

Post-Horror: Critical Dissonance

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Introduction

This project offers an in-depth aesthetic, thematic, and cultural assessment of recent post-horror films, examining how these elements factor into their marketing and distribution as well as their broader critical reception. Starting in the 2000s, there has been an ongoing critical debate about the value of designating more recent cycles of horror films using the category “art horror,” a debate that has illustrated the shifting cultural values and aesthetic modes that horror genre films present to critics and the general public. These contemporary post-horror films prompt various responses, with some arguing that the developments aren't groundbreaking enough to justify labeling it post-horror rather than traditional horror. Others claim that the horror genre has indeed entered a post-horror phase. I maintain that horror remains alive, and these films set themselves apart by adopting an arthouse style, injecting a unique quality into the genre.

Given these developments, several questions arise. What aesthetic practices and narrative tropes do critics see as fundamental to all the films in the “post-horror” cycle? In what ways do more recent films (2017-2022) uphold or depart from prevailing interpretations of post-horror, such as David Church's 2020 book *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation*? What aspects of contemporary horror do interpretations like Church's overlook? How do more recent horror films, in responding to events such as the Trump presidency and the COVID-19 Pandemic, waver between populist appeals of “commercial horror” and the more niche sensibilities of “art horror” in their shared open-endedness and what W.H.Rockett terms “relative closure”?

To address these questions, my project draws on scholarly studies of the horror genre, as well as engaging in the critical debates out of which terms like “art horror” and “post horror” have evolved. Film critics have praised post-horror films, which have also been popular in both genre and non-genre film festivals. This is because these films, as Church argues in *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation*, appear to overcome the lowbrow stigma associated with the horror genre. Even though post-horror is “one of the horror genre's most important trends since the turn of the twenty-first century” (Church, 2), and although these films are praised for their aesthetic inventiveness and form by both critics and genre lovers, they are typically not well accepted by what Church refers to as “populist viewers” (6).

In the following paragraphs, I will provide an overview of the scholarly literature surrounding emerging phenomena in the realm of horror films. According to Church, post-horror films, “merge art-cinema style with decentered genre tropes, privileging lingering dread and visual restraint over audiovisual shocks and monstrous disgust” (1). Populist viewers are frequently let down by the films’ lack of jump scares, lengthy shots, and slow pace, which falls short of their expectations for “popcorn,” or commercial/mainstream Hollywood horror (95). According to Church, the deceptive trailers that present the films as mainstream Hollywood horror rather than art cinema in order to appeal to a wider audience are also responsible for the dissatisfaction of the populist audiences. Unfortunately, this leads to some viewers urging others not to watch these films and giving them poor ratings on sites like Rotten Tomatoes or IMDb.

The historical intersections of art and horror discourse and audience reception are the main subject of Joan Hawkins’ research on art-horror in *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde*. Hawkins’ book focuses on examples of art-horror and looks at how commercial horror and art-house or avant-garde film intersect and interact. She also argues that

examining these intersections reveals the relative lack of difference in the aesthetics and story techniques featured in horror-themed “high-brow” avant-garde films and those of more “low-brow” commercial horror genre films. She supports this claim by examining how technological shifts, such as the widespread availability of VHS and DVD home viewing, have led distributors of both “high-brow” and “low-brow” to emphasize similarities among these films in their marketing materials. Hawkins explains that “art’ companies as well as ‘sleaze’ companies market both high-art and low-art titles suggests that the sacralization of performance culture (its division into high and low art) never took root among art and horror/sleaze/exploitation film fans” (12). This close examination of the para-cinematic reading strategies employed by audiences and critics of horror illustrates the flexible nature of horror’s aesthetic distinctions.

According to Church, post-horror is a progression of post-9/11 horror filmmaking that also intersects with what Hawkins identifies as the Gothic/supernatural trend of independently produced “quiet horror,” in which “signs of mourning and grief are everywhere.” In part a response to the torture porn films of the 2000s, Church contextualizes the emergence of post-horror in relation to earlier art cinema genres like “slow cinema” and “American smart films,” noting that descriptors like “slow,” “smart,” “indie,” “prestige,” and “elevated” are frequently used to characterize post-horror films in analyses and reviews. He places post-horror within the rich history of art horror films like Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), which Church shows are not a recent addition to the horror genre.

Church notes that rather than concentrating on the archetypal monster/slasher/torturer figure found in commercial horror films of the 1990s-2000s, many post-horror films use Tzvetan Todorov’s idea of “the fantastic” (from *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary*

Genre) to evoke the terror and revulsion associated with the horror genre. This places post-horror films closer to “the fantastic” than it does to conventional horror. The uncertainty of whether allegedly supernatural phenomena are actually occurring or if they are merely an illusion is a common theme in post-horror films. As a result, these films frequently have uncertain resolutions, few audio-visual scares, and no gore scenes.

