese commercial cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. He appeared as the sword smith in Tarantino's *Kill Bill vol. 1* (2003).

[9] Bey Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema* (London: Titan Books, 1995), 9.

[10] Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 97.

[11] David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: popular cinema and the art of entertainment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 204.

[12] There were notable exceptions to this such as Verina Glaessner, *Kung Fu: cinema of vengeance* (London: Lorrimer, 1974).

[13] For a sociological take on the kung fu craze amongst UK youth in the 1970s see *Knuckle Sandwich*

[14] Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters*, 4.

[15] Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters*, 76.

[16] Teo, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 122.

[17] Teo, *Hong Kong Cinem*, 126.

[18] Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema*, 66

[19] Logan, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 66.

[20] Logan, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 70.

[21] Leon Hunt, 'The Hong Kong/Hollywood Connection: stardom and spectacle in transnational action cinema'. In Yvonne Tasker, *Action and Adventure Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 273.

[22] Hunt, 'Hong Kong/Hollywood Connection', 274.

[23] Hunt, 'Hong Kong/Hollywood Connection, 274.

[24] David Desser, 'Martial Arts Films in the 1990s'. In Wheeler Winston Dixon (ed.) *Film Genre 2000: new critical essays* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 81.

[25] Yvonne Tasker, '*Kung Fu:* re-orientating the television western'. In Bill Osgerby and Anna Gough-Yates (eds.) *Action TV: tough guys, smooth operators and foxy chicks* (London: Routledge, 2001), 118.

[26] Richard Myers et. al. *From Bruce Lee to the Ninjas: martial arts movies* (New York: Citadel Press, 1985), 204.

[27] I discuss this show more in the chapter on *Martial Law* that follows.

[28] Pym, John (ed.) *Time Out Film Guide* (London: Penguin, 2003), 118.

[29] Odham and Stokes, *City on Fire*, 130.

[30] Mark Gallagher, 'Rumble in the USA: Jackie Chan in translation'. In Andy Willis (ed.) *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 115.

[31] Gallagher, 'Rumble', 119.

[32] Gallagher, 'Rumble', 120-123.

[33] Hunt, 'The Hong Kong/Hollywood Connection', 274.

[34] Gallagher, 'Rumble', 132.

9. American Martial Arts Movies and the US Exploitation Film: *Forced to Fight*

The focus of this chapter is the 1991 US martial arts film *Bloodfist III: Forced to Fight*. Directed by Oley Sassone, *Forced to Fight* is a vehicle for former world kickboxing champion Don 'the Dragon' Wilson and is specifically designed to showcase his martial arts skills. In order to understand this film, as well as the place and role of martial arts action and martial arts movies within the American cinema I want to argue that it is necessary to place them into the context of exploitation cinema, the arena of US cinema where they have been most consistently produced. In this regard, I will consider the place of martial arts films within exploitation cinema, arguing that this specific context enables us to understand why martial arts action appears to be suitable for inclusion in a range of films from a variety of different genres and not just exclusively as part of so-called martial arts movies. In order to do this I will begin by investigating the idea of 'exploitation cinema', a term which must be defined if this approach is going to yield any rewards.

9.1 Exploitation cinema: some definitions

The term exploitation cinema is certainly not easy to define. Whilst there may be some clear elements that make a film 'exploitation': low budgets, marketing aimed to appeal to an unsophisticated audience, as well as the inclusion of nudity and action, the limits of the term are difficult to define, resulting in a rather slippery term. Indeed, since the mid-1970s the ever closer relationship of

exploitation films to the so-called Hollywood mainstream has, if anything made the term even more difficult to tie down. I therefore want to spend some time at the start of this chapter considering what an exploitation film is or might be, before going on to consider where martial arts and martial arts films fit into exploitation cinema.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the content of much contemporary exploitation cinema, Eric Schaefer has argued that exploitation films have their origins in works that aimed to educate the newly concentrated industrial masses. These films had a liberal intent as some 'progressives favoured reinvigorating political energies of the people through populism'[1]. The rapid attempt to marginalize forms such as the sex hygiene film meant that, according to Schaefer, 'as a result of censorship, the exploitation film emerged as a distinct class of motion picture, existing alongside the classical Hollywood cinema from the late teens to the late fifties.' [2] Schaefer goes on to identify the fact that from the early days exploitation films relied on spectacle,

> This reliance on spectacle remained a crucial component of the success of the exploitation film...Exploitation films remained closely tied to what Tom Gunning has identified as "the cinema of attractions": a cinema that "shows" rather that "tells". Spectacle was an important ingredient in many Hollywood genres, such as musicals, but it usually functioned within the mise-en-scène (elaborate sets or special effects) and served to advance the narrative (song-and-dance numbers in which characters professed love, etc.). In contrast to the use of spectacle in Hollywood cinema, exploitation film spectacle could spill over to impede or even obscure narrative.[3]

Martial arts films would seem to fit Schaefer's argument well. They are full of spectacle, most obviously in the form of fight sequences and scenes, which often simply delays narrative progression to celebrate martial arts skills before returning to the films story. Due to their clear origins within this exploitation cinema

tradition it is not surprising that few serious writers about film have turned their attention to US produced martial arts movies.

Related to this, Schaefer has also observed that 'exploitation films are usually thought of as ethically dubious, industrially marginal, and aesthetically bankrupt'.[4] This perhaps explains why the academic study of US made martial arts films remains severely limited. This situation reflects the fact that whilst Schaefer was discussing exploitation films that were made between the 1910s and the 1950s his arguments continue to have some substance with regard to exploitation films made more recently.

Thomas Doherty, in his *Teenagers and Teenpics: the juvenilization of American movies in the 1950s*[5], argues that the term 'exploitation' operates in 3 distinct and sometimes overlapping ways within the American film industry. Firstly, it refers to, 'the advertising and promotion that entices an audience into a theatre'[6]. However, he argues that the film industry generally operates in this somewhat exploitative way. For example, most parts of the film industry use advertising and promotion that is clearly aimed to entice an audience to its product. This point is reflected in Justin Wyatt's work on 'high concept', in which he argues that contemporary Hollywood is marked by this type of exploitation,

> The high concept films therefore depend upon the visual representation of their marketable concepts in advertising. Advertising is the key to the commercial success of these films through representing the marketable concepts of the films, but, more basically, advertising as a medium of expression is fundamental to the very construction of the high concept films.[7]

As has traditionally been argued with regard to exploitation films, Wyatt states that the importance of marketing, advertising and promotion has gone so far as to

impact upon the actual construction of the films themselves. This long held definition of 'exploitation' therefore becomes limited as it does not any longer distinguish exploitation films from those produced within the so-called mainstream. Other uses of the term exploitation are more focused on maintaining a distinction between legitimate mainstream products and those that are produced within the less central parts of the industry. Jim Hillier argues that,

> The term 'exploitation' differentiates a certain kind of overly exploitative product from the supposedly non-exploitative product of the majors, and implies that movies thus labelled take advantage of their audiences, for example by promising more than they deliver - in effect by cheating. [8]

This links with Doherty's second way in which the term exploitation operates within the American film industry, that is, 'the way the movie endears itself to that audience.'[9] Again, he argues that this type of exploitation was present in the Hollywood film industry more generally, in so much as 'the wise moviemaker "exploited" what he knew about an audience by catering to its desires and meeting its expectations.'[10] It is this manipulation which Doherty sees as particularly exploitative. The marketing of exploitation movies therefore demands a certain level of mutual knowledge on behalf of the filmmakers and their audience regarding their tastes. In order to achieve this aim the promotional materials produced for exploitation films had to create a sense of dialogue between filmmaker, film and potential audience. This dialogue was dependent upon the marketing departments knowing who their potential audience was in some detail.

Hillier picks up on this point when he explains that exploitation movies were able to be targeted 'not at a general audience but rather at the youth market that the majors, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, were failing to cater for...'[11]. He also

discusses the ways in which new outlets for exploitation pictures impacted upon their reaching particular audiences in this period. For instance, downtown movie houses now became an important outlet for the exploitation product because it, 'attracted a predominantly male, working-class audience.' [12] Hillier goes on to argue that another significant way in which certain films and their production exploit is in terms of personnel. He states that due to the high levels of unemployment and the large number of people hoping to gain entry into the industry, independent producers were able to pay non-union rates and work with small crews. This type of exploitation meant that smaller independent companies could produce films much more cheaply than the majors.

Whilst these points lead to an understanding of why certain films exploit both the audience and production staff, it is Doherty's third use of the term exploitation within the Hollywood film industry that is most relevant in relation to martial arts films. He argues that 'exploitation' is used to define, 'a particular kind of movie'[13] and that by the 1950s this kind of movie was commonly seen in a negative light. According to Doherty this related closely to subject matter that was 'timely and sensational'[14]. This linked to a growing appetite amongst certain elements of the audience for 'the bizarre, the licentious, and the sensational' and led to the growing division between exploitation films and the more 'serious' products of the Hollywood majors, which in turn fostered the idea that exploitation fare was certainly a less serious product. Doherty argues that in the 1950s the exploitation formula had three strong elements that often contributed to it being seen as a lesser form of filmmaking,

> (1) controversial, bizarre, or timely subject matter amenable to wild promotion ('exploitation potential in its original sense); (2) a substandard budget; and (3) a teenage audience. Movies of this ilk are triply exploitative, simultaneously exploiting sensational happenings (for story value), their notoriety (for publicity value), and their teenage participants (for box-office value). Around 1955-56, 'exploitation film' in this sense had become fairly common usage within the industry.[15]

Roger Corman, one of the most famous producers of exploitation movies, began his film career in the 1950s as that term gained wider currency within the industry. It is the presence of Corman that provides a direct link between the approach adopted within exploitation cinema in the 1950s and the production of some of the most interesting American martial arts movies in the 1990s and beyond.

9.2 Roger Corman, Exploitation Cinema and Martial Arts

Roger Corman is often seen as the king of the exploitation movie. Indeed, he himself has promoted himself in such a way, calling his biography, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*[16]. In 1970, after a career in the exploitation field directing and producing, Corman formed his own production company, New World Pictures, with his brother Gene and Larry Woolner. Since then, Corman and New World have become the focus of some of the most important academic work on the exploitation field which provides some useful insights into the links between traditional genres and the exploitation 'cycles' favoured by production companies such as New World[17]. One of the most significant aspects of the company was that from the outset it was concerned with distribution as well as production. The control of both areas was of particular concern to Corman who had been pushed towards the formation of the company in an attempt to prevent what he perceived as the mishandling of his pictures by

others. This position had been arrived at following the fact that his film *Gas-s-s* (1970) was heavily re-edited against his wishes by its distributor American International Pictures.

The early development of New World between 1970 and 1973 set certain important trends for the company that, it may be argued, are still typical of the practices of exploitation production companies more generally. New World's first film *Student Nurses* (1970) proved to be an enormous success, and according to Hillier and Lipstadt, encouraged the company to initiate a series of films that dealt with 'groups of professional (and of course reputedly titillating sexually) women. All featured three or four heroines and dealt with their professional / romantic problems; all ran between 81 and 87 minutes; all were set in the present, usually in California; all were rated R'.[18] During this period New World also initiated a series of women in prison films following the success of *The Big Doll House* (1971). The importance of prison films to the exploitation tradition generally and Corman's companies in particular is something that would later link with the production of martial arts based films.

The importance of film cycles generally within exploitation cinema is noted by Aaron Lipstadt, he argues that each one,

> has a life of its own; it appears, as indicated by the definition of exploitation films, on the heels of an event or successful movie. Several independent companies, and maybe even some of the majors, will quickly commission a script and shoot a film which apes the prototype, particularly in the details that are thought to contribute to its success. Speed of production and widespread bookings are typical, especially in the summer months when school is out, the drive-ins are open, and the kids are looking for excitement. [19]

The exploitation of mainstream success, however, is no longer simply the realm of the so-called exploitation companies. The major studios now also attempt to create financial success out of models that have in the past proved successful for others. This partly explains the continual promotion of sequels to even moderately successful major productions in Hollywood. Occasionally these sequels are raced into production before the financial success of the original has been fully calculated or even secured.

The quick follow up of success is also evident within martial arts film production, and this aspect places much of it firmly within the exploitation tradition of filmmaking I have outlined here. This is particularly evident in relation to martial arts film production in the late 1980s when another successful cycle of production was getting underway. For example, the success of Cannon's Jean Claude van Damme vehicle *Blood Sport* (1987) led to the production of a large number of films that used the martial arts competition to structure their narratives. This then subsequently forms a cycle in the manner outlined by Lipstadt. Certainly, this is supported by the fact that Pyramid Entertainment exploited the success of *Bloodsport* by quickly releasing another Van Damme film that focused on a martial arts competition. This was 1989s *Kickboxer*. Other films that exploited the success of *Blood Sport* and its competition setting in particular and Van Damme's developing image more generally included, *Death Match* (1993); *King of the Kickboxers* (1993); *Rage: Ring of Fire II* (1994); and *Savate* (1994). Indeed, the competition narrative played an important, but not singular, role in the narrative of Van Damme's next film *AWOL* (1990) (aka. *Lionheart* and *Wrong Bet*). Again, this shows how, once initiated, a cycle can have a longevity well

beyond the period of the initial film or films success. In the case of martial arts films competition narratives were still regularly being produced well into the late 1990s. It is not surprising, given the success of some of the early films in this cycle, that Roger Corman identified the martial arts film as something that would fit his tried and tested formula of exploitation filmmaking. He produced *Bloodfist* in 1989 establishing the long running *Bloodfist* series, which was still going strong in 2005 with the release of *Bloodfist 2050*.

