

# Debbie Does Halloween (1987)

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The mingling of violence and eroticism in the contemporary exploitation film has received a great deal of attention in terms of its possible deleterious effects on society, but little attempt has been made to account for this mingling in its discursive specificity. The correspondence between violence and eroticism is immediately broadened to become a sociological phenomenon, neglecting that in this instance it is first a cinematic one. My aim is to offer an explanation of this correspondence in terms of points of continuity between the genres of horror and pornography. This correspondence is not simply a matter of violence encountering eroticism but of a complex relation between two film genres that despite their many differences share a similar concern to explore the limits of the visible.

I should stress that violence and eroticism are subject to very different articulations within the genres of horror and pornography. Very broadly, violence tends to be confined to the theatricality of sado-masochism within pornography while it is manifestly apocalyptic within horror. Eroticism tends to be divorced from all consequence or social context within pornography (largely an iconography of coupling organs), while within horror it is subject to a paranoid reflection beyond the limits of its ordinary functioning - instead of the utopian fuck, we have rape and lethal phallic metaphors, awful pregnancy and threatening voyeurism. In short, eroticism is always linked to violence in horror, while a fragile separation between the two is maintained within pornography. Thus in terms of their representation of violence and eroticism the two genres very rarely overlap.

How then are the two genres to be related? I shall suggest three points of continuity that have their basis in specific cinematic features of each:

1. **Point of View:** pornographic narration is characterized by an omniscient voyeurism. Only very rarely is the point-of-view adopted that of one of the characters in the scene. Pornography observes very closely but maintains a crucial distance. The condition that nothing escapes it is that it scrupulously avoids participation. Horror, on the other hand, shifts easily between a variety of points of view - between an unmarked omniscience and a foreboding omniscience (commonly a slow tracking shot), between omniscience and character point-of-view, between literal and psychological point-of-view. The point of continuity between the two genres is that quite often horror employs the voyeuristic point-of-view of pornography, allowing us for instance an illicit gaze at a naked woman or a pair of entwined sophomores, only to then drift into foreboding omniscience or the bogeyman's point-of-view. Thus we slip from a soft-core porn voyeurism to an awareness of threat and even to a partial implication in that other gaze. Perhaps then it is within horror that pornography loses any last vestige of imagined innocence.

2. **The Explicit:** hard-core pornography and contemporary horror are both notoriously explicit. Conventional wisdom, with its preference for suggestion rather than revelation, regards this as a sign of imaginative failure on the part of both the film-maker and the viewer. But perhaps it suggests another form of imagination - a transgressive imagination determined to pursue the forbidden image even to the point of invisibility, to the point at which it is precisely the image that is at stake, that risks annihilation. For what is it that appears explicitly within the two genres? The privileged image is that of the body transgressed, either through erotic opening or violent laceration, ecstasy or decay. Bataille would no doubt recognize here a common theme of sacrifice. We approach another's pleasure, another's death, recognizing in it our own, only to withdraw at the last instant - precisely in order to see, to preserve an image, rather than to slip ourselves into the darkness.

Thus it is necessary, at any cost, for man to live at the moment when he truly dies, or it is necessary for him to live with the impression of truly dying. This difficulty foreshadows the necessity of spectacle, or generally of representation, without the repetition of which we could

remain foreign to and ignorant of death, as animals apparently remain. In effect, nothing is less animal than the fiction, more or less removed from reality, of death. (Bataille quoted in Derrida, 1981, p.258)

Why this necessity to observe one's own death? It is closely related to the necessity within the Hegelian dialectic that negativity should at once be unleashed and constrained. Negativity is at once the energy of dialectic and its potential undoing. For Hegel, death is the most obvious form of negativity and the most threatening. If absolute knowledge requires the incorporation of all otherness, then it must face death directly and retain an image even as it dies. The entire Hegelian project is based upon this impossible vision of death. Through the mechanism of the *Aufhebung* (double process of elimination and preservation), Hegel imagines that death can be stripped of its real effects - its excessive, blinding force, while at the same time becoming incorporated within the compass and life of absolute knowledge. Bataille (1985) stresses the excessive character of this vision of death, its irruptive status - like the sun, the brightness of which blinds if one stares at it too closely.

It seems possible to recognize a similar motion toward visible excess within horror and pornography. The gruesome special effect is crucial within horror, often arresting the narration, rendering everything else merely a lame pretext for this vision out of control. The viewer's characteristic response is either to turn away, to stare in utter fascination, or to laugh. Pornography tends to replace classical narration with a cyclic structure - a repetitive sequence of fucks, at times interspersed with a ludicrous pretend plot, which serves little purpose other than to crudely delay the excessive image.

3. **The Ending:** the narrative structures of the two genres would appear to be very different and yet there is a crucial point of continuity. Horror tends to obey a strongly Aristotelian structure (often closely corresponding to Propp's folktale)? but with one important difference; within contemporary horror the denouement can often appear less as a resolution than as an excessive addition, a tag that mocks the story before and re-opens conflict. The lone survivor of the night's atrocities steps out on to the porch. It is dawn. The music lifts. And then suddenly, beyond the diegesis (or at its invisible limits), a force rises up from the forest and swoops down upon the lone survivor. The screen goes black at the instant that he sees his death. This example from *Evil Dead* is characteristic. Where can such an ending be found within pornography? Within the only place that retains a genuinely Aristotelian character - the scenes of fucking, which preserve the fundamental elements of beginning, complication, climax, and denouement. Just at the moment of climax (in both senses) the cock is withdrawn from whatever orifice it happened to be engaged with and ejaculates in space. Thus the diegetic fuck, the increasing union between the participants, is suddenly violently transgressed precisely in order that the pleasure of their union should be rendered visible to the viewer. The condition of this impossible visibility is the annihilation of the sexual act itself, just as in horror a vision of death requires the mockery of all struggle against it - the off-hand destruction of the hero, black screen, and credits. Both horror and pornography attempt to show us then what can never properly be seen, and in so doing employ a common logic of excess.

## References

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3. Bataille, G. (1986) *Eroticism*, San Francisco: City Lights