Post-horror films represent a genre cycle that combines horror film conventions with minimalist art film elements like a deliberate pace and narrative ambiguity. They tend to ignore comfortingly well-known clichés and instead exhibit far more artistic restraint, causing viewers to absorb unsettling feelings like grief and terror. I see the post-horror cycle as an amplification of the enduring art-horror tradition within the genre. It's important to remember the extensive history of intersections between art and horror films, with prominent examples such as Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), among other instances.

W.H. Rockett notes how *Rosemary's Baby* in particular merges the modes of “relative closure” of art filmmaking with “big-budget horror” filmmaking in his article, *The Door Ajar: Structure and Convention in Horror Films that Would Terrify*. (1982) Specifically, the film conveys relative closure in both its visual aesthetics and its plot by only suggesting the horrific nature of Rosemary's (Mia Farrow's) satanic offspring in the final birth scene. Rockett theorizes that the absence of an event alone causes terror rather than a physically dangerous threat or horrific visual element typical of Hollywood horror. When deployed effectively, withholding of information about the horrifying event can provoke terror in the viewer. “One of the most terrifying stories in fiction is one of the shortest: The last man on earth sat reading in his library. Something knocked at the door” (Rockett 1). The effectiveness of this technique is a deceptively

simple reason: the director refuses to reveal the horror's origin, but we the audience are yearning to know. As a result, our imaginations fill in the details and our thoughts imagine a uniquely horrifying scenario that reflects what we the viewer find scary.

Steve Rose, a critic for *The Guardian*, claims that “post-horror” is a subgenre for horror films that tackle profound and existential issues in an article entitled *How Post-Horror Movies Are Taking Over Cinema*. Written in response to the recent UK release of Trey Shults’ *It Comes at Night* (2017), Rose’s article has provoked extensive debate amongst horror fans because it implies that horror films featuring ambiguous endings that highlight existential themes occupy a higher or superior form/category of film. The article is structured around an interview with Trey Shults who explains his vision for *It Comes at Night*. In response, Steve Rose calls *It Comes at Night* a “post-horror” film. *It Comes at Night* was well received by critics but not with general audiences because its promotional material did not match up to the film. The promotional material for *It Comes at Night* emphasized a more traditional horror narrative, featuring eerie imagery and suggesting a supernatural threat, possibly a monster or otherworldly entity. Trailers and posters played up suspenseful moments and horror elements, contributing to the expectation of a conventional horror film. However, the actual movie focused more on psychological tension, human dynamics, and the breakdown of trust in a post-apocalyptic setting, diverging significantly from the more supernatural themes suggested in the promotional material. This mismatch between audience expectations based on marketing and the film's true nature likely contributed to the divide in reception. The same type of mismatch occurred with Robert Eggers’ *The Witch* (2015). What general audiences were expecting was a horror film with jump scares and a scary creature stalking a family in the woods (what the commercials and promotional

materials advertised). The film was more of a minimalist human drama about a family during a time of uncertainty set at a particular historical moment, with the visual and plot elements of “relative closure” noted by Rockett.

After reading some of the literature surrounding horror and post-horror, I come away with the idea that the methods employed by post-horror directors have been part of the horror genre since its conception. What Rose’s term does is highlight the ways in which generic canon-building assumes a progressive narrative: you can apply “post” to virtually anything to justify an intellectual narrative and to denote an evolving set of standards and expectations for determining a genre’s cultural value.

This project considers the larger questions about the usefulness of post-horror as a category that gestures to interesting intersections in past, present, and future production techniques, promotional tactics, and aesthetic/narrative modes in horror cinema. I will use Hawkins’ discussion of “new Gothic” as a model—specifically her concluding comments that:

horror studies [has] an impoverished and frequently inaccurate view of horror film history—one that too readily maps sub-generic eras: the Fifties become the decade of sci-fi horror, the Sixties see a rise in Gothic supernatural only to be replaced by the Slasher and so on. . . . this is ideologically problematic, giving rise to historical narratives of continuing progress and, for our purposes, generic development; narratives that tend to privilege the conscious over the unconscious, public sociohistorical concerns over personal politics, and linear thought over cyclical repetition. The term the ‘new Gothic’ is not meant to name a new period in horror history, but rather to identify some subtle shifts in a narrative *mode* that, as I have tried to show, has continued to resonate across multiple sub-genres.

Only Sane Man

While post-horror films often delve into well-established horror subgenres in terms of their fundamental themes, they diverge from the typical genre conventions through the expressive techniques characteristic of art cinema and the uncertainty woven into their narratives. This deviation creates room for both characters and audience members to immerse themselves in contemplative or emotionally charged atmospheres, rather than being hurried from one sudden fright to another. For instance, these films often downplay or indirectly depict the appearance of the monster. This could involve rendering it invisible or as an abstract force, or framing it as a potential product of a character's overwrought imagination or mental instability (Church 12). This downplaying is seen in *Beau Is Afraid*, a 2023 surrealist tragicomedy horror film written and directed by Ari Aster.