9.3 Finding the space in the formula: political content and exploitation cinema

It was the emphasis upon cycles within low budget filmmaking, alongside the fact that production companies usually only demanded the inclusion of vital ingredients such as sex and violence, that provided the space for those involved to explore a number of social and political issues. Once again, when considering film cycles, exploitation and political content, New World provide a useful case study. Lipstadt argues that the way in which a company like New World adhered to cycles derived from their own successes or the successes of others allowed for a certain amount of flexibility or freedom for their film-makers. He quotes John Sayles, who worked as a screenwriter for Corman at New World, who puts it thus,

> When you write for Roger Corman, you know exactly what's expected of you. Like with *Piranha*. They said, "You're going to rewrite *Piranha*. Make sure you keep the main idea, the idea of Piranhas being loose in North American waters." I said "Okay, how often do you want an attack? About every fifteen minutes?" They said "Yeah, but it doesn't have to be an attack. Maybe just the threat of an attack - but some sort of action sequence about that often to keep the energy going." I said "Anything else?" They said, "Yeah. Keep it fun." And that's a story conference at New World. It takes about twenty minutes. After that you're on your own. You can come up with any story, any location, so long as you fulfil what was agreed upon: keep the fish in the country and keep it fun. [20]

Within this restrictive yet loose format directors and writers were allowed to infuse their work with some elements of social comment. The fact that this most commonly takes place within the exploitation sphere of the American film industry has also allowed the makers of martial arts movies to create works that on occasion are politically forthright whilst closely adhering to the conventions of a particular cycle, and satisfying audience needs on a range of levels. One of the clearest attempts to create a martial arts film that is also highly politically engaged is *Bloodfist: Forced to Fight* (1991) produced by Roger Corman's later company Concorde Pictures. One of the ways in which this film is able to do this is by setting the story within prison. In relation to this fact, I now want to examine the political potential of this type of prison movie to create social comment.

Historically, on a variety of occasions the prison film has proved itself a useful form for exploitation filmmakers. Certainly, the setting of these films allows for the sensationalist approach that Schaefer sees as central to exploitation films, and that Doherty argues marks out low budget exploitation films from the 1950s onwards. More particularly, the prison setting also provides, due to its relationship with ideological notions of justice, the opportunity for strong social commentary. This is something that Lipstadt argues marks out some of the more interesting examples of the women in prison cycle produced by New World in the mid-1970s.

However, some have argued that the social comment offered by prison films is often lacking in clarity. For example, when writing about the cycle of women in prison films produced in the late 1950s, Anne Morey argues that, 'prison is

presented as an agent to return women to domesticity...while domesticity is valorized as an appropriate aim (and women who try to avoid their womanly roles are castigated), prison is the site of contradictions.'[21] The sensationalist cycle in this instance is used to try and argue that women would be happiest in the domestic arena. However, this traditionalist position is challenged through the creation of female characters that cannot easily be assimilated into patriarchal society and yet cannot simply be read as negative because of this.

For New World Pictures in the early 1970s films about women in prison also proved to be financially very successful. Following the success of *The Big Doll House* (1971), which was shot cheaply in the Philippines, New World embarked upon the production of a cycle of women in prison films. As Lipstadt observes once again in this case the politics of exploitation films is far from straightforward. In clearly attempting to appeal to a young male audience through the titles and promotion of these films New World emphasised the potential sexual content and encouraged the audience to seek titillation from their product. However, the films themselves often also attempted to work against the expectations of this audience, making observations and comments about the wider institutions within American society. Lipstadt discusses Jonathan Demme's *Caged Heat* (1974) in this light, arguing that,

> the prison stands in for the institutions that repress women, especially minority women...The movie insistently uses sexual symbols, and is centrally concerned with women's independence and solidarity. It seems torn between its responsibilities, on the one hand it is sympathetic to the struggles of the characters, while on the other, it indulges in grotesque stereotypes and exploits the sadism to which the characters are subjected.'[22]

As Lipstadt puts it, the film ends up 'serving two masters'; on the one hand the production company's desire for a product that they can sell and on the other the desire on behalf of the filmmakers to engage politically with a number of social issues. This duality is also a concern when considering the ways in which some martial arts films attempt to engage with contemporary social issues, and comment upon them. Certainly like other exploitation films martial arts movies are structured around a series of events that satisfy the primary expectations of their target audience. In this case, violent scenes that display a range of martial arts skills. Again, as has been outlined in relation to prison films, beyond this necessity it is possible for certain martial arts film-makers to attempt to create works that are socially and politically engaged. *Forced to Fight* is certainly an example of this. As such, it provides a useful case study, one which explores the way in which a film that is in many ways a conventional martial arts movie can offer a level of social and political comment.

9.4 Social Comment, Politics and the Martial Arts Film: the case of Forced to Fight

Forced to Fight is the third film in the *Bloodfist* series. This series is one of Corman's flagship martial arts film cycles, and its production fitted well into his shifting mode of production from the late 1980s onwards. Ever since the early successes of films such as *The Big Doll House*, Corman's companies had operated a successful production unit in The Philippines. He had produced a number of films that had utilised the jungle settings and cheap labour abundantly available on the islands. By the late 1980s they offered suitable settings for the newly popular

Eastern set martial arts films that were becoming established in the exploitation market following the success of the early Van Damme films. With his connections in these territories Corman was well placed to make a martial arts film set in The Philippines. The first of these, *Bloodfist*, appeared in 1989 and starred Don 'the dragon' Wilson as Jake Raye.

A real martial arts practitioner, Wilson was to go on to become a major figure in exploitation martial arts films. When Corman slated him to appear in this film Wilson had been a professional Kickboxer since 1974. According to his personal website he went on to become a world champion 11 times 'in 33 different weight classes under 6 different sanctioning organizations.' [23]. He was therefore well known to enthusiasts of martial arts and in particular kickboxing and Corman was so impressed with his martial arts skills that he signed him to a seven picture deal.[24]

Bloodfist is set in Manila and mixes a murder mystery plot, Raye is there to discover who killed his brother, with a backdrop of what was become a key setting for US martial arts films from the Hong Kong co-production, *Enter the Dragon* (1973) to *The Karate Kid* (1984), the competition arena. Once again, competition settings had been central to the Van Damme films of the late 1980s, highlighting their influence over martial arts films of this period. *Bloodfist* also utilises a number of stock character types within martial arts films, in particular the older teacher, who here inducts Raye into the underground world of martial arts in Manila.

The release of Jean Claude van Damme's prison film, *Death Warrant*, in 1990 was likely one of the main motivations behind the making of Concorde's third *Bloodfist* film, *Forced to Fight*. In *Death Warrant* van Damme plays a cop who goes undercover to expose the corrupt regime running a prison. In *Forced to Fight* Wilson plays a character who is sent to prison for a crime he did not commit and unsurprisingly finds a corrupt regime running the place. The film exploits the once again popular prison setting of the Van Damme film, and the prison movie setting clearly serves the interests of those producing martial arts films in a number of ways. The most obvious being, that they often involve fights and disputes, and the forms of combat most commonly shown within this type of film are unarmed, or only involve home-made knives and clubs. Prison films therefore deliver the primary expectation of most audiences for martial arts films: hand to hand fights. However, as I have already observed, the prison film also provides the potential for social comment and on occasion even political engagement. It is this aspect of *Forced to Fight* that I now want to focus on.

Forced to Fight tells the story of Jimmy, played by Don 'the dragon' Wilson, who finds himself in a prison that is being used as a testing ground for new surveillance methods by a politically ambitious governor. After witnessing the rape and murder of a young black inmate Jimmy kills Luther, the leader of the gang who committed the act and finds himself transferred to cell block C, home to the most dangerous criminals in the prison. Here the main body of the film unfolds as Jimmy avoids the attempts at revenge plotted by Blue, someone who had drug links to Luther. Whilst in cell block C Jimmy is placed in a cell with an Sam Stark (Richard Roundtree), a politically committed prisoner with whom he forges a

mutually respectful relationship. After a series of fights, each detailed in lengthy combat sequences, Jimmy manages to survive in the cell block and thanks to Stark the old racial antagonisms are replaced by a more positive, less divisive, more collective political perspective on things. At the end of the film Stark is released and as he leaves he hands his law books to Jimmy who, in taking them, symbolically accepts the mantel of the cell block political leader from his new friend.

For all of its insertion of political content and due to the fact it was made in the exploitation arena, first and foremost *Forced to Fight* is a martial arts film. The films opening sequence shows Wilson going through various elements of martial arts training, revealing his skills to the audience from the outset. This is certainly a convention that is associated with martial arts films produced in Hong Kong in the 1970s and 1980s, which often had training sequences as pre-credit trails or under the credits. In the case of *Forced to Fight*, as the credits appear Wilson works out and performs a variety of martial arts moves, showing the audience that he can actually perform the moves and kicks that they expect will appear in the main body of the film. The authenticity of Wilson's skills are further reinforced by the fact that on the credits he is listed not simply as Don Wilson, but as 'Don "the dragon" Wilson, World Kickboxing Association world light heavyweight champion'. Again, this works to confirm Wilson as a 'real' martial arts practitioner, and one who has performed at the highest level. In terms of the film's exploitation origins the prison setting further reinforces the expectation that Wilson will systematically be called upon to show his martial arts prowess throughout. The

narrative of the film delivers on this level as Wilson's character Jimmy is involved in a number of situations that demand he engages in hand to hand combat.

However, once the film has delivered this, its most exploitable element, as in the New World pictures of the 1970s, the filmmakers attempt to create a work that is also political in that it includes strong elements of social comment. As an example, and in order to suggest how this occurs, I will focus on the way in which *Forced to Fight* handles issues of race within its institutional setting. As Lipstadt argues with regard to *Caged Heat*, the exploitation prison film is often clearly critical of the institutions that make up American society[25]. Within *Forced to Fight* the political aspirations of the Governor link the actions within the prison to the wider political picture. In the film's opening sequence he is seen making political mileage out of his policies within Wingate Penitentiary. He presents an economically driven, less men needed to supervise prisoners due to new surveillance technologies, rationale for his changes to the prison structure, and clearly sees this as part of his wider campaign to become State Attorney General. The best interests of the prisoners are therefore clearly subservient to the political ambitions of the prison Governor. The films engagement with racial issues also appears in the opening sequences, suggesting how important it will be for what follows. Inter-cut between the governor's politically motivated speech to the media and their walkabout in the prison is a far more brutal event: a young black prisoner is attacked, raped and murdered by a gang of black prisoners. The racial divide between those in control, who are white, and those who are controlled and are black, is clearly established from the outset.

The issue of race is also central to the way in which the film establishes its central relationship between Jimmy and Sam Stark. Within the narrative, once Jimmy has been transferred to the high security cell block C he is placed in a cell with Stark. The confined space of the prison cell becomes very important as it provides an opportunity for the characters to talk and through their discussion establish important connections between each other in relation to issues of race. For example, when Jimmy asks Stark if he can borrow a book from him he is handed the biography of Malcolm X. Jimmy returns the book, but instead of rejecting it as we might suspect, he says that he has already read it. This shared political knowledge is the beginning of a mutual respect between the two men. The shots used within the mise-en-scéne show the cell clearly reinforces the politicised nature of Stark as it highlights the posters of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela that are within it.

On many occasions race is shown to be a key motivation in prison films, with inmates clearly connected to gangs that are demarcated through racial origin. Alongside this, the hero is often presented as a loner who remains outside the negative influence of these gangs. In *Forced to Fight* this narrative convention is challenged as Stark clearly represents a political position that is beyond these simple racial divides. As such he marks out the most positive position presented within the film. When Jimmy is first allowed to join Stark's horticultural group who meet on the prison roof, it is clearly shown as one that is racially mixed to reinforce this point. Jimmy is introduced to the members of Sam's 'gang' who span a number of the ethnic groups that populate contemporary America: it consists of Tony D'Angelo, an Italian-American, Joe and Kelly Clarey who are

Irish-American, and Clinton Dunbar and Henry Jones who are African-Americans. The acceptance of Jimmy into this group is therefore significant, and suggests a utopian racial vision of America within the film. However, the film is not always simplistic.

Forced to Fight explores Jimmy's racial origins in a sophisticated way. When he first arrives in cell block C a variety of racial labels are used to describe him. This works to emphasise the fact that he cannot be easily assimilated into the racial gangs that predominate the space, and they include: 'chink', 'China man', 'Korean', 'cracker', and 'half-breed'. When he is initially confronted by the Aryan brotherhood in the prison laundry, their leader says that 'laundry is in his blood'. Once again the cell that Jimmy shares with Stark is important as it becomes the area where the truth is exposed. Jimmy reveals that he is in prison for being involved in a bar fight. He suggests that he was arrested because the police 'didn't like the look of my skin'. He states that he is an 'American, born and bred', but because he is half Japanese the authorities 'are always looking side-ways at him'. As he speaks he is framed in the cell bars, suggesting that America, with its institutionalised racism, is as much of a prison as the cell block because of the ways in which the (white) police wield their power. This is an important moment as it represents the first definite acknowledgement of Jimmy's racial origin, and proves that the earlier racist assumptions about him were totally wrong. Here, *Forced to Fight* is clearly a film that attempts to tackle what is an important issue within contemporary American society, racism. Once again, the intimacy of the cell shared by Stack and Jimmy provides a thoughtful moment within the film and reinforces it as a space for truth and contemplation. The other important space

within the cellblock is the roof garden, a place where the prisoner's horticultural club meets.

The roof garden acts as a sanctuary for those selected to be part of Stark's community. Here, the prisoners care for plants and prepare meals. Again, the meals reflect the pluralist approach championed by Stark as they are drawn from a range of cultural backgrounds. The *mise-en-scéne* of the roof garden suggests an oasis within the hostile environment of the prison, transforming the wire fences that keep the men in into trellises that support the plants and flowers grown by them. The space of the garden also visually marks an escape from the racially divided prison community in general. The care taken in creating this through the *mise-en-scéne* is particularly effective when assassins enter the roof garden in an attempt to murder Jimmy. The moment threatens not just Jimmy, but as they destroy the work of Stark's men it threatens his vision of another, more tolerant and politically committed way of living. The garden also provides the space for the final conflict between Blue, the man who wants to kill Jimmy and destroy Stark, and who through his drug dealing is representative of capitalist exploitation. Taking place in the garden, this becomes a symbolic confrontation between different political perspectives and values. It is a fight not only for the garden but also for Stark's outlook and political values.

Stark plays a pivotal political role in the film as he is used to articulate the reasons for the oppression of the men. For example, he challenges those involved in gang fighting and the attempts on Jimmy's life, connecting their position to the wider social context, when he says, 'we were all born into a bad situation, and

we've graduated into something even worse. They don't care if we live or die. So if you want to fight, fight the damn system that got you here, not each other'. The broader context of course is a racist, white, middle-class dominated society. This is further reflected in the world of the prison by the fact that figures of authority are all white. The prison guards are shown as vindictive and corrupt; the governor wears a bow-tie signifying middle-classness and hates Stark for his politically challenging views; and the candidate for state attorney, is willing to exploit anything to gain political ground.