The "monster" portrayed in this film is the perspective of an individual gripped by anxiety and paranoia. The world in this film validates these anxious and paranoid notions as reality. For instance, right from the beginning, the protagonist, Beau, is convinced that everyone he encounters is passing judgment on him. The film explicitly confirms that they are. This reaches its peak when every person he's encountered throughout the film, and possibly throughout his life, assembles to formally judge him in a courtroom scenario. This film also incorporates the theme of a domineering mother and her emotionally stifled son. This aspect of the film becomes evident when viewers observe the mother confining a conspicuously phallic creature in her attic. Metaphors related to water are prevalent throughout the film. For instance, Beau's surname is "Wasserman," signifying "water man," and he hails from "Wasserton," meaning "Water town." This recurring motif of water alludes to amniotic fluid. On multiple

occasions in the film, Beau submerges himself, reflecting his yearning to return to the safety of the womb. The film concludes with the grim irony that water ultimately becomes the agent of his demise. It is revealed in the film that most, if not all, of the characters Beau encounters are actually employees of his mother's company. The film can also be interpreted from the perspective of Beau's mother (Patti LuPone), who is projecting a distorted caricature of his life that aims to absolve him of responsibility for his own death and shoulder it all herself. The film's narrative invites viewers to consider these two perspectives, making it especially rewarding for those who revisit it multiple times.

One may think, "Does anything in the film belong to an objective reality within the narrative, or is it entirely part of a character's dream?" This inquiry finds its response in a specific segment of the film where Beau attends a woodland play. So captivated by the performance, he starts to immerse himself in it, transforming it into his own reality. He discovers a place to call home, encounters a woman, enters into matrimony, fathers three children, endures the agonizing loss of everything he holds dear, and embarks on a hazardous quest to reunite with his estranged family. In the end, he appears to be reaching the pinnacle of a classic hero's journey, complete with a conventional Hollywood-style happy ending. However, this idyllic fantasy is abruptly shattered by the realization that it cannot be genuine, as he had never engaged in sexual activity. This suggests that the film is entirely the creation of an unreliable narrator, an individual who isn't merely deceiving the audience but also deceiving themselves.

In the film, distinguishing between what's real and what's imagined is an impossible task; the spectator must simply embrace it for what it presents. The question that may linger in the mind of the viewer is, "Does this type of narrative hold any merit? A narrative where the events don't occur in the objective reality of the film and instead occur within a character's mind?"

Perhaps not. It's conceivable that viewers who disliked the film struggle to get over this particular hurdle. To overcome this challenge, the audience must ask, "What is the underlying purpose of a story?" Does it have any purpose when this well-crafted yet potentially inconsequential portion of the film essentially constitutes a fantasy within a fantasy narrated to the audience by an unreliable narrator? Even a tall tale can convey significant insights for an audience. It can provide insights into the storyteller's identity, their perspective on the world, and potentially shed light on the environment that influenced them. Consequently, the core of Beau's fears comes into question. Within the film, Beau has crafted a narrative where his mother occupies a central role in a vast tapestry of anguish, pulling on threads to orchestrate the misfortunes that befall him. His mother might also serve as a symbol for capitalism as Matt Brennan and Josh Rottenberg suggest in their *Los Angeles Times* article *Beau is Afraid explained: a disturbingly in-depth analysis of Ari Aster's guilt trip to hell (2023)*.

Indeed, within the film's storyline, she lays claim to not only the residence where Beau resides but also appears to have a hand in the employment of every character featured in the film. She possesses the companies responsible for the mass-produced food he consumes, the pharmaceuticals that ensure people's compliance, delves into his medical records, and watches his every action. Beau's mother represents every facet of capitalism that intersects with Beau's journey. As he serves as an untrustworthy narrator, projecting his anxieties onto the world and manifesting them within the narrative, one can't help but consider the possibility that he is channeling his own problems onto the individual he holds responsible for shaping him in this manner. When examining this tumultuous relationship, it's essential to view it not solely as the strained dynamic between a mother and her son, but as a representation of the strained relationship between a capitalist society and those who work within it.

What makes *Beau is Afraid* a horror film is that it aims to evoke fear, dread, and terror in the audience using a dark, eerie atmosphere and threats (including humans and monsters) that are terrifying or grotesque. While Beau's mother may not exist in our world, the circumstances portrayed in the film do, although presented in a grotesquely exaggerated manner typical of surrealist comedy horror. The real world features fear, conflict, desire, and the act of delineating 'us' versus 'them' to promote its goods, preserve the existing order, and ensnare us within its framework, mirroring the world Beau resides in, seemingly shaped entirely by his mother's hand. This isn't an attempt to attribute a sole motive or identify a solitary antagonist. In the real world, there isn't a single individual or secretive group orchestrating everything, and to believe so would be the unfounded musings of a paranoid psyche, much like it is portrayed in the film's protagonist. These phenomena are outcomes, and unintended consequences of a profit-driven world that often neglects the potential psychological harm it can induce.