The finale of *Forced to Fight* successfully brings together the various political elements of the film. Stark is attacked and stabbed and we are led to believe that he is dead. Jimmy defeats Blue in a fight in the garden and there is a fade to black. In the final moments of the film we are presented with a shot of a black man walking through the prison with the aid of a stick. Whilst it is clearly on one level Stark, having survived the stabbing he is walking towards a release and freedom, the figure is also somewhat strange. On closer inspection this sequence contains the film's most startlingly political image. As Stark walks through the interior of the prison the actor in silhouette is clearly not the familiar figure of Richard Roundtree. The replacement is much taller and thinner and greatly resembles black American political leader Malcolm X. This reading seems particularly relevant as Malcolm X had appeared on the wall of Stark's cell and the book he and Jimmy discussed was his biography. The *mise-en-scéne* here seems to directly link Stark's ideas and his commitment to those oppressed by the political system, here represented by prison, with the political beliefs of Malcolm X. This striking sequence suggests the ways in which this exploitation him can also offer a

political perspective on the social context and setting of the action. In a similar manner to some of the earlier New World features, *Forced to Fight* demonstrates that strong, forthright political content can be woven into the structures of exploitation films. The filmmakers are able to do this here without necessarily denying audiences the elements they expect of an exploitation film, in this case martial arts action.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that this type of reading is available to all US martial arts films produced in the context of exploitation cinema. Indeed, one has to only look at the other films in the *Bloodfist* series to see less politically left leaning martial arts films. This fact emphasises the point that general sweeping statements about US martial arts films must be balanced with some detailed textual analysis. In this examination of *Forced to Fight* I have argued that within the constraints of the exploitation martial arts film a number of politically progressive ideas can be explored. In the next chapter I want to turn my attention to another performer who has made their career within the exploitation sphere, Cynthia Rothrock, an actor who also has a persona that emphasises her authentic martial arts abilities.

Notes:

1. Eric Schaefer, *'Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: a history of exploitation films, 1919-1959* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 17.

2. Schaefer, *Bold!*, 18.

[3] Schaefer, *Bold!*, 38.

[4] Schaefer, *Bold!*, 17.

[5] Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics; the juvenilization of American movies in the 1950s*, (London: Unwin Hayman, 1988)

[6] Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 3.

[7] Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: movies and marketing in Hollywood*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 23.

[8] Jim Hillier, *The New Hollywood*, (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 40.

[9] Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 3.

[10] Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 6.

[11] Hillier, *The New Hollywood*, 40.

[12] Hillier, *The New Hollywood,*, 40.

[13] Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 3.

[14] Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 8.

[15] Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 8.

[16] Roger Corman and J. Jerome, *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*, (London: Muller, 1990).

[17] Jim Hillier and Aaron Lipstadt, *Roger Corman's New World*, (London: British Film Institute, 1981); Jim Hillier and Aaron Lipstadt, 'The Economics of Independence: Roger Corman and New World Pictures 1970-1980'. In *Movie*, 31/31, Winter 1986, 43-53; Hillier, *The New Hollywood.*

[18] Hillier and Lipstadt, *Roger Corman's*, 3.

[19] Aaron Lipstadt, 'Politics and Exploitation: New World Pictures'. In Hillier and Lipstadt, 1981, 10-11.

[20] Lipstadt, 'Politics and Exploitation', 13.

[21] Anne Morey, 'The Judge Called Ma an Accessory: women's prison films, 1950-1962'. In *Journal of Popular film and Television*, 23:2, 1995, 80.

[22] Lipstadt, 'Politics and Exploitation', 18.

[23] Donwilson.com no pages

[24] M. Ray Lott, *The American Martial Arts Film.* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland), 147.

[25] Lipstadt, 'Politics and Exploitation', 18.

10: From Hong Kong to the USA: Cynthia Rothrock, authenticity and the martial arts performer.

In her book *Spectacular Bodies*, Yvonne Tasker observes that 'Cynthia Rothrock has repeatedly been described as an unlikely action heroine.'[1] This may be because she is blond and petite, however, due to her impressive credentials within the related worlds of martial arts competition and the Hong Kong film industry as a female performer she has forged something of a unique cinematic career. There have been other female martial artists who have attempted to establish themselves in films such as kick-boxing champion Kathy Long, but none have managed to equal the standing of Cynthia Rothrock, who to date has appeared in over 30 films and television programmes. For this alone she is a rare performer in the martial arts field. However, her achievements within action cinema have been largely ignored by critics who have chosen instead to concentrate on the muscle-bound male heroes of the 1980s and 1990s. This critical marginalization might be explained by the fact that since her return to the USA from working in the Hong Kong film industry Rothrock has worked almost exclusively in what might be described as exploitation cinema.

Cynthia Rothrock made the move into action cinema following a successful career within competitive martial arts. This is an important aspect of her career as it laid the foundation for her acceptance by the fans of martial arts movies who place a great deal of store in the idea of 'authenticity'. Her website (www.cynthiarothrock.org) proudly proclaims that 'From 1981-1985 she was the undefeated World Karate Champion in both forms and weapon competition.' Going on to state, impressively,

that, 'She is a consummate performer with such Chinese weapons as the Chinese Double Broad Swords, Staff, Chinese Nine-section Steel Whip, Chinese Iron Fan, and an assortment of Okinawan Kobudo and Japanese Bugei Weapons.' It followed that producers began to think that if she had the skills to become a multiple martial arts world champion maybe she would be able to translate those moves onto the big screen. In 1985, after making her acting debut in an advertisement for Kentucky Fried Chicken, Rothrock, the holder of five black belts in Eastern martial arts, began her career within the Hong Kong film industry. This is a significant move and highlights the fact that at this time in Hong Kong it was possible for female performers to be widely accepted in the lead and supporting roles in action movies in a way they were not in the USA. Yvonne Tasker acknowledges why this might be so when she says that 'The different conventions and traditions of the Hong Kong cinema allow all sorts of characters...to be fighters'[2]. Rothrock's first appearance was as co-lead in a production entitled *Yes, Madam* (1985). Here she appeared alongside an actress called Michelle Khan, who would later find international stardom in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) as Michelle Yeoh. *Yes, Madam*, directed by Corey Yuen (Yuen Kwai), was a big hit at the Hong Kong box-office and was followed by a series of other films starring Rothrock and again directed by Yuen. These included, *Righting Wrongs* (1987), *Blonde Fury* (1988) and *No Retreat, No Surrender II* (1989). These firmly established on the Hong Kong action scene and other successful projects saw Rothrock appear alongside high profile Hong Kong performers such as Sammo Hung in *Shanghai Express* (1986) and Yuen Biao in *Righting Wrongs* (1987). In this period

Cynthia Rothrock quickly became one of the few western performers to consistently and successfully assume lead roles in Hong Kong martial arts films.

The success that Rothrock enjoyed in Hong Kong led producers at Golden Harvest, a major player in the Hong Kong film industry, to consider Rothrock as having the potential to 'cross-over' into the lucrative US action movie market place. Of course, they had experience of such endeavours having previously attempted this by offering Jackie Chan to US audiences as the Robert Clouse directed *The Big Brawl* (1980). However, they seem to have thought that the fact that Rothrock was actually American might give her an advantage over failures such as Chan. Once again Golden Harvest employed Robert Clouse, who had made the enormously successful *Enter the Dragon* (1973) as well as Chan's failure, to direct the film, hoping that he would be able to work some of the fading magic from his collaboration with Bruce Lee. They chose to make two films back to back, which became *China O'Brien* (1988) and *China O'Brien 2* (1988). The approach here, as with *The Big Brawl*, involved creating what was considered a more 'American' format for the performer. That is one that was closer to existing US action genres rather than simply transferring Hong Kong styles to US contexts. Here, Rothrock plays Lori 'China' O'Brien, a cop who leaves the force after an accident and ends up 'cleaning up' the corruption in her father's town. As Yvonne Tasker points out, the film is put together in such a way as to offer narrative moments that showcase Rothrock's martial arts talents, such as a fight in a bar[3]. These sequences also reveal the tension between the creation of action and the importance of femininity to Rothrock's developing image

as she performs her fights wearing high heels. However, once again Golden Harvest's attempt to break into the US market failed as both films under performed at the North American box-office. Significantly, these two films were able to take advantage of the growing video rental market as they both became huge successes in this domestic format. This new development clearly marked the future direction for Rothrock's career in the US. They almost instantly established her as a bankable action performer in this form of distribution, leading to her being dubbed 'the video queen of martial arts' by her own website[4].

As Brian A. Austin has argued, videocassettes provided another important mode of distribution for feature films. Introduced to the North American consumer market in 1975, the major boom in VCR ownership took place in the 1980s. According to Austin 56% of North American homes owned VCRs by 1988, which coincided with Cynthia Rothrock's move into the US action movie market. Because of this new technology, fresh patterns of consumption emerged in this period. Low budget, exploitation filmmakers who had previously placed their products in drive-in theatres and inner city cinemas now saw a new distribution network emerging. Video, initially seen as a minor threat by the Hollywood studios, was embraced by exploitation movie moguls. Again as Austin notes, 'the impact of home video...may have important consequences for independent (those not tied to the studios) filmmakers. In particular, new markets for the products of the Hollywood outsiders could result. Already we have seen independent production of horror/slasher films targeted to the teenage audience in the home.' [5] The impact of video consumption on the audiences for type

of martial arts films that Rothrock was making was equally great. Primarily consumed by under 23s, and in particular teenage males, according to Austin, research showed that this group quickly took to video consumption, 'teenagers spend more than twice the number of hours watching films on videocassette than in movie theaters.'[6] This change in audience consumption patterns paved the way for video stars, whose films were either poorly received at cinemas or even unreleased theatrically, were now bankable in the new home viewing market. Again, as Yvonne Tasker notes, 'Rothrock was 'important on the video martial-arts scene'[7], and a performer whose films may fail in the theatrical market place but whose work found a dedicated and enthusiastic audience in the realm of video releases.

Due to these factors it is certainly possible to argue that the poor response by audiences to the theatrical release of the China O'Brien films, alongside their popularity on domestic video, pushed Rothrock firmly into the confines of the kind of North American exploitation cinema that was explored in the previous chapter. Here producers were able to exploit her talents by delivering a very particular martial arts based product to a niche market of fans. However, this created a situation where Rothrock has been forced to accept that success in this market has meant her opportunities to cross-over into mainstream Hollywood productions has become, at best, limited. The demands of a martial arts film performer are very particular and it these it might be argued that have forced Rothrock into what, for her, might be termed the 'ghetto of exploitation'. One from which, whilst she has continued to work consistently, she has found it difficult to escape.

10.1 Rothrock is the 'Real Deal': authenticity and the martial arts performer

One of the main criteria used by martial arts fans to select those performers they champion is 'authenticity'. The fact that much of the fan material about Cynthia Rothrock highlights her real life martial arts achievements, and that many of her publicity pictures have her posed with weapons from her championship disciplines, indicate that this is an important aspect of her image as a performer. In his article, '*A Star is Born* and the construction of authenticity'[8], Richard Dyer argues that the idea of authenticity in relation to film stars leads to their being associated with words such as 'sincere, immediate, spontaneous, real, direct, genuine and so on.' He goes on to say that, 'it is these qualities that we demand of a star if we accept her or him in the spirit in which she or he is offered.'[9] This may be related to martial arts film performers in a number of production contexts. The idea that martial arts performers can actually perform the actions we see them do on screen is their mark of authenticity. Jackie Chan, for example, always includes a series of out-takes at the end of each of his feature films. These out-takes often show Chan performing dangerous stunts that have gone wrong and amazing feats of athleticism. For example, the ending of *Super Cop* (aka *Police Story 3*, 1992) shows Chan being accidentally hit by a passing helicopter as he attempts to perform a stunt whilst on the top of a moving train. We then witness him being eased down from the train to the medical support team who have been standing by. These outtake endings clearly work to reinforce the idea that Jackie Chan performs all his own stunts on his productions,

even those which are highly dangerous and would have other actors calling for a stand in. Through these important moments he becomes the authentic action performer, offering us confirmation of this through our witnessing his 'accidents'. These sequences, and Chan's commitment to stunt work, are used by fans as a way of demarcating between the 'real' and the 'play' action men. Jackie Chan's star persona relies very heavily on this creation of an almost mythic authenticity, continually the subject of talk show appearances and magazine articles. Indeed, his break-out US box-office hit *Rumble in the Bronx* (1994) was marketed in some European territories, such as Spain, with the line 'No doubles, no stuntmen, just Jackie Chan' emblazoned across posters. As Leon Hunt observes,

> Debates about "authenticity" have recurred both in Chinese critiques of Kung Fu and in English–speaking subcultures surrounding Hong Kong cinema, although with different emphases. This has been intensified by the increasing visibility of technology and special effects in fight choreography.[10]

In lower budget films that cannot afford top-end digital effects for their fight sequences the fact that the actors can actually perform martial arts skills on-screen becomes vitally important. As noted in the previous chapter, within the US exploitation field this led to the employment of actual martial artists as actors, and a highlighting of their off-screen achievements in the marketing of the films. As Hunt notes, audiences have an 'investment in "special people" doing what mere mortals cannot.'[11] Whilst on the surface Us martial arts films was not be able to compete with the more 'authentic' products of Hong Kong's cinema, they did operate in a manner that clearly attempted to conform their performers actual, real, skills.

If, as Hunt notes, martial arts movie fans seek out this confirmation of a performer's authenticity, it helps explain why Jackie Chan is widely held in such high regard. As Dyer argues, 'we no longer ask if someone performs well...but whether what they perform is truthful, with the referent of truthfulness not being falsiable statements but the person's "person"'. [12] For many martial arts movie fans then, the actuality of experience and 'real' martial arts skills are at the heart of their admiration for an actor. The, rather problematic, assumption at work here seems to be that the 'real' skills of the performer are simply transposed onto the screen. Of course, they cannot be, so a great deal of effort is spent in the creation of an authentic persona through other related media texts as well. For example, at the height of his popularity in the 1990s, action actor Jean-Claude van Damme often appeared on chat shows promoting his latest releases. When he did it was likely that he would be asked to perform a trademark high kick. He almost always obliged, usually missing the presenters head by inches, and achieving some level of authenticity by doing so. It would be fair to assume that Van Damme realised that the appearance of such actions in these related media texts acted as a guarantor of his authentic martial arts skills, proof that he could actually 'do it'. In a similar vein a variety of unconfirmed stories circulated concerning the involvement of another action star, Steven Seagal, with the CIA in Asia. Whenever this topic is raised in interviews he carefully neither confirmed nor denied these stories, rather he refused to talk about them, his 'refusal' here working to create a myth that suggested that the stories may well be true. In a similar fashion to Van Damme, he thereby reinforced his authentic action persona through the suggestion that he had 'done things'.

As already noted, many martial arts fans prefer Hong Kong films, seeing them as 'more authentic' because of their origin, those working in the film industry have also seen US produced martial arts films as somehow 'lesser' than their Hong Kong equivalents. Craig D. Reid, an experienced fight choreographer, makes such a point when he states that in his opinion, 'Most American fight scenes are scripted by the screenwriter, director, or stunt coordinator, with little room left for any changes. And without the opportunity for spontaneous or last-minute changes, a fight becomes a prearranges, robotic series of movements, immune to extemporaneous inspiration.'[13] He goes on to argue that,

> Although creativity and originality should be the most important virtues in a fight choreographer's arsenal, over the tears a stereotypical repertoire of choreographic methods has been developed...Chinese choreographers have learned to extend the limits and create new ideas. The American industry, however, chooses to remain within the constraints of each method, thus ensuring creative stagnation.[14]

Reid's dismissal of American fight construction simply adds to the already at the time current idea that US martial arts films are not worthy of comparison to ones produced in Hong Kong. Reid uses his experience as a fight director and his detailed explanation of the techniques employed by filmmakers to dismiss US martial arts films. However his article does not consider the differences in the production contexts of the two industries he is discussing. He may well be right to argue that the fights are not as technically good in US films but that does not mean they are not worthy of consideration. His tone when he says that 'despite the dynamic changes in action fight methodologies constantly being created by the Chinese film industry, the American industry remains static, still throwing the same old punches.'[15] is dismissive. Reid

will surely have been approving of the fact that in the 21st century the most high profile fight co-ordinators on Hollywood films have come from Hong Kong industry. However, his critique reveals the up-hill struggle faced by US martial arts filmmakers as they strive for credibility with martial arts movie fans.

Cynthia Rothrock has two things elements that has been exploited in the attempt to create an 'authentic' persona. Her real life martial arts skills and her cinematic origins in the 'real' Hong Kong film industry, where as noted earlier she had worked with 'real' performers such as Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao. Rothrock, as a female performer appearing in martial arts based action films has had to employ familiar strategies in an attempt to create a genuine, 'real' and authentic persona. In her case this has manifest itself in two distinct sources. Firstly, through interviews in specialist magazines such as the British based *Impact*, which is devoted to action cinema, and the North American *Black Belt* and *Inside Kung Fu*, which are primarily for martial artists. Such magazines in their interviews and features regularly focus on the fact that Rothrock was a star performer in the Hong Kong action movie industry, carrying films herself and holding her own with the stars of that industry. As I have noted earlier, for many martial arts movie fans a more authentic action cinema, often based on their assumptions about performers skills discussed above in relation to Jackie Chan. Indeed, in a small research project I undertook through the letters pages of *Impact*, all respondents claimed to prefer Hong Kong martial arts films to those produced in the USA. I believe this preference has hardened through the increase in availability of Hong Kong films on DVD and video in the UK. This has been

facilitated over recent years by DVD and video distribution companies such as 'Made in Hong Kong', 'Eastern Heroes' and 'Hong Kong Legends', and the fact that stores in the UK such as HMV and Virgin now carry specialist sections devoted to 'martial arts'. This is certainly a reflection of the consumer power of such supposedly small fan groups. Rothrock's position as a performer with a Hong Kong track record therefore assists the acceptability of her US films with such fans in the UK and elsewhere.

Another key strategy in creating an authentic performer of Rothrock has been the highlighting of the fact that she has been a weapons and forms champion. Whilst this too is brought up in interviews, this authentic skill also has to be integrated into the films themselves. Often this takes the form of training sequences. This narrative device was particularly favoured by Hong Kong filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s as a way of displaying performers talents, and can be seen in such landmark titles as *Invincible Shaolin* (1978) and *36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978). However, as US martial arts movies are more driven by action than the historical epics of the Hong Kong industry, which conventionally included more static training sequences, these moments of display can be seen to interrupt the narrative flow. This is certainly the case in many of Cynthia Rothrock's films that include training sequences. Arguably, the need to authenticate her martial arts skills is heightened because she is a woman operating in a very male centred genre. The fact that her 'real' martial arts skills are in the area of forms and weapons, a particularly static practice, demands this sort of narrative disruption and almost invites the audience to step outside the narrative

progression whilst the display takes place. For example, her 1992 film, *Undefeatable*, contains sequences that work in this manner. A member of a street gang involved in inter-gang rivalry, Rothrock's character is seen practising with martial arts weapons outside her mobile home. She stands facing, and looking at, the camera in a full length shot as she goes through her display. The camera is static and the sequence contains little editing. The purpose is simply to show the audience what Rothrock can do. The lack of editing, and the static camera used, in this sequence reveal that no special effects or doubles have been used and that we are seeing is the 'real' thing.

The desire to create a truly authentic martial arts persona leads me to another area of interest in relation to Cynthia Rothrock, the inability to transfer her success and persona in a popular genre to mainstream roles. The desire to prove the authenticity of female action performers is less prevalent within mainstream Hollywood films. Here, audiences are willing to accept performers such as Sigourney Weaver, Geena Davis and Linda Hamilton in action roles, if they look right. There are few sequences in their films that authenticate their skills in the manner used within Rothrock's. Interestingly, Michelle Yeoh, Rothrock's co-star from *Yes, Madam*, was cast in the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) largely based upon her reputation within the action wing of the Hong Kong film industry. However, she was cast alongside Terri Hatcher, who was clearly identified in the marketing of the film as the sex interest. Yeoh, alongside Hatcher, was marketed as being there simply to provide action support. As an Asian actress perhaps the idea of her holding her own in fight sequences and being feminine enough to catch James Bond's eye was too much for

the producers in 1997. However, with the ascendance of stars Lucy Lui, largely through computer generated martial arts sequences in *Charlie's Angels* (2000), this may have since changed.

One of the most negative effects of popularity in the exploitation field is that audiences for this type of cinema have, like all audiences to some extent, certain, very fixed expectations of performers. For performers with a very high profile within exploitation films, such as Rothrock, this impacts upon the projects that are seen as suitable for them. The performers themselves are very conscious of these expectations, and how this translates into expectations regarding content and authenticity. Rothrock herself has shown an awareness of the demands made of her and her films by her primary audience. Indeed, this is reflected in an interview with *Impact* magazine where, when discussing the opportunity to play a 'straight', non martial arts based role, Rothrock commented that, 'The company sent me a script for that movie (*Deep Red*, 1992), in which I'd have played a co-lead part. It wasn't an action piece. I said 'I'll do it if you don't bill me. Don't put me in the credits. I don't want people saying 'This is a Cynthia Rothrock movie' and people seeing it and going 'oh she just acts.'[16] It seems, therefore, that Rothrock herself is very aware of the fact that as an exploitation action performer she brings a lot of baggage to the screen. This means that any new film that may be outside her normal product range, such as for example, an erotic thriller, need to be marketed in a way that does not put off audiences for either the erotic thriller or a Cynthia Rothrock movie. This seems to suggest that within the field of exploitation films there is an increasing awareness of

the fragmentation of markets, whereas in the 1970s there was much less differentiation between elements of the audience in the marketing of exploitation films. The Rothrock persona, established through the authentication of her martial arts skills, satisfied her primary target audience of martial arts movie fans. However, in satisfying that primary market Rothrock moved herself into a ghetto of exploitation cinema. The few roles that Rothrock has been given within mainstream productions have been very predictable. For example, she appeared in the thriller *Eye for an Eye* (1994) as a Karate instructor. There has been a resistance to cast Rothrock in roles in medium or big budget films as her image is seen to be 'cheap' due to her work in the US exploitation field. However, in Hong Kong the appearance in lower budget films did not automatically mean marginalisation as generally budgets are lower in that industry. Sadly, the time when Cynthia Rothrock could have arguably transferred into the mainstream given the right vehicle may have passed. This is because the action movie in Hollywood has changed. One of the main reasons for this change has been the long awaited breakthrough of Hong Kong superstar Jackie Chan into the US market.

This change in fashion within the martial arts cinema is of course no surprise. If the fans want authenticity then Hong Kong performers provide it. These shifts however have left Rothrock in a marginalised position. Now removed by a number of years from her period in the Hong Kong industry many within her potential audience will only be familiar with her from low budget US productions. Ironically, as she is a real martial artist, the success of Hong Kong performers in the US has meant her

opportunities have been severely limited. This in turn has led her to drastically reduce the number of projects that she is involved in, struggling to find suitable vehicles for her talents. 2001 saw her involvement in a project for TV, for which she also acted as an executive producer, *Outside the Law*. This film attempted to cast her as an ex-CIA operative on the run. However, the confines of television severely limited the opportunities for the bone crunching martial arts action of her earlier work, and so the satisfaction on offer for her fans. In another interesting development, the Internet Movie Database lists her as being involved in a video game *The Untouchable 2* (2002), perhaps this new medium will offer her a new place to display her many martial arts talents. One thing is for sure if Hollywood makes a film of the game it is unlikely that Cynthia Rothrock will be required to return from the ghetto of exploitation her career has so often existed in.

Notes:

[1] Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: gender, genre and action cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 24.

[2] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 25.

[3] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 25.

[4] www.cynthiarothrock.org

[5] B. A. Austin, 'Home Video: the second-run "theater" of the 1990s'. In Tino Balio (ed.), *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (London: Unwin Hayman, 1990) 340.

[6] Austin, 'Home Video', 342.

[7] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 24.

[8] Richard Dyer, '*A Star is Born* and the Construction of Authenticity'. In Christine Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: industry of desire* (London: Routledge, 1991), 132-140.

[9] Dyer, '*A Star is Born*', 133.

[10] Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: from Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 21.

[11] Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters*, 22.

[12] Dyer, *A Star is Born*, 133.

[13] Craig D. Reid, 'Fighting without Fighting: film action choreography'. In *Film Quarterly*, 47: 2, 1994, 32.

[14] Reid, 'Fighting without Fighting', 32.

[15] Reid, 'Fighting without Fighting', 31.

[16] Bey Logan, 'Lethal White Female: inside Cynthia Rothrock'. In *Impact*, january, 1994, 24.

11. *Martial Law* and Martial Arts on US Television

Martial Law first aired on CBS on 26 September 1998 with the episode *Shanghai Express*. It was an American television series starring Hong Kong martial arts superstar Sammo Hung, and ran for two seasons, producing a total of 44 episodes. This chapter will examine the ways in which a clear sense of fan expectation, here of martial arts action, informed the design and creation of the show. While networks had often been dismissive of fan audiences in the past, the pursuit of an already existing fan base has become a vital part of industry strategies. By developing a show with an eye on pre-existing fans, this small but dedicated audience may be enough to see a new programme through its potentially troublesome early broadcasts, and so help it avoid cancellation. However, while martial arts fans, for example, might be attracted to a show that showcased one of the greatest martial arts stars, if producers start to tinker with a show in an attempt to open it up to a more mainstream audience, there is always the danger that the resulting product will fail to appeal to either the fans who had established the show or the mainstream audiences for which the show has been redesigned. I would argue that this was the case with *Martial Law*. The result of such interference marginalized the very groups originally targeted by the show and led to falling viewing figures and its eventual cancellation. However, *Martial Law* remains a significant television show in a number of ways as it demonstrates the increasing influence of Hong Kong action cinema on US television audiences and productions and in so doing marks a number of significant shifts in the production of martial arts based television in the US. In a sense, *Martial Law* can be seen as the television

equivalent of what David Bordwell has termed the 'Hong-Kongification' of US action cinema.[1] It was also the first series produced by a major television network starring an Asian-American or Asian lead performer to be commissioned for a second season.

In her book on the impact of communication technologies, Patrice Flichy argues that technological developments have led to a breakdown in the traditional family unit's consumption of the media. She states, when discussing this in relation to music, that, When they were launched, the transistor and long-playing record benefited not only from a new form of music (rock) but also from a profound change in private life. The family did not disappear but it was transformed; the home was maintained but as a place in which individual practices were juxtaposed. Music was particularly well adapted to this new 'juxtaposed home'. Family members could all listen to the music they wanted in their rooms.[2]

The television industry in the US, and indeed across the globe, has gone through a similar period of audience fragmentation. Families now have a number of television sets around the house and family members consume programmes from an array of sources, from the traditional networks to speciality satellite and cable stations. This has resulted in significantly smaller viewing figures for top rated, popular shows, and while this does not mean that the major networks have given up on family orientated shows, other factors have come into play.

Most particularly, it is these changes that have forced the industry to both acknowledge, and actively target, once marginal audience groups such as fans in order to provide a foundation for a mainstream television show. Perhaps the best example of this is science fiction fans that are sought by the networks for shows such as the *Star Trek* spin-offs and *The X-Files*. It is the loyalty and commitment of fans to genres, such as science fiction, that has led networks to embrace them as central rather than marginal audiences. Furthermore, once one genre based fan group has proved its worth, others come into the equation and, as a result; fans of martial arts based action have become an identifiable audience group. As such, these groups have been drawn in from the margins of US cultural consumption and placed much more centrally. Therefore, they have become identified as an audience group that has, potentially, similar generic loyalties to those of science fiction fans.

There have been important factors in this change of attitude. The success of shows such as *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which are influenced by Hong Kong action cinema and incorporate elements of martial arts fighting, have been significant, as has the continued popularity of comically violent programmes such as professional wrestling. As a result, while the violence associated with martial arts movies was previously seen as problematic material for television, these attitudes are changing. Programme makers have accepted that violence based in comedy is now acceptable to audiences, thus paving one way for martial arts television to find a niche in the US networks programming. Other factors that have

also come into play will be discussed below, but first I want to provide a history of the relationship between television, martial arts and its fans.

11.1 Martial Arts on US Television

One of the major figures in the field of martial arts cinema remains Bruce Lee. Even though he died in 1973, as noted in earlier chapters, he has had an enormous influence on people's conception of martial arts and martial artists. He came to prominence in the television series *The Green Hornet*, which was made by the ABC network and first broadcast on US TV between 1966 and 1967. In *The Green Hornet* Lee played the sidekick of the eponymous hero, and each week his character, Kato, would dispose of the bad guys through the use of his amazing martial arts skills. However, this part was not a breakthrough for Lee and did not lead to a deluge of other roles, merely other guest style appearances on television and in films. Indeed, Lee's experience after the success of *The Green Hornet* is very telling in relation to the images of martial arts that appeared on US TV.