Consider commercial news stations, for instance. In the film, they excessively amplify the threat posed by the comically named "birthday boy stab man," an entity that, coincidentally, runs into Beau after he entertains the idea. This mirrors the conduct of real-world news outlets like Fox News, which, in 2022, conjured up a surge in crime to coincide with that year's midterm elections (Vargas). They portrayed American cities as lawless dystopias and then reduced their coverage of violent crimes by about 50% once the midterms concluded (Gabbatt). However, this portrayal conveniently disregarded the fact that the overall crime rate in the United States had actually decreased from 2021 to 2022 (Fawcett and Fortin). Furthermore, in contrast to a rise from pre-pandemic levels, violent crime had been consistently declining since the 1990s (Federal Bureau of Investigation). Just as the menace materializes in Beau's world, the prevailing

perceptions of the American populace do not align with the objective reality that the world they inhabit is, in fact, less menacing than it was three decades ago (Colarossi).

The fear of crime serves multiple purposes, not only as a political campaigning strategy and a means to secure increased police funding but also because it attracts the most attention. It aligns with the journalism mantra "if it bleeds, it leads," which has become a rallying cry for sensationalistic reporting. Media professionals are aware that one-dimensional villains sell better than nuanced characters, a trend exacerbated in the internet era due to the demand for attention-grabbing "hot takes" to maintain a prominent presence in social media discussions. In the crowded media landscape, headlines must instantly captivate the audience's attention, a phenomenon often referred to as clickbait. Fear is a potent motivator, not only in the realm of news but also in the broader context.

In the film, a young Beau is inundated with advertisements assuring him that certain products are "perfectly safe," subtly implying that other products may not be, mirroring the way brands are promoted in the real world. The film immerses the audience within the perspective of an unreliable narrator, a perpetually stunted individual lacking the capacity to grasp the societal influences shaping him. This narrator has constructed an elaborate conspiracy theory to rationalize his problems, all the while failing to recognize that his true struggles stem from the psychological trauma and existential discontent inflicted by the capitalist world he inhabits. The narrative suggests that there is value in the ability to see beyond these illusions and uncover the underlying reality. David Church, in his 2020 book *Post-Horror: Art, Genre, and Cultural Elevation*, discusses the idea of capitalism being the monster in horror films:

Many of post-horror's stylistic choices recall the American "smart films" described by Jeffrey Sconce as an "indie" aesthetic developed in the late 1990s that favors "long-shots, static composition, and sparse editing" to suggest a hip, ironic distance from white, middle-class conformity and the "horrors of life under advanced capitalism."

We can trace this trope back to *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), directed by George A. Romero, which has been interpreted by some as a critique of capitalism and consumerism, especially through its portrayal of societal breakdown and the mindless pursuit of material goods amidst a zombie apocalypse. While the film doesn't explicitly focus on capitalism, it does offer social commentary that can be seen as a critique of certain aspects of consumer culture.

One hallmark of post-horror is its emphasis on social commentary and thematic depth. *Beau is Afraid* does explore societal issues, including consumerism and the idea of "the smothering mother," using the horror genre as a metaphor. The film delves into the consequences of societal neglect. There appears to be an auteurist influence inherent in post-horror, suggesting that these films earn their uniqueness through the distinctive visions of their creators.

Admiring the Abomination

Nope is a 2022 science fiction horror film set in a neo-Western backdrop, written and directed by Jordan Peele. This film marks Peele's third directorial venture following the success of *Get Out* in 2017 and *Us* in 2019.

The storyline revolves around Otis "OJ" Haywood, Jr. (Daniel Kaluuya) and Emerald Haywood (Keke Palmer), siblings managing a ranch in southern California that supplies specially-trained horses for the film industry. Inheriting the ranch from their deceased father, Otis Haywood, Sr. (Keith David), whose tragic death resulted from an unexplained accident involving falling debris. Months after their father's demise, peculiar occurrences begin to happen. The Haywood siblings observe their horses vanishing or displaying unusual behavior, seemingly related to mysterious shapes and sounds from the sky. As their best horse is abducted during the night, they uncover the possibility of a genuine UFO presence. Motivated by both the pursuit of recognition and uncovering the truth behind their father's death, they embark on capturing evidence of this phenomenon, unwittingly encountering more than they had anticipated.

The film presents two initially disparate storylines. It commences with a chimpanzee causing chaos on the set of a sitcom, offering no context but clearly indicating that the chimpanzee kills actors during some kind of rampage. This event remains unaddressed until OJ and Emerald encounter Ricky (Steven Yeun). Ricky, a former child star in a sitcom featuring a chimp, reveals the mishap that occurred, and the film shows us his distressing childhood flashback. A pivotal moment arises when Ricky narrates the incident not from his own perspective but through Saturday Night Live's portrayal, hinting at the connection between this

subplot and the main story. This scene suggests a key theme of the film: how we, as viewers and creators, relate to spectacles and distressing images or events, highlighting our engagement with trauma through depictions rather than personal experiences. Jordan Peele talks about this theme in an interview on *Entertainment Weekly*:

The word I said the most on set was spectacle. A lot of our analysis dealt with spectacle and this business of spectacle. There's a magic to it, something I've devoted my life to being a part of, and there's also something insidious about it. And when you have that duality, that's a perfect kind of thing for me to tackle because I love that. I love duality.

Most people tend to steer clear of witnessing genuine horror. Although there exists a vast industry catering to fictional horror movies, there are also documentaries portraying atrocities that are immensely difficult to watch, delving into depths of horror that surpass the thrill of the latest Blumhouse scare—a kind of horror we typically don't actively seek out. These documentaries evoke true fear, not for the sake of catharsis or therapeutic release, but in a way that shakes our understanding of existence or is profoundly disturbing. Our relationship with images of disturbing events is complex. On one side, there's a curiosity to observe, yet there are times when we consciously choose to avert our gaze. This complexity is evident in Ricky's story, where he has transformed his traumatic experience from the sitcom into a spectacle he monetizes. He endeavors to do the same with the film's monster, the UFO, exploiting the profound fascination people have with horrifying events, enabling him to commercialize these experiences.

OJ and Emerald aim to film the UFO responsible for their father's demise. This endeavor

serves three primary purposes. Initially, it seeks to shed light on the actual cause of their father's death, moving beyond a mere freak accident. Secondly, capturing this spectacle offers the potential for fame, financial gain, and recognition, tapping into the public's insatiable appetite for the extraordinary or the terrifying. Thirdly, through the resulting fame and wealth, they aspire to reclaim parts of their family history in Hollywood that had been expunged. In the film, Emerald mentions their ancestral connection to Hollywood, citing their great-great-great-grandfather as the first man on film, who appeared in Eadweard Muybridge's 1887 photographs titled *Animal Locomotion*.

Horror films essentially commercialize trauma, typically fictional, yet occasionally, as in the case of *Nope*, blurring the line; Ricky's narrative, for example, drew inspiration from the well-known and tragic case of Charla Nash. In 2009, Charla Nash, a woman from Stamford, Connecticut, was viciously attacked by a chimpanzee named Travis. Depicting trauma through images can serve to render the trauma more visible, particularly to those who might otherwise deny its existence. Furthermore, such imagery may aid those who have undergone the trauma in processing their experiences. However, for those responsible for capturing these images—especially for the individuals enduring the trauma themselves, who lack the choice to look away—this act comes with a significant cost.

Within the film, OJ discovers that avoiding looking at the UFO prevents being consumed by it, ultimately saving himself. This situation hints at the notion that the influence of distressing images can be circumvented by not observing them. In the film, there's a sequence where the main characters have recently undergone an intensely frightening experience that solidifies the existence of the UFO. They gather at a restaurant for a debriefing. OJ brings up his findings regarding the UFO, seeking to discuss the events, but the other characters refuse, shutting down

the conversation. This particular scene reflects a common sentiment: I've found myself in numerous situations, especially lately, where after discovering distressing news with a group, there's often a conflict between the desire to address it and the wish to disregard it, attempting to retain a sense of normalcy and move forward.

With the recent Ukraine–Russia and Israel– Hamas wars I wasn't solely receiving reports about these events; I was witnessing the attacks unfold through recorded footage. The viewpoint provided by smartphones and the intensely personal, individual nature of this content felt more immediate and emotionally affecting compared to previous war footage I've seen. Smartphones have significantly altered our perception of traumatic and horrifying events from a distance. Although Peele might be contemplating these very concerns in *Nope*, I believe he's investigating this fundamental conflict within a slightly altered context.

The film commences with an unconventional frame enveloping the credits, later revealed as the actual mouth of the alien. As the opening credits conclude, the camera ventures into this mouth, unveiling the Muybridge film and transitioning to a similar scene of a horse on a commercial film set. The visual language of this sequence presents the film industry as an unrestrained predator, a monstrous force. Notably, Peele engages with the western genre in *Nope*, referencing Sidney Poitier's classic western film *Buck and the Preacher* (1972). This film stands as one of the rare exceptions in Hollywood's tendency to overlook the presence of black cowboys in the American West, where a considerable percentage were black, a historical reality often omitted from mainstream westerns (Billson). Similarly, in *Nope*, the monstrous entity claims the life of the black cowboy at the start, OJ and Emerald's father. To capture this creature on film is to shed light on this fact, but it requires approaching the perilous entity that could easily consume someone.

Peele delves into the concept of spectacle in this film, examining and pondering it, primarily through posing questions. There isn't a necessity for Peele to present a definitive answer or resolution to this duality within the film. Apart from acknowledging OJ and Emerald's endeavors and achievements in capturing an image of the monster, thus aiding in rectifying some of the erasure they've encountered, Peele refrains from explicit solutions. Fundamentally, what Peele accomplishes with this film is capturing an image of a monster—specifically, the monster within our own unsettling allure and exploitation of spectacle. In doing so, he contributes to rectifying some of the erasure experienced by Black individuals in Hollywood. During an interview with *Uproxx*, Peele discusses the dynamic involved in creating a scene where individuals are drawn into a spectacle, which mirrors what he aims to achieve with this film:

So the scene you're talking about, I think it has some DNA connection to that idea that you can simultaneously invite an audience to a spectacle and indict them and yourself for putting it on and needing that spectacle.