Lee had hoped that he would be able to follow the success of *The Green Hornet* with another series in which he would feature in the central role rather than as a supporting player. With this in mind he assisted in the development of a project that he hoped would deliver such a role: *The Warrior*. This project became, perhaps, the best known of all the incarnations of martial arts on American television, *Kung Fu*, a show which ran successfully from 1972 to 1975 on ABC. Originally the concept, a

Shaolin monk wandering the old west, was developed in the late 1960s but there was no green light for the project from Warner Bros and ABC, and Lee was only able to pick up small parts in TV series such as *Longstreet* (1971)[3]. As a direct result of his disappointment Lee left the US to make films in Hong Kong. There after signing with the Golden Harvest studio he quickly made 2 highly successful pictures, *The Big Boss* (1971) and *Fist of Fury* (1971). Whilst working in Hong Kong Lee still hoped that *The Warrior* would be picked up by a TV network back in the USA, and that his popularity as Kato would still land him the lead role. However, the producers considering the project were unsure whether a mainstream US audience would accept an Asian actor in the lead role of a primetime show. Lee slowly realised that the executives resistance would limit his chances of being cast. Indeed, in an interview with Pierre Berton, he indicated that he was well aware of this issue. In response to a question about the potential problems of a Chinese lead in an American series he said, 'well, the question has been raised. In fact, it is being discussed, and that is why *The Warrior* is probably not going to be on...They think, business-wise, it's a risk. And I don't blame them...If I were the man with the money, I would probably have my own worry whether or not the acceptance would be there.'[4] As a result, on December 7th 1971, Lee received a telegram that stated that, 'due to pressures from the network regarding casting', he had been dropped from the project.[5] In 1972 the pilot episode of the show was aired under the new title *Kung Fu.*

Opting for what they thought was safety, the producers cast David Carradine as the lead in *Kung Fu*, a decision that left Lee feeling that he had been the victim of

racism. Nor does a wider look at the Asian characters in circulation on US TV at this period do anything to disprove this view. Often Asian performers in television shows appeared as servants or assistants, as Lee himself had done in *The Green Hornet*. For example, Sammee Tong in *Bachelor Father* (1957 –1962), Victor Sen Yung in *Bonanza* (1959 –1972) and Miyoshi Umeki in *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1969 –1972)). In these programmes and others, as Wilson and Gutierrez note, the images perpetrate, 'the subservient, humble Asian image.'[6] Certainly, many programmes featured martial arts after *Kung Fu* but these also maintained the policy of casting white actors in the lead roles. Like many American produced martial arts films, television also chose to place martial arts within the context of already established genres. For example, after its initial setting in the Shaolin monastery, *Kung Fu* utilised the codes and conventions of the television western rather than the historically set martial arts films popular in the Hong Kong cinema of the 1970s. Yvonne Tasker puts it thus, 'The distinctiveness of the original show lay in its martial arts inflection of that peculiar mix of violence and stoicism so characteristic of the Western in its various fictional incarnations.'[7]

Kung Fu was clearly a response to the international success of Bruce Lee and the martial arts film, even if the executives were afraid to cast him in the lead. In much the same way, the next wave of martial arts movies to achieve box office success also elicited a response from US Television executives. A number of low budget martial arts films focussing on the mysterious Japanese assassins, the Ninja, and their deadly martial arts skills, Ninjitsu, were box office hits in the 1980s, the best known being

probably *Enter the Ninja* (1982). These films had a tendency to cast American or European actors in the lead roles, such as in the case of *American Ninja* (1986) which starred Michael Dudikoff. NBC felt that this preoccupation would translate to television screens and developed a project to exploit this potential. *The Master* was first aired in 1984 but, unluckily, it only lasted for 13 episodes. Casting was probably the root of the series' problems as it starred the veteran star of popular European westerns, Lee Van Cleef, as 'the only Westerner fully trained as a Ninja'. This was essentially the same premise as *Enter the Ninja* but, mainly due to his age, during the all the important fight sequences, Van Cleef was often poorly doubled by a stuntman in a bald wig. As a result, and despite the obvious skills of Sho Kosugi as the heroes' nemesis, in a role that closely resembled his part in *Enter the Ninja*, the series was doomed. An excellent opportunity to bring martial arts to a mainstream US television audience had been missed. Whilst martial arts skills became part of the make up of many mainstream cops and detectives, it wasn't until the 1990s that martial arts television once again proved itself successful.

The syndicated series, *Renegade*, produced by TV veteran Stephen J. Cannell, began in 1992 and ran for 110 episodes. Once again the series appears at a time when martial arts were popular at the cinema box-office, this time via the films of Jean-Claude Van Damme, for example: *Bloodsport* (1988), *Kickboxer* (1989), and *Hard Target* (1993) and Steven Seagal with *Nico* (1988) and *Under Siege*, (1992). Starring former soap star Lorenzo Lamas as Reno Raines, *Renegade* highlights martial arts in the credit sequence but actually contains very little hand to hand combat in the actual

episodes. Indeed, it is possible to see the martial arts skills of central character, Reno Raines, as largely symbolic his outsider status. He rides a motorcycle; he has long hair; and he can high kick. In this context, martial arts skills become little more than a fashion accessory. The programme, in which a framed cop, Raines, sought to prove his innocence, was fairly standard television fare, but it was a minor hit in syndication, proving that, even if only a peripheral element, martial arts were becoming more bankable. By April 1993, CBS weighed in with a heavyweight martial arts performer, former world Karate champion and long time action 'B' movie star Chuck Norris as Cordell Walker or *Walker, Texas Ranger* as the show's title proclaimed.

11.2 Walker, Texas Ranger

With the success of their Chuck Norris vehicle, CBS found that there was definitely an audience for martial arts based action television, and the series re-established the bankability of action/martial arts programmes. Norris had enjoyed some level of success in the post-Bruce Lee era of martial arts films, establishing a persona that clearly drew on the success of stoic US stars such as Clint Eastwood whilst still showcasing his Karate skills. Norris' persona was immersed in films that clearly operated within established popular Hollywood genres, for example, the cop film, *An Eye for an Eye* (1981), the Vietnam war film, *Missing in Action* (1984), even Indiana Jones style action / adventure, *Firewalker* (1986). When his box office appeal began to dip in the 1990s, unsurprisingly, it coincided with the demise of Cannon

Films who had backed many of his later star vehicles. With the end of Cannon the opportunities for Norris to star in theatrical releases diminished and television seemed a logical move for the fading movie star. The move would in many ways prove to be his saviour. The Norris fan base, the size of which should not be underestimated, was ready to accept him in this new medium. *Missing in Action* had been a top earner when it was first released, causing *Halliwell's Film Guide 2000* to comment, with characteristic understatement, that it had 'caused quite a lot of box-office business around the world'.[8] Significantly, the film had been even more successful in the arena of home video. Certainly, the popularity of Norris at the box office and on video and his potential drawing power on television was not lost on CBS. Whilst Norris' films may have been critically dismissed, he appealed to a sizable and dedicated audience. Many of which were martial arts movie fans who remembered his iconic appearance alongside Bruce Lee in *Way of the Dragon* (1973) as well as his own movies.

CBS consciously drew on Norris' existing star image in the creation of *Walker, Texas Ranger*. The opening credits, for example, reference moments from his previous career: in one of his most successful films, *Lone Wolf McQuade* (1984), he had already played a Texas ranger and in *Good Guys Wear Black* (1977) he had famously performed a stunt in which he kicked-in the window of a moving car, which was reproduced for the opening credit sequence of *Walker, Texas Ranger*. The references to these earlier performances suggest that the show was, at least in part, directed at an audience that was familiar with these moments and knew Norris as a star. This star status was also evoked through these other inter-textual moments that

drew on his screen persona. The success of *Walker: Texas Ranger* encouraged CBS to look for other stars who would also tap into the potential martial arts audience, and this search would lead to the development of *Martial Law*. However, before looking at this show in some detail, I want to explore some aspects of the show's background.

11.3 Martial Law: the background

Another key context for the production of *Martial Law* was the commercial success of Jackie Chan's *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995). For years, Jackie Chan had been one of the biggest stars in eastern markets, but it was not until *Rumble in the Bronx* that he finally made his breakthrough into the US mainstream. The film reached no. 1 at the US box-office, and ended the year as the most successful film in Hong Kong.[9] Chan also consolidated his popularity in the US with the release of another Hong Kong produced film that was re-edited for an American audience, *First Strike* (1996). This film, like *Rumble in the Bronx*, was directed by Stanley Tong, who would be a key creative force behind *Martial Law*, but, despite its success, Tong was disappointed by the handling of the film by its US distributors New Line. It is therefore likely that one of the attractions of *Martial Law* was his executive producer role as it gave him more input into, and control over, the final product.

The success of these re-edited Hong Kong films was followed by Chan's first fully fledged Hollywood movie, *Rush Hour* (1998), a fairly conventional tale of mis-matched cops solving their case - a Chinese diplomat's daughter is kidnapped - in an

unorthodox manner. The success of Chan in the USA meant that CBS could now see the potential for an Asian performer to appeal to a crossover audience. Furthermore, Chan and other Hong Kong practitioners, such as directors John Woo, Kirk Wong and Ronny Yu, were not only proving they could work successfully within the American industry, but also that they could bring projects in on time and on budget. These factors all contributed to CBS's decision to offer Stanley Tong the opportunity to develop a project for them, a project that would become *Martial Law*. Tong argues that, from the outset, he was aware that he would need to attract a lead performer who could handle the action sequences that he envisaged as being at the centre of the programme. As he put it, 'If you want to do an action show, you really have to have an action star, like Sammo Hung. To do *Martial Law*, I had to have someone like Sammo to execute the choreography.[10] However, the problem that faced him and CBS was that many people in the USA would simply ask the question: who is Sammo Hung?

11.4 Who is Sammo Hung?

Whilst he may have been unknown to television executives and the mainstream US TV audience, Sammo Hung was a major star within the field of martial arts cinema. Sammo also brought something to the project with which no American performer could compete: he was 'the real deal'. As I have already outlined, Jackie Chan and other martial arts actors star persona was very heavily founded on their 'authenticity'. For example Chan's films were marketed on the basis that he did all

his own stunts, and the end credit sequences of his films often featured footage of them going wrong as previously discussed. Sammo Hung could bring much of that same aura to television. He too had a reputation for performing his own dangerous stunts despite his heavy physical appearance and, without Sammo Hung's stunts, action choreography and performance skills, *Martial Law* would not have been the same show. It is therefore useful to outline how he gained such a reputation amongst martial arts film fans. A reputation that, I would argue, contributed greatly to *Martial Law* status within the world of US television.

As should already be clear, Sammo Hung is very much linked in the popular imagination with Jackie Chan. They attended the same Chinese Opera school and appeared together as part of the touring troupe *The Seven Little Fortunes*, before going on to make a series of enormously popular Hong Kong films. However, within the world of martial arts movies, Sammo Hung is very much a star in his own right. Born in 1952, he had become a significant presence within the Hong Kong martial arts film industry by the early 1970s. He was employed by the Golden Harvest studio as a fight choreographer in 1970, and had worked in that capacity and as a bit part player until he was given leading roles in the mid-1970s. As a fight choreographer, Sammo Hung helped many Hong Kong stars look good in their action sequences, particularly Angela Mao, Jimmy Wang Yu and even Bruce Lee. He also worked with major, internationally acclaimed directors such as John Woo and King Hu. This foundation in Hong Kong martial arts and action cinema meant that, when the opportunity arrived to move into direction and to take lead roles, Sammo Hung was

well placed to snap them up. In 1978 he directed his first feature, *The Iron-Fisted Monk*. From that point on he developed a career as a director, lead actor and action choreographer, maintaining a career that, given his unmistakable figure, enabled him to establish himself as an instantly recognisable multitalented star.

Occasionally, Sammo Hung would team up with his former school friend Jackie Chan, making such Hong Kong hits as *Winners and Sinners* (1983) *Wheels on Meals* (1984) and *Twinkle, Twinkle Lucky Stars* (1986). Sammo also directed a string of action packed martial arts films, that innovated Hong Kong cinema through the development of new stunt and camera techniques. His films often featured comedy, and he even introduced supernatural elements to the genre with his highly popular and influential *Encounters of the Spooky Kind* (1981). Sammo Hung was therefore at the heart of the re-invention of Hong Kong martial arts cinema in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[11]

From the outset, *Martial Law* was also a significant departure for US martial arts based television. As I have already suggested, previous martial arts programmes had been rather serious and dour. These shows drew on action movies of the 1980s and early 1990s that starred Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger or the more martial arts focused variants that starred Jean-Claude van Damme and Steven Seagal. Whilst these films had moments of dry humour, usually delivered through dialogue, they did not have the physical comedy associated with elements of Hong Kong martial arts cinema. For example, much has been made of Jackie Chan's relation to

silent film comedians such as Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, but this relation can also be established with the fight choreography and stunt work of Sammo Hung. It was the inclusion of its' physical humour that distinguished *Martial Law* from other examples of US action television.

Martial Law was developed by Andre Morgan and Stanley Tong. Morgan was an American who had worked in the Hong Kong film industry, and he has claimed, 'The first film I worked on was *Enter the Dragon* with Bruce Lee. I was a translator and a set PA. Then, I worked on a film called *Hapkido* with Sammo Hung...between 1972 and 1978 I produced between 15 and 20 Chinese pictures.' Certainly this allowed Morgan to make a number of contacts and, more importantly, understand the working methods of Hong Kong film production personnel. Morgan and Tong wanted to create a contemporary martial arts television show for the 1990s and, according to Morgan, the development moved very quickly. Part of the reason for this was Morgan's connections with the industry. He had also been part of the team responsible for CBS's *Walker, Texas Ranger*, and was able to convince the network that *Martial Law* would be a perfect lead in show. As a result, Les Moonves, president of CBS Television at the time, was committed to the show and pushed things forward to ensure the key players were in place. Morgan's knowledge and experience of Hong Kong cinema also explains the speed of development. He was confident in Sammo Hung and in his ability to carry the key central role of Sammo Law. As Morgan argues, 'the truth is, there aren't many martial artists who can do the

kind of action that Stanley choreographs'. Undoubtedly, as the show itself proves, Sammo was one of the few who could.