He also establishes a correlation between himself and the character of Ricky:

The character he plays is a total character study, and it's a unique guy that's based on, I think, observations about the type of trauma that this industry can inflict on people who are launched into the machine of attention. Yeah. I won't... I'm very close to that character. Let's just put it that way.

Audiences may find themselves easily frustrated or perplexed by films such as *Nope*,

which delve into a duality or tension. This can be especially confounding considering the established expectation for Peele's work, which hints at a clear, concise, and incisive social commentary, given his past creations. However, I believe that commentary that refrains from offering a solution and instead delves into an issue, posing questions, remains immensely valuable and essential. *Nope* explores the peril of spectacle. It's a high-budget Hollywood production that critiques the film industry itself. It doesn't aim to neatly resolve these dualities. Rather, it's a film that navigates the discomfort that emerges when we're uncertain whether something is inherently good or bad, finding ourselves entangled within it.

David Church mentions the established expectation for Peele's work:

Although *Get Out*'s explicit relevance to its socio political moment marks its difference from the less urgent themes in many other post-horror films, the fact that *Get Out* was viewed as a post-horror film while Peele's follow-up *Us* (2019) was, more often considered "just" a horror movie – despite both films incorporating a mixture of humor and social commentary – tells us something about the different tone struck by each film.

The distinction between *Get Out* and *Us* in terms of their reception and categorization within the horror genre does reveal an intriguing contrast in the tone and the thematic depth of the films. Both movies, crafted by Jordan Peele, possess elements of horror, humor, and social commentary, yet their treatment and the way they engage with these aspects differ significantly.

Get Out was recognized as a post-horror film due to its overt and incisive exploration of racial themes within a horror framework. It tackled the subject matter of racism in America, delivering a scathing critique of societal issues. The movie used horror elements to vividly illustrate the real-life horrors of racism, making its social commentary extremely explicit and

timely.

On the other hand, *Us* may have been seen more as a traditional horror movie because while it also included social commentary and humor, its central themes were more complex and open to interpretation. *Us*' dealt with broader societal issues, including class disparity and duality, but the social commentary wasn't as directly tied to a specific socio-political moment as *Get Out*. As a result, *Us* might have been perceived as a more standard horror film due to its narrative that could be interpreted in different ways, leaving the social commentary less explicitly defined compared to *Get Out*.

The distinction in the reception of the two movies showcases how the level of directness in addressing societal issues within the horror framework might influence the categorization of a film. *Get Out* was considered more of a post-horror film due to its direct and specific social commentary, while *Us* may have been seen as a traditional horror movie due to its broader, more ambiguous social themes.

Ultimately, the difference in the categorization of these films highlights the varying tones and approaches Peele employed in each work to explore societal issues within the horror genre.

Spoiled Sweet

Pearl (Mia Goth), the protagonist of A24's 2022 horror film *Pearl* directed by Ti West, is commonly misconstrued. The film as a whole is also often misunderstood. It deviates from the intense gore of its predecessor, *X*, and those anticipating a prequel with an abundance of elderly nudity and kills, akin to the original, found themselves understandably let down. Instead, the audience encounters a profound and contemplative exploration of character.

Ti West's continuing horror trilogy is a reflection on the medium of film itself. It delves into the influence that films wield over individuals' aspirations, dreams, and behaviors. In stark contrast to the behind-the-scenes intensity depicted in *X*, *Pearl* centers on a deep appreciation for cinema and the allure that envelops cinema. The grand orchestral soundtrack that initiates the film promptly transports us to a bygone era in the world of movies.

In the year 1918, our focus shifts to a rural girl residing with her domineering mother Ruth (Tandi Wright) and ailing father (Matthew Sunderland). Despite her aspirations of stardom, the Spanish flu and her mother's stringent rules progressively complicate her life. Pearl grapples with dire circumstances, where joyous moments are confined to memories and photographs. With her husband Howard (Alistair Sewell) away at war, the challenging conditions she confronts are gradually solidifying into a lasting reality. Examining *Pearl*'s themes more closely reveals evident homages within this narrative. One particularly noteworthy reference is to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) directed by Victor Fleming. In both stories, we witness a destitute farm girl harassed by a stern maternal figure in a vivid, vibrant, technicolor world. Going beyond the explicit references, such as Pearl's mother taking on the persona of the Wicked Witch of the West or Pearl's father representing the Tin Man, the writers were indeed reflecting on these parallels,

even though a direct one-to-one correlation is not present.

The references in the film serve more as a homage to classic archetypes and symbols from Hollywood's golden age. Pearl goes a step further by naming her pets after renowned actors of that era, making it evident from the outset that Hollywood significantly influences her, and these symbols shape her life. The influence is certainly not lost on Ti West. He aimed to create a technicolor 1940s movie with a scarecrow, evoking an era of filmmaking characterized by wonder and fantasy. There's a childlike quality reminiscent of certain Disney movies from that time, providing an intriguing contrast to the much darker narrative.

Fairly early on, the vibrant visuals yield to a more somber narrative in the film. Nearly everything in the film harbors a darker facet. For example, the film includes newsreels initially shown in a standard movie theater, but they later escalate in graphic content, surpassing the limits acceptable for conventional theaters. The same shadow is notably cast over her family dynamics. Past photographs reveal a once joyful family, but presently, Pearl's mother chastises her, dismissing her dreams as impractical. Her father, stricken with a poorly defined illness, alludes to both the encroaching influenza outside their door and the weight Pearl feels, stuck on the farm. While she harbors genuine love for her father, scenes hint at underlying resentment due to his condition. It's later unveiled that Howard's enlistment was a deliberate choice, a means of retaliating against his family, inadvertently hurting Pearl the most. Despite Pearl's circumstances steering her away from her desires, she's repeatedly told that understanding the importance of making the most of what you have surpasses the pursuit of personal desires. The film reaches a pinnacle with an exceptional monologue, laying bare all of Pearl's wishes and regrets for the viewer. Warming up to Pearl is inevitable; one can't help but feel empathy for her. She simply yearned for love. However, with her father incapacitated and her mother driven away due to her

violent tendencies, finding love seems nearly impossible for her.

Certainly, one of the film's notable highlights is Pearl's monologue, but an often overlooked scene features Ruth's equally poignant and chilling monologue. It serves as a stark contrast to Pearl's subdued speech—a manifestation of loud, violent threats from a character who has until this point kept a low profile, in opposition to the soft-spoken musings of someone capable of explosive violence.

A significant parallel in the film emerges between Pearl and her mother. In the opening scenes, Pearl's admiration of herself in her mother's dress is abruptly interrupted, alluded to by the music halting and the lights coming on. She is instructed to change into her work clothes, marking the moment when her power and confidence are stripped away. Throughout pivotal moments in the story, Pearl reclaims her confidence by wearing other dresses. However, at the film's conclusion, following Pearl's rejection from the dance troupe, she reverts to the role of a poor farm girl, donning overalls—a poignant symbol of her lost power.

It is revealed that Ruth, too, has faced a difficult life, essentially stolen from her when her husband fell ill. Consequently, Pearl's mother no longer wears elegant clothes, highlighting the theme of power dynamics associated with clothing. This allegory may offer insight into Pearl's future. Maxine –Pearl's killer, also played by Mia Goth–, on the other hand, challenges the traditional farm girl uniform by wearing overalls without anything underneath, hinting at a departure from the constraints of her strict environment.

A lesson emerges from these observations: allowing outdated traditions to dictate one's life leads nowhere. Pearl recognizes the similarities between herself and her mother and seeks to reconcile when visiting her body in the root cellar. In a fleeting moment, she is alive and embraces her mother, expressing love in German—the only instance of her speaking German in

the film. Unfortunately, this realization comes too late.

The significance of food, particularly the dinner table, is pronounced in *Pearl*. Despite the film being set in a time of severe famine, Pearl's farmhouse is abundantly stocked with food, leading to a considerable amount going to waste. This surplus is largely attributed to Pearl's mother, who attributes it to "how we conduct our lives." Following her demise, the food begins to spoil, and thereafter, every shot of food depicts it being discarded, smashed, or left to rot—a reminiscent image from Robert Eggers' *The Witch* (2015) where rotted corn husks symbolized an evil hex upon the family.

While Pearl may not be explicitly portrayed as a witch, a sense of malevolence certainly trails her. The film's pivotal scenes unfold around the dinner table, traditionally viewed as a space for family bonding and heartfelt conversations. In an attempt to rectify her errors, Pearl goes so far as to set the table for a family dinner, albeit in a tragically unique manner.

Despite the brutality, decay, and overall chaos depicted in the film, I still perceive "*Pearl*" as a sympathetic narrative with an equally empathetic protagonist. Even upon my second viewing, the emotions evoked remained tangible. I deeply empathized with the plight of this murderous girl confined to her farm, her attempts and failures resonating strongly.

She yearns for freedom, love, and acceptance, driving her to commit cruel acts in pursuit of her dreams, only to encounter rejection at every turn. Her desires mirror universal longings experienced by many, coupled unfortunately with the familiar sting of rejection. Essentially, Pearl delves into the theme of believing in one's potential beyond the current circumstances. It becomes even more tragic as she endeavors to escape her constraints throughout the film, only to, by the end, relinquish this belief and resign herself to what she believes is her destined place.

Pearl was anticipated by general audiences as another farm-set slasher or a narrative

detailing a villainous or chaotic origin story; what unfolds is a study of a character surprisingly less cold-hearted and ruthless than initially presumed. Instead, we encounter someone who deserves sympathy as she earnestly attempts to rectify her fatal mistakes.