11.5 Shanghai Express: introducing Sammo Law

In the premiere episode of the series, *Shanghai Express*, many inter-textual elements are used to underline the fact that *Martial Law* will deliver what martial arts film fans expect of its star. The pre-credit sequence involves Sammo's character in China uncovering a stolen car ring. He enters a warehouse and takes on a number of 'heavies'. The sequence is marked by the physical humour so typical of Hong Kong action cinema. Certainly, as noted, this would appeal to the fans of Hong Kong cinema who would be drawn to the pilot of *Martial Law* by the presence of Sammo Hung. The opening sequence makes good use of Sammo's size, which would certainly surprise those audience members not familiar with his heavyweight presence and amazing physical agility. He jumps from car roofs, high kicks and displays amazingly fast hand speed. Whilst clearly using 'effects', this sequence seems designed to mark *Martial Law* out as different: it gives the Hong Kong cinema fans what they expect, but have not been given before on US television; and it shows viewers of action television that are not familiar with Sammo that the series offers something new. It is the skilful hitting of both these targets that explains the success of the series first episode.

However, at the centre of the programmes success is Sammo Hung. Whilst Stanley Tong helped to develop the programme and acted as co-stunt co-ordinator as well as director on *Shanghai Express* and other episodes, it is probably safe to assume that Sammo Hung, himself an experienced director and action director, had a hand in the fight co-ordination. CBS seemed aware of the fan base available for a Hong Kong performer. As noted earlier, this had been confirmed by the success of Jackie Chan and CBS allowed the creative personnel to create a series that would deliver what that audience wanted, and indeed expected. Significantly, the show would also move their action television in the direction that action cinema, more generally, was moving.

The premiere episode of *Martial Law* draws on the codes and conventions of martial arts films in a number of explicit ways. A key factor in many martial arts films is underestimation, usually that of the hero by the villains or an opponent. This often provides a rich source of humour, particularly in Hong Kong films, when the root of the underestimation is often the racist attitudes of white criminals. Whatever the reason, it usually results in the hero 'kicking ass'. In the case of Sammo, he is underestimated because of his large size. *Shanghai Express* uses this key component of martial arts films and turns it on its head. Near the opening, Sammo Law arrives at Los Angeles airport in pursuit of the gang of car criminals and hoping to find his beautiful assistant, played by Kelly Hu, who has gone undercover. As he stands outside the terminal, he is persuaded to take an illegal taxi to the city centre. Instead of the city centre, however, he is taken to a remote area and robbed by a waiting gang. Throughout this sequence, those familiar with the star and his martial arts ability, as

well as the generic conventions being evoked by the sequence, are invited to smile knowingly. The audience is invited to 'know' what is going to happen. The pre-credit sequence has already shown Sammo's fighting skills so we are in a privileged position knowing more than the characters who are robbing him. The sequence is shot in such a way as to draw us into this position, suggesting that Sammo is about to explode. As the men surround him, he is placed in the centre of the frame, in the foreground and background the men stand within range of his deadly hands and feet. A head and shoulders shot shows Sammo looking around and judging distance, the camera then moves in closer so his face fills the shot. Then suddenly it cuts to a wide shot as the men get into their cars, drive off and leave Sammo standing alone. This sequence of shots reveals the high level of sophistication in operation within the premiere episode. Rather than simply giving the audience what they expect, it suggests that *Martial Law* will do even more; for example, a level of self-consciousness that will distinguish it from the show that it was designed to lead into, *Walker, Texas Ranger*, a series that takes itself very seriously. As a premiere episode, it is essential that *Shanghai Express* captures the feel of the series and shows what it will deliver to martial arts fans who might not normally watch a lot of network television.

The ways in which *Shanghai Express* engaged with audience knowledge and expectations operates in different ways for different sections of it's potential audience. Certainly, the programmes use of inter-textual knowledge offers various pleasures to different audience groups. For mainstream television fans, the premiere

episode neatly produces a popular programme that celebrates their taste. Sammo is persuaded to attend a recording of the popular show, *The Price is Right*, by one of his new American partners, Louis (Louis Mandylor). He is shown being selected to be a contestant and goes on to win the major prize. Sammo's enjoyment of American popular culture contrasts sharply with the attitude of his other partner, Dana Doyle (Tammy Lauren), who is shown as aloof and unable to relax. This is made clear by her attitude to *The Price is Right*, which she dismisses but Sammo embraces. This sequence is carefully included to help define Sammo as a likeable character for mainstream television viewers. It also suggests that *Martial Law*, whilst offering something new will not be critical of mainstream viewers or alienate them, but will give them something to enjoy. However, the programme also offers martial arts fans their own moments of inter-textual pleasure. The inclusion of *The Price is Right* also promotes one of CBS's other programmes.

Underestimation, as I have already discussed, is central to two of the premiere show's funniest scenes. In one sequence a tough detective mouths off at Sammo in a racist manner, and challenges him to beat him using any object he chooses. Sammo chooses a chalk eraser and duly covers the detective with chalk marks before finally leaving the eraser in his mouth. Here the audience is invited to laugh as soon as the challenge is issued and enjoy the loud mouth's comeuppance. This sequence also introduces a key element within the series: Sammo Law can make anything a deadly weapon, so great are his martial arts skills. This is also central the first martial arts set piece after Sammo's arrival in the USA. Sammo, Louis and Dana go to a suspect's

house to question him but, at the suggestion of the American cops who are still unsure of his usefulness, Sammo goes and relaxes in the garden. Whilst he is there a suspicious pair of Asian gardeners arrive wearing shoes whose soles are covered in large spikes designed to airiate lawns, and the pair attack Sammo. Once again, Sammo reacts with physical and mental agility, and the audience get to see a range of his martial arts moves. In a clear reference to his screen persona, he uses a small bench, something he is closely associated with from Hong Kong films such as *The Magnificent Butcher* (1979). The choreography and editing of the sequence are used to maximise the sense of speed and agility of Sammo's performance and crucially to incorporate comedy into the series. This sequence clearly illustrates the way in which *Martial Law* utilises a style of comedy Kung Fu normally associated in Hong Kong cinema and particularly the films of Jackie Chan. The premiere episode of *Martial Law* is therefore carefully designed to appeal to those viewers who might be 'looking in' to see if it is like a Jackie Chan movie. Furthermore, following this set piece, as the suspect is taken out of his house, he turns to Sammo and says, 'that was cool all that Bruce Lee stuff'. He also asks, 'where did you learn to do all that?', to which Sammo replies, 'Peking opera school'. Martial arts movie fans will know that Sammo Hung trained at the same opera school as Jackie Chan and so they can laugh knowingly at this line. However, it also indicates that his martial arts use is designed for entertainment, and moments such as this reflect the extent to which *Shanghai Express* wants to draw new viewers into the world of the show.

The initial response to *Martial Law* was positive. Sammo's physical appearance was commented upon by critics who were taken by the agility of a man of his size. Michele Greppi for the *New York Post* noted that 'the premiere episode is best when Sammo's dough-boy body is moving faster than seems possible. The fight sequences are often genuinely funny...we applaud any action show that closes with proof it doesn't take itself seriously and only wants to leave us laughing.'[12] Of course, Greppi is talking about the out-takes which accompanied the end credits of every episode, a tradition taken from Jackie Chan's films, and certainly something designed to show any unbelievers watching that it really is Sammo performing the acrobatic scenes they had just witnessed. It is the Hong Kong elements within *Martial Law* that may explain why it appealed to young males who normally did not watch that time slot. Ed Bark notes in the *Dallas Morning News* that, '*Martial Law* has been a steady Saturday night performer for CBS, winning its time period most weeks and attracting at least a smattering of young male viewers who otherwise ignore the network's older appeal line up.'[13]

However, half way through the first season of *Martial Law* the producers changed the show as a new direction was sought. Arsenio Hall was introduced as Tyrell Parker in episode 9, *How Sammo got his Groove Back,* and became a regular cast member. At this point the show became more clearly a copy of Chan's successful movie *Rush Hour*, which had teamed Chan with fast talking, Black American comedian Chris Rock. During the second season the changes to the show's initial blueprint became even greater as new producers Lee Goldberg and William Rabkin wielded more

influence. This highlights the power of producers in the US television industry. It is worth remembering that Newcomb and Alley argue that it is producers who are the driving force in television, and they have the overwhelming ability to make changes[14]. Goldberg and Rabkin's changes included dropping regular actors Tom Wright, Tammy Lauren and Louis Mandylor. The effect was to make the show more like other American television cop shows and less like the newer Hollywood action movies that were displaying the impact of Hong Kong cinema.. The influence of Hong Kong action began to lessen and the high levels of physical comedy, so fresh in the early episodes became less and less central. The cancellation of the show after the second season marks another lost opportunity for US martial arts TV. However, the early episodes of *Martial Law* tantalise us with what might have been.

Notes:

[1] David Bordell, *Planet Hong Kong: popular cinema and the art of entertainment* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19.

[2] Patrice Filchy, *Dynamics of Modern Communication: the shaping and impact of New Communication technologies* (London: Sage, 1995), 164.

[3] *Longstreet* was made by the Paramount in 1971.

[4] Bruce Thomas, *Bruce Lee: fighting spirit* (Berkeley: Frog Books, 1994), 144.

[5] Thomas, *Fighting Spirit,* 144.

[6] Clint C. Wilson and Felix Gutierrez, *Race, Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Sage, 1995), 103.

[7] Yvonne Tasker, '*Kung Fu*: re-orientating the television western'. In Bill Osgerby and Anna Gough-Yates (eds.) *Action TV: tough guys, smooth operators and foxy chicks* (London: Routledge, 2001), 115.

[8] John Walker (ed.) *Halliwell's Film Guide 2000* (London: Harper Collins Entertainment, 2000), 552.

[9] Stokes, Lisa Odham and Michael Hoover, *City on Fire: Hong Kong cinema* (London: Verso, 1999), 129.

[10] Stokes and Hoover, *City on Fire*, 316.

[11] For more on this revival see Leon Hunt *Kung Fu Cult Masters: from Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003).

[12] Michelle Greppi, 'Review', *New York Times*

[13] Ed Bark '*Martial Law* star Sammo Hung is refreshingly open'. In *Dallas Morninh News*, 28/1/1999, np.

[14] Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, *The Producers Medium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983)

12. 'Hip Hop Kung Fu': American martial arts movies in the 21st century

The recent US comedy, *Undercover Brother* (2002), makes the links between low budget, black action films of the 1970s, Blaxploitation, and martial arts explicit. It does this via a number of clearly intertextual moments. Early on in the film there is a sequence where the character of Undercover Brother meets iconic black martial arts actor Jim Kelly, co-star of *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and star of *Black Belt Jones* (1973). Towards the end of the film, as it moves towards its climax, there is a spoof of the famous and instantly recognizable Coliseum duel between Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris from *Way of the Dragon* (1972). The makers of *Undercover Brother* clearly assumed that audiences would understand the link between black action and martial arts and 'get' the references. Indeed, one of the key elements in the creation of the character of Undercover Brother, and something that contributes to its 70s nostalgia, is his supposed martial arts abilities. Behind *Undercover Brother* is an assumption that everybody knows that black, urban, super heroes know their martial arts moves. *Undercover Brother* highlights the strong links that exist within American popular culture between martial arts films and urban, black America.. The popularity of martial arts movies with urban black audiences, the celebration of martial arts films by recent rap artists such as The Wu Tang Clan, and the influence of Hong Kong practitioners, from Jackie Chan to Yuen Woo-ping, on Hollywood action movies, has not been lost on a number of US producers. In turn, this has led to a range of films that, I would argue, have helped reformulate American action and martial arts movies in the 21st century. In this chapter I want to consider such films and explore how a

number of recent US films have utilised the connections between martial arts and a contemporary revival of so-called blaxploitation cinema.

Today we see supposed martial arts skills practised in films as varied as mainstream big budget productions such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Charlie's Angels* (2000) to children's entertainment such as *3 Ninjas* (1992) and its sequels. The inclusion, and in particular the idea of kung fu, first attained a significant place on US screens in the 1970s. David Desser argues that the popularity of Hong Kong kung fu films in American hit an all time high when, 'On May 16, 1973, *Fists of Fury*, *Deep Thrust: the hand of death*, and *Five Fingers of Death* were ranked 1, 2 and 3, respectively, on *Variety*'s list of the week's top box-office draws'[1]. The popularity of martial arts films at that time greatly informed the way in which producers approached action cinema. For example, the popularity of martial arts with black audiences meant that when Warner Bros. were setting up their reaction to that popularity, the Bruce Lee project *Enter the Dragon*, they chose to cast an up-and-coming black action star, Jim Kelly in a key supporting role. Desser notes that, 'Warner Brothers realized with particular clarity that the blaxploitation audience and the emerging martial arts audience were rather consonant'[2]. Therefore, in a reciprocal way martial arts action appeared in blaxploitation films such as *Superfly* (1972), *Cleopatra Jones* (1973), and *Three the Hard Way* (1974). The link between blaxploitation and martial arts was, it can be argued, created as a reaction to the popularity of martial arts films among urban, disaffected social groups. Elsewhere, Desser argues that,

> the appeal of martial-arts movies was to inner-city and rural audiences, to African American, Latino, and Asian American youth nation-wide; and to the younger remnants of the counterculture...for audiences of color, the sight of Asian men, and women, starring in action packed movies filled with attractive and dynamic heroes and suave and sophisticated villains was welcome relief from the years of stereotypical characterizations and outright exploitation of their like.[3]

The cycle of black action films from the 1970s, and the reasons for their appeal to audiences, can also offer an important model that can be used to consider the cycle of martial arts films produced in America during the early 21st century, and their popularity with urban audiences. This group of film has been labelled by their co-producer Dan Cracchiolo as 'hip hop kung fu'[4]. In this chapter, I want to examine this cycle of films, tracing links between martial arts movies, blaxploitation and action at the start of the 21st century. These films include: *Romeo must Die* (2000), *Exit Wounds* (2001) and *Cradle 2 the Grave* (2003).

As already discussed in relation to exploitation cinema, the bottom line of any cycle of films is the desire to make a profit. The martial arts based films that I shall discuss here are no exception to that rule. These films clearly reveal the ways in which producers will try and assemble a 'package' that will deliver what they think particular audiences with specific tastes. Smaller scale films, such as martial arts movies, might not always seeking to make blockbuster type profits but are seen by producers as having a strong potential to reach demarcated audiences and return a profit on smaller investments. As Producer Joel Silver observes, actors like Steven Seagal have a strong 'urban' audience if the right vehicle can be found[5]. In this sense, they operate on a lower financial level than Hollywood's major productions, but they still attempt to create a 'marketable' mix on a lower budget.