Every horror release in recent years grapples with a persistent question: is this considered elevated horror? A24, in particular, has been at the forefront, presenting genre films that deviate from the conventional mold horror typically occupies. These films are often labeled as "elevated horror" by enthusiasts, a term that, while disliked by some for appearing dismissive, is seen by others as signifying an evolution in the genre. While imperfect, it communicates that these films challenge conventional notions of horror.

A common critique of "elevated horror" is that it seems exclusive to A24 productions, but in reality, the concept has been circulating for a while. Regardless of one's stance on the term, there's an undeniable shift in the horror landscape. The genre is progressively moving away from mainstream studio conventions, venturing into more unexpected directions. Horror thrives on surprise, and as audiences step into a horror film, the anticipation of the unknown heightens. "Elevated horror" may serve as a blanket term. This reflects the broader trend of horror films branching out into diverse and unexpected territories.

What Do You Mean, It's Not Symbolic?

Whether we categorize a film as "post-horror" or not, the essence of the story of the particular film we're talking about remains unchanged. The act of re-labeling a film should not be a justification for a mixed audience response. While it's possible to reassess a film's meaning over time, the fundamental truth is that nothing truly alters except for the audience's perspective. Take, for instance, William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), initially hailed as the most terrifying film ever made. With the passing years, numerous writers have revisited its significance, acknowledging it still as a horror film but with a greater emphasis on its portrayal of a priest grappling with a crisis of belief and confronting his own morality.

In our contemporary landscape, there is no single, uniform audience perspective. Instead, we exist on a spectrum of diverse beliefs and attitudes. Consequently, regardless of how the audience interprets the story, as long as the foundational components that establish the tone and atmosphere align with the horror genre, these films remain true to their identity. Whether these films employ horror as a metaphor for capitalism, grief, or spectacle, they undeniably fall within the horror genre, devoid of the "post-horror" label but firmly entrenched in traditional horror.

These films might not conform to the jumpscare-filled Blumhouse formula favored by popcorn audiences, but who determines that such elements are essential to the genre? Rather than succumbing to the pressure of attaching pretentious labels to cater to certain perceptions of a film, our focus should shift towards appreciating and encouraging good cinema.

The key lesson to glean from the mixed critical and general receptions of films like *Beau is Afraid*, *Nope*, and *Pearl* isn't about deciding the appropriate prefix for these horror films. Instead, it's about questioning whether trailers should rely on clichéd tropes to attract audiences,

creating false expectations that ultimately diminish the actual narrative experience.

Whenever someone challenges the boundaries of what's considered 'junk culture,' there's a tendency for someone else to argue that this warrants the creation of a new and distinct genre. For instance, if all comic books are generally dismissed, but one is exceptional, suddenly it's not just a comic book—it's a graphic novel. The term 'post-horror' seems to perpetuate a similar cultural snobbery. It suggests that the horror genre, as a whole, is perceived as terrible, stupid, poorly executed, or shallow. When presented with a horror story that doesn't fit these stereotypes, the implication is that it's an entirely new phenomenon. It's not. It's still horror; it just happens to be well-crafted, thoughtful, or competently executed.

Does horror cinema appear so stagnant to the public that we feel compelled to coin a term for a horror film that's genuinely well-made, created by individuals who genuinely care about the craft rather than those simply aiming to make a quick profit?

This is the message I've been trying to convey to those who insist on differentiating "psychological-thriller" or "suspense" from the category of "horror." Perhaps this distinction arises because horror has historically been marginalized as a less serious genre, often associated with popular misconceptions that it exclusively involves monsters, ghosts, gore, and jump scares. Carol J. Clover gained recognition with her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* that touched on old slasher films, arguing that horror has been perceived by many in a similar vein to pornography — created solely to elicit a physical reaction rather than an intellectual one. However, recent indie-horror films challenge this perception, revealing that horror can be the most profound, expressive, and relevant genre of our time. Perhaps labeling these films "post-horror" isn't the only way to garner serious consideration for them.

The central challenge appears to be the desire among horror enthusiasts to distinguish

independent horror from mainstream counterparts. Independent horror has gained popularity as a niche genre, primarily due to its rejection of the tropes that define mainstream horror, such as jump scares, simplistic plots, a preference for stylized gore over realistic depictions, and the inclination toward endless sequels. Many big-budget horror films seem to adhere more to a checklist than a genuine vision, and any deviation from this norm is labeled as "post-horror" due to its stark contrast. The difficulty lies in marketing these films accurately; when the average person hears about a horror movie, they often expect something akin to the *Paranormal Activity* or *Saw* franchise.

Consequently, marketing efforts tend to align with these expectations, causing a disconnect when more nuanced films are released. Personally, I would welcome the replacement of mainstream horror by these independent films, and it seems like we are moving in that direction, albeit with some distance left to cover.

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