Martial arts films have played an important if often unacknowledged part within mainstream American cinema. There have been a number of successful cycles including the Ninja films of the 1980s. For example, *Enter the Ninja* (1981), *American Ninja* (1985), *American Ninja 2* (1987), *American Ninja 3* (1989), *American Ninja 4: the Annihilation* (1991) and *American Ninja 5*, (1993). Similarly, *The Karate Kid* films and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* films showed that there was a significant audience for films with strong martial arts content. Each of these films conforming to one of David Desser's major variations within, what he calls, the American martial arts genre. He argues that there are five main trends within martial arts films: those that have an arena setting; law enforcement films; juvenile adventure fantasies; video/cartoon fantasies and science fiction films[6]. The most recent successful trend, the 'hip hop kung fu' cycle, may be broadly described as falling within the law enforcement variation. However, this attempt to classify these films may miss some significant questions raised by the changes in US cinema more generally between the 1980s and the early 20th century. For example, there have been some significant shifts from the successful films law enforcement based films of Chuck Norris in the 1980s and those of Steven Seagal in the 1990s. Both of whom might be described as the key figures in this variation of the martial arts film, they have been able to present their martial arts differently as FX have become incorporated into this style of filmmaking.

One of the main shifts in the law enforcement cycle and US martial arts film more generally, has been the higher profile of recent releases. After the cross-over success of films such as Seagal's *Under Siege* (1992) and the increased inclusion of martial arts action in mainstream, big budget films, this latest cycle of 'hip hop kung fu' martial arts films has had the potential to wield much more box-office clout. Whilst these films may still derive their narrative and generic structures from lower budget and exploitation movies as explored in previous chapters on *Forced to Fight* and Cynthia Rothrock, they can no longer simply be seen as 'essentially low budget, formulaic films that are usually released in regional play dates or, more often, direct-to-video and pay-TV'[7]. For example, *Cradle 2 the Grave* was able to command an impressive $17.1 million over its opening weekend and found itself at the top of the box-office charts[8]. This fact, combined with the international potential of transnational stars such as Jet Li, meant that martial arts film now had the ability to make an impact on audiences beyond their more recent direct to DVD fan base.

I now want to consider what elements make up the package of this recent martial arts based cycle of action movies, 'hip hop kung fu', as this will assist an understanding of the differences between these and earlier examples of the law enforcement variation. Firstly, a key star attached to the project. As I have argued in earlier chapters, in the world of martial arts movies certain stars have a very strong pulling power. Whilst, this might not always transcend into consistent mainstream success, it does deliver a strong primary audience who will go to their movies, and in particular will purchase or rent them on video and DVD. Even as martial arts action

moves into mainstream films there is still an appetite for what is perceived as 'authentic'. It is not surprising then that this recent cycle has used established martial arts performers, such as Jet Li and Steven Seagal, actors who have a very loyal fan base. However, other recent releases such as *Bulletproof Monk* (2003), have utilised Asian performers, who are not associated with martial arts, such as Chow Yun-fat, but do have a reasonably strong profile in the USA. As with many areas of cinema, the right star in the right style of film is still a key factor in collecting together this marketable package[9].

Alongside an established martial arts figure 'hip hop kung fu films' have, as their label suggests, cast rap stars alongside their martial arts expert in order to appeal to a wider potential audience than if they had included just the top line stars, and such performers clearly helping put the hip hop in these films. Of course, it would be simplistic to say that it is the inclusion of these performers who open these films up to just black audiences. This is due to the fact that rap and hip hop music, in the early 21st century, is acknowledged to be consumed by a wide range of white audiences. As S. Craig Watkins acknowledges, by the 1990s, 'young white males were emerging as major consumers of black popular cultural products', and that not surprisingly, 'It was this reconfigured popular culture marketplace that the film industry inevitably noticed'[10]. In films produced at the beginning of the 21st century there is an interesting shift from the blaxploitation of 1970s action films and their inclusion of well known music artists to appeal to urban black audiences. It might be argued that the appeal of none African American martial arts performers has traditionally

attracted a black urban audience, and continues to do so. The casting of black rappers attracts a young white audience, hence the appearance of DMX in *Romeo Must Die*, *Exit Wounds* and *Cradle 2 the Grave*, and Jah Rule and Kurupt in *Half Past Dead* , is more complex than their simply being there to attract black audiences. In addition to these well known rap artists, R 'n' B star Aaliyah appears as the female lead in *Romeo Must Die*. Her inclusion offers another representation of 'street' culture and suggests that the producers of the film see all contemporary black music as, in some way, signifying 'hip hop'. As Watkins noted in relation to the emergence of what he terms the 'ghetto action film cycle' of the late 1990s, it was the film industry's,

> response to a rapidly changing youth culture and marketplace. This response was not unprecedented to the extent that it was a direct effort to appeal to the film industry's most stable market – young moviegoers- even if it was based on social currents that were clearly not of the film industry's own making. The job of the film industry executives was to select scripts that translated the popular appeal of hip hop, especially hard-core, into saleable film product. If minimizing risk is one of the central principles in developing media product for mass consumption, it should come as no great surprise, then, that film industry executives embraced film projects that could be directly marketed to a cross section of youth by appropriating the language, style, and sensibilities of hip hop culture, and especially the allure of hard-core.[11]

The hip hop kung fu cycle fits easily into Watkins argument. Through the careful balancing of casting decisions, they were able to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, without diluting the initial attraction of urban black settings and culture.

The other significant element that these inclusion of rap and r 'n' b artists bring to these productions is their ability to contribute to the film's soundtrack, and importantly this offers the opportunity for the producers to licence and sell soundtrack albums to music consumers beyond the cinema. Again, this is something that it might

be argued drew on the traditions established in the blaxploitation era of the 1970s, where films often included artists such as Isaac Hayes and Curtis Mayfield in cameo roles as well as writing the music used for the work. This is not, however, simply a marketing decision. In cinematic terms it assists in creating a believable urban atmosphere on screen. Today, for many audiences rap is perceived as *the* contemporary urban musical form, as soul and funk had been in the early to mid-1970s. This fact contributes to these films offering a feeling of credibility and authenticity. The rap acts bring this to the 'dangerous' urban American settings as the martial artist do to the hand to hand combat sequences.

The hip hop kung fu films also share a similar use of *mise-en-scene*. This fact is not surprising when one considers that three of them, *Romeo Must Die, Exit Wounds* and *Cradle 2 the Grave*, are directed by the same person, Andrzej Bartkowiak. A former cinematographer, he has worked widely in the field of action movies, shooting, amongst others, *Speed* (1995), *Dante's Peak* (1997), *US Marshals* (1998) and, significantly, *Lethal weapon 4* (1998). The latter featuring the Hollywood debut of major Hong Kong martial arts star, Jet Li. Bartkowiak's cinematographers, visual eye has enabled him to create brooding and atmospheric settings for his films that have included such typical cinematic urban spaces as night clubs, warehouses and dimly lit back streets and alleyways. All of these are populated by designer clad, gun toting gangsters, most of who are African American. Indeed, the visual style of these films owes a lot to the music videos of directors such as Hype Williams and Paul Hunter, who made their names creating the opulent video worlds for a number of

black music artists including Notorious BIG, Method Man, Puff Daddy, Aaliyah and DMX. Indeed, Williams went on to cast many of them in his 1998 feature debut the hip hop gangster film *Belly*. These music videos, so closely associated with the creation of a fictional world inhabited by contemporary black American gangsters and rappers, suggest a template that a number of the hip hop kung fu films choose to follow. A key element in this representation is the distinctive costumes used in both the videos and the films that represent this urban world.

Costume is, of course, a key element in the creation of a films mise-en-scene. As Stella Bruzzi has argued, it played an important part in 70s blaxploitation films, and does so in the early 21st century. She argues that in the 70s, 'Blaxploitation films are distinctive for their extreme fetishisation of clothes, and the significance of appearance to the heroes' identities. In *Shaft, Superfly* and *Cleopatra Jones*, costumes function as important signifiers that transfer to the spectacular the success and desirability of the protagonists who wear them'[12]. The wealth and excessive image of the contemporary rappers and the gangsters they play in film and videos is equally reflected through their costume. However, in these latter, hip hop, examples they sport designer wear that comes from the fashion ranges of those actual performers or others in the field such as Sean 'Puffy' Coombs. On a political level these trappings, and conspicuous display, of wealth contrast with the black leather coat of John Shaft, which at the level of *mise-en-scene*, linked the character to the fashions associated with organisations such as The Black Panthers.

In a manner suggested by Watkins, these hip hop kung fu films are drawing together cinematic elements that are highly marketable in a manner that the earlier 'ghetto action' movies had. In the hip hop kung fu examples under discussion here, these include: reworking genre, familiar film stars, young music performers, contemporary music and those exploitation staples, sex and violence. It is not surprising then that such films achieved a significant level of box-office success. *Romeo Must Die* was the first major hit of the cycle. Marketed, in the frenzy of a post-*Matrix* cashing in period, as 'from the producer of *The Matrix*', that is Joel Silver. It was also the first lead role in a US film for Jet Li following, as noted, his supporting role as the villain in *Lethal Weapon 4*. Clearly designed to appeal to fans of martial arts the casting of Li is of great significance. His 'authenticity' as a martial arts star derived from his appearances in Hong Kong films such as *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991), a film that had helped re-invent the kung fu genre in Hong Kong[13]. Li therefore promised 'real' martial arts action for a general audience, even if his actuality is often questioned by hardcore martial arts fans. Leon Hunt notes that in some circles his style, with its emphasis on wire work, was dismissed as 'flight' rather than 'fight'[14]. The fact that the producers were aware of the various martial arts audiences' demands for authenticity is reflected in their employment of Li's long-time collaborator and fight designer Corey Yuen as fight choreographer for the film. Indeed, Silver admits that he had first become aware of Li as a star from his appearances in the *Once Upon a Time in China* series. He had already used Hong Kong kung fu legend Yuen Woo-ping as fight choreographer on *The Matrix* and so was aware of what technicians from that cinematic tradition may bring to the project.

Clearly then, the film was conceived as combining elements from Hong Kong cinema as well as more traditional American action elements such as shoot outs and car chases. However, it was the style that Hunt terms, 'MTV-style Hong Kong action'[15], of films such as *A Chinese Ghost Story* that appealed to Silver, not the 'old-school' style so beloved of fans of Hong Kong cinema. This choice indicates that once again that the producers of the film were packaging it in a manner that was designed to appeal to a potential cross over audience as well as that Hong Kong fan body. The box-office, if not critical, success of the film proved that, in this sense, the film was a success.

12.1 Re-Inventing Seagal: Exit Wounds

Following the success of *Romeo Must Die*, it is not surprising that producer Joel Silver and his team gathered many of the same personnel to work on another urban set film with a hip hop soundtrack and martial arts action. *Exit Wounds* saw director Andrezj Bartkowiak return, as does Rapper DMX and other prominent cast members Isaiah Washington and Anthony Anderson. Instead of Jet Li, US martial arts star Steven Seagal takes the lead role. Once again, the soundtrack includes music form DMX and other rap artists in a manner that offers cross media marketing of the product. The story is once more typical cop movie fare, as a corrupt precinct is cleaned up by a grizzled old cop with the help of a character who we are led to think is a drug dealer, but who really wants to get the cops who framed his innocent brother and sent him to prison. Again, a over familiar plot which could easily have been used

for a very low budget martial arts films in the 1990s is given higher production values by the Joel Silver team. Whilst still relatively a low budget film by Hollywood standards, the production values of *Exit Wounds* are certainly a cut above those of the Chuck Norris films that were at the centre of martial arts production in the 1980s, and which Desser sees as the precursors to Seagal's work. This generic blueprint can be seen from the outset as cop Orin Boyd, played by Seagal, is disciplined by his boss for his actions in saving the US vice President. Boyd, as many cinema cops before him, does the job but never sticks by the rules and is always at odds with his superiors. This is a typical set-up familiar from films such as *Dirty Harry* in the early 1970s, and one that was replicated in a number of blaxploitation and martial arts films since then. *Exit Wounds* marks a significant divergence from *Romeo must Die* in the casting of Steven Seagal in the lead. Seagal had already combined with a black co-lead (Keenan Ivory Wayans) for his 1996 film *The Glimmer Man* but was to re-launch his generic stardom with the success of this project. However, his presence meant that the urban setting of the film had to be re-worked slightly, as his character was very different to the one presented by Jet Li in *Romeo Must Die*. Alongside this, due to his colour and age his character was less able to occupy the spaces, such as clubs and music shops, that Li had entered..

Significantly impacting on this area was Seagal's martial arts screen persona, which is very different to Jet Li's. His films, from the breakthrough *Nico / Above the Law* (1987) to the highly successful *Under Siege* (1992) to less popular works such as *Fire Down Below* (1997), have been straightforward combinations of traditional

American action genres, usually cop based but sometimes espionage and military, with added martial arts action. His characters within these had usually fitted generic types, such as the maverick cop. They also were predominantly in the realist style of Hollywood, utilising close hand to hand combat and not the elaborate wire style stunts Li brought to *Romeo Must Die*. However, the stunts had been calculated as one of the contributors to that films success, so the production team for *Exit Wounds* included one of Yuen Woo-ping's fight choreography team, Dion Lam as martial arts expert. This entailed Seagal moving away from his usual Aikido based style and his embracing the wire work related kung fu style that was now associated with martial arts on screen thanks to high profile successes from *The Matrix* to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). In the words of Lam 'we got Steven doing some stuff he hadn't done before'[16]. Indeed they did, as the actor had to experience wire work and offer high kicks for the camera. These changes may seem small in the context of an action based film, but they do indicate that martial arts on US screens in the 21st century were changing. Once again, it had become associated heavily with the idea of kung fu and Chinese martial arts as it had been in the early 1970s. This rather than the kickboxing styles of Jean-Claude van Damme and Don 'the dragon' Wilson that had been the dominant style of the 1990s, or the Karate of Chuck Norris which had been popular in the 1980s and this difference further shows that martial arts films cannot be simply grouped together because they contain martial arts. Distinctions exist within films that utilise such fighting skills and those differences often indicate other shifts and changes within this type of action cinema.

Seagal's willingness to embrace the rap connection revealed this shift, and its place in the martial arts film formula is further reflected in his next recent film, *Half Past Dead* (2003), which is clearly designed along the same lines as the other successful hip hop kung fu films. In this case the rappers involved are Jah Rule and Kurupt. Once again, the film has much in common with previous US martial arts films in that it utilises a familiar setting, the prison. This link with previous US martial arts films is perhaps not surprising as its writer and director, Don Michael Paul had worked on TV martial arts programme *Renegade*, which had adapted a range of familiar martial arts set-ups for the small screen. In *Half Past Dead* the main setting is a prison, where, as the chapter on *Forced to Fight* indicates, the opportunities for martial arts action are clear. Seagal, once again, plays a character that shares a number of similarities with his previous roles, in particular in this case the *Under Siege* films, as he is underestimated continually by his foes. This, of course, is another martial arts film plot staple.

Other elements in the film are clearly attempting to reproduce the elements of *Romeo Must Die* and *Exit Wounds*. A rap heavy soundtrack accompanies the action, and heavily features the films performers, and the main rap performers wear a series of designer outfits, most notably the almost obligatory long, *Matrix* style overcoats. However, there are also clear links to the American tradition of martial arts action movies. Rather than importing personnel this film uses an established US fight choreographer, Art Camacho, someone who has previously worked extensively in the low budget, exploitation field with the likes of Don Wilson. *Half Past Dead* shows

how the hip hop kung fu influence is now becoming more apparent in a range of productions beyond those of Joel Silver, as even though it resembles his works had nothing to do with this production. The shift represented by these films reveals how US martial arts films are able to change to accommodate new influences, even those from beyond US cinema.

However, Silver himself was unlikely to walk away from the chance to repeat his success and he was back organising hip hop kung fu films with *Cradle 2 the Grave* (2003), the next significant entry in this cycle of new style US martial arts films. Once again the Joel Silver team is reunited with lead player Jet Li returning. Once again, Li brought with him his own influential fight choreographer, Corey Yuen. In addition the film cast exploitation martial arts movie and television star Mark Dacascos, and *Martial Law* co-star Kelly Hu. The coming together of older US elements and the new influences from Hong Kong further reflected in this casting. The box-office success of this film proved that the cycle still had 'legs'. So with the undoubted success of these hip hop kung fu films is it possible to see them as more than simply a reformulating of the older 1970s blaxploitation model for the 21st century?

12.2 Martial Arts, Blaxploitation and Politics: then and now

When considering black action films of the early 1970s certain writers make clear distinctions between the independently produced films, most notably *Sweet*

Sweetback's Baadasss Song (1971), and those made under the banner of the major studios, for example, *Shaft* (MGM, 1971) and *Superfly* (WB, 1972)[17]. This distinction between what they seem to argue is a potentially more radical independent film and compromised studio financed pictures has been rehearsed in relation to a range of films that are concerned with representing social and political issues and concerns such as race and gender. Reid claims that '*Shaft* appealed to a mass audience whom I call black popular, or unpoliticized, audience'[18]. The strategy of targeting a primarily black audience is reflected in the fact that MGM hired a black-orientated advertising organisation UniWorld to initially promote the film. However, like the Hip Hop Kung Fu films under consideration here, it can be argued that *Shaft* was able to appeal to crossover audiences outside the black community. Reid observes how this might have been the case, and in doing so is critical of MGM's creation of John Shaft. He argues that,

> MGM, like other major studios, invested black heroes with mainstream values. In doing so, it did not create mythic black heroes. Instead, like the doll-makers who painted Barbie's face brown, MGM merely created black-skinned replicas of the white heroes of action films'.[19]

He goes on to argue that *Shaft* clearly aspires to escape from Harlem and the blackness that that space signified. He indicates that Shaft's only friends are a middle class black family and a white police officer, and, he lives and socialises in the mixed area of Greenwich Village. Yearwood makes a similar criticism when he argues that the 'apparatus of the institutionalized film industry operates to determine a particular use of cinema as consumerist entertainment in which the hero-star functions as a marketable commodity.' [20] Ultimately, for these critics the fact that the films emerge from within the mainstream of film production makes them unable to escape the

assimilating power of Hollywood, blunting their potentially radical edges. Yearwood and Reid's criticism of films such as *Shaft* offers some food for thought when considering the recent cycle of hip hop kung fu films, inaugurated by *Romeo Must Die*, which also offer interesting images of black heroes.

Romeo Must Die is an inter-racial gangster film that incorporates martial arts action. It has at its centre a *Romeo and Juliet* style romance between Jet Li, son of the Chinese gang leader and Aaliyah, daughter of the African American gang. Whilst on the surface this might seem to confirm to David Desser's assertion that most martial arts films are left leaning, the liberal perspective offered by the romance is somewhat compromised by other representations within the film. The conflict within the plot of *Romeo Must Die* involves the aspiration of the rival mob leaders to gain the contract to build a new stadium for, and therefore have the opportunity to become involved in, a National Football League franchise. Issak, played by Delroy Lindo, is desperate to move his operation into the financial mainstream. This economic desire to be equal to the white entrepreneurs who will front the NFL franchise is mocked by the film in an early sequence when he attempts to play golf. This telling sequence presents him as a poor player and he looks uncomfortable in the golfing attire he has chosen to wear. He is clearly no good at this traditionally white and middle class game. The inability of him to play by white capitals rules reflects his inability to assimilate his organisation into the mainstream. Indeed, it is his willingness to embrace the law of legitimate business that is seen as weakness by Mac (Isiah Washington), his right hand man, and leads to his downfall and finally death. There is a suggestion that

African Americans should stay in their place, leaving the real economics to the Ivy League graduates. In a similarly problematic way, the Chinese gang are represented as more shifty and willing to operate in the grey area between illegal and legitimate business. In the world of *Romeo Must Die* non white businessmen have guilty secrets and skeletons in their closets. However, whilst it would be easy to try and draw the same conclusions about, *Exit Wounds*, the next hip hop kung fu film Silver Pictures offered, on close examination it would be unwise.

Indeed, the image of the black entrepreneur in *Exit Wounds* is very different. Desser has noted that many martial arts films are left leaning, a challenge to the assumption that they are in some way reactionary in their politics. Whilst a closer examination of many of the low budget martial arts films of the 1980s and 1990s might render this argument difficult to sustain generally, as I have already noted in this study, some films such as *Forced to Fight* were able to offer positive or progressive perspectives on issues related to race and gender within the B movie martial arts formulas. Perhaps the most consistent left/liberal leaning films are those involvjng Steven Seagal. From the class consciousness of *Nico / Above the Law* to the widely dismissed and mocked environmentalism of *On Deadly Ground* (1994) and *The Patriot* (1999), his films have consistently attempted to adopt a more liberal perspective. I would argue that this tradition within Seagal's work is also present within *Exit Wounds*. Screenwriter Ed Horowitz had already suggested his liberal credentials with the screenplay for *On Deadly Ground*, and here the focus for those concerns is the representation of the central black character Latrell Watkins (who we

later find is really called Leon Rollins) played by DMX. He is perhaps the most significant representation of a black character in the hip hop kung fu cycle, and the film uses the audiences' knowledge of action cinema, and its general construction of black characters, in a challenging way.

At first, as Latrell Watkins is spotted by Seagal's character, Boyd, he is involved in what seems like a drug exchange. Boyd intervenes and Watkins escapes. The audience has seen many images of black drug dealers and so accepts him in this conventional role. We assume his designer clothes, luxury apartment and expensive car are the profits from his illegal activities. His movements are backed by a hip hop score that is meant to enhance the 'street' aspect of the character. However, half way through the film we find that he is not a drug dealer at all, but a vigilante attempting to reveal the corruption within the police force. He shifts from villain to hero. His money, we are informed, has come from his legitimate internet activities that have made him a 'trillionare'. Watkins, who we now know is really Leon Rollins, becomes a interestingly complex character due to the films ability to use the audiences assumptions that he would be a drug dealer. Like John Shaft before him, Rollins understands the space occupied by both black and white in society, but he uses this knowledge to resist stereotyping. This is perhaps best expressed in the sequence when he goes to a dealership to buy a new car. Watkins makes a fool of a black, middle class, salesman for making exactly the same assumptions as the audience. Watkins enters with a friend, wearing a black vest and a gold chain, and the black salesman says to his white partner, 'don't worry bud, I've got them, they are my people', he

then addresses them as 'homies' making clear his assumptions that they are 'street' guys. However, when Watkins excited friend begins to shout he is becomes embarrassed. The salesman wants to talk the talk but he also wants them to know how to behave in the space usually occupied by rich white people. However, whilst he is embarrassed about them he also wants to exploit their wealth. This is captured when Watkins associate turns the car radio loud he the salesman shouts 'can you turn the music off brother!'. Rollins meanwhile quietly finds the car he wants on his own as he knows all about these top-end vehicles, contradicting the salesman's assumptions, and merely says 'this is it', his coolness contrasting with the salesman's desperation. When he finds he is not getting the commission for the car he exclaims 'homies! I'm your man' and attempts a bark. He is clearly someone to laugh at because of his assumptions about young black men. However, I would argue a sequence such as this wants to challenge the audiences assumptions as well as the characters. His purchase of an expensive car becomes a signifier for his being a drug dealer, but his later actions challenge such an easy reading of this purchase. The sequence is complex in the way that it works both textually and intertextually, assumptions being based on a range of cultural images of young black men, to question many of the ideas about wealth and black entrepreneurs.

This sequence from *Exit Wounds* shows that whilst there are a number of links between the films that make-up the hip hop kung fu cycle, each should also be taken on its own merits. The ways in which each film engages with contemporary social and political issues, on close examination, reveals the core of these differences. There

are also links between these films and earlier music related representations of African Americans in the blaxploitation cycle of the 1970s. However, once again, whilst these links exist one has to be aware that the recent films in their engagement with urban black culture cannot, and indeed do not, simply repeat the perspectives of earlier historical moments. These films draw, once again, on the links between black popular culture and Chinese kung fu. However, they do so in a transnational cinematic world, where products from the east are readily available, and this appropriation takes on a different look. It is in the sphere of martial arts cinema that these cross fertilizations most readily take place, and for that reason the hip hop kung fu films deserve sustained critical attention. It is only through such detailed analysis that the different perspectives offered by each, and what they are saying about contemporary American society and contemporary American filmmaking, can be fully understood.

Notes:

[1] David Desser, 'The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong cinema's first American reception'. In Poshek Fu and David Desser (eds.) *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, arts, identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20.

[2] Desser, 'Kung Fu Craze', 25.

[3] David Desser, 'The Martial Arts Film in the 1990s'. In Wheeler Winston Dixon (ed.) *Film Genre 2000: new critical essays* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 104-105.

[4] Dan Cracchiolo interviewed on the DVD release of *Exit Wounds* as part of *The making of Exit Wounds,* 2002.

[5] Joel Silver interviewed on the DVD release of *Exit Wounds* as part of *The Making of Exit Wounds*, 2002.

[6] Desser, 'Martial Arts', 75.

[7] Desser, 'Martial Arts', 79.

[8] Screendaily.com

[9] This is explored at more length in Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

[10] S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: hip hop culture and the production of black cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 187.

[11] Watkins, *Representing*, 187.

[12] Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and identity in the movies* (London: Rooutledge, 1997), 97-98.

[13] This is detailed in Tony williams, 'Under "Western Eyes": the personal odyssey of Huaing Fei-hong in *Once upon a Time in China*. In *Cinema Journal*, 40: 1, 2000, 3-24.

[14] Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: from Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press), 27.

[15] Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters*, 27.

[16] Dion Lam interviewed in *The Making of Exit Wounds* on the *Exit Wounds* DVD.

[17] See for example, Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[18] Reid, *Redefining,* 83.

[19] Reid, *Redefining,* 84.

[20] Yearwood, 1982, 48.

[12] Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and identity in the movies* (London: Rooutledge, 1997), 97-98.

[13] This is detailed in Tony williams, 'Under "Western Eyes": the personal odyssey of Huaing Fei-hong in *Once upon a Time in China*. In *Cinema Journal*, 40: 1, 2000, 3-24.

[14] Leon Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters: from Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London: Wallflower Press), 27.

[15] Hunt, *Kung Fu Cult Masters*, 27.

[16] Dion Lam interviewed in *The Making of Exit Wounds* on the *Exit Wounds* DVD.

[17] See for example, Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[18] Reid, *Redefining,* 83.

[19] Reid, *Redefining,* 84.

[20] Yearwood, 1982, 48.

13. Conclusion

The preceding case studies show that accepted definitions of categories such as genre need to be interrogated against the actual films that are assumed to belong in them. They also suggest that these defining characteristics must also be placed against the very particular contexts of production of each film or cycle of films. The necessity of this is further revealed by the specific inflections that such seemingly easily defined genres such as 'horror' or 'martial arts' take on when produced in contexts that the dominant critical writing does not associate with these categories.

The detailed exploration of both Spanish horror and US martial arts films has shown that often generic definitions themselves serve particular interests. As my discussion of Kinder and Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas's[1] miss identification of Spanish horror films as being from other genres suggests, the assertion of generic traits and place within such categories needs to be reconsidered in light of an analysis of the films themselves. Such a process often reveals that these films really should be re-assigned and the assumptions behind their misclassification challenged.

This process of detailed analysis also reveals that films that are dismissed as politically reactionary may in fact operate in a very different way. Again, an acknowledgement of the specific contexts of production, along with an acceptance of the fact that the specific historical moments that produced the films will impact upon the potential politically informed readings of such work. The studies of both

Cannibal Man and *Forced to Fight* show that within cycles that might indeed offer alternatives to the dominant ideological positions associated with these genres.

The combination of approaches that I have utilised in this work shows a willingness to cross somewhat problematic academic divides. I combine a number of traditions, both textual, such as *mise-en-scene* and genre based analysis; with industrially based work that accepts that the production context plays an important role in any meaning a film might offer its audiences. Alongside this I draw on the idea that fans and audience groups with specific investments in texts may also impact both on their potential textual meaning and their construction. By focussing on critically marginal types of filmmaking these factors become clearer.

Finally, this study has shown that styles, cycles or genres of film, as well as the individual works that exist within them potentially have an enourmous amount to say about both the historical moment they were made and the ways in which they have, or have not, been consumed since. This is as much the case for the works I focus on as it is for the accepted classics of Hollywood and World Cinema

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Notes:

[1] Marsha Kinder *Blood Cinema: the reconstruction of national identity in Spain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and Barry Jordan and Rikki Morgan-

Tamosunas *Contemporary Spanish Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

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