A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET (1984)

A Nightmare on Elm Street was released in 1984, which feels significant thanks to Freddy's backstory. Wes Craven made Krueger a pedophile, specifically a child killer, which feels strangely atypical for other villains of the slasher genre. Yes, Krueger focuses on teens, but the change-up is part of an act of revenge, not to mention the fact that the teens in question are the children of those who murdered him. So in essence, he's staying true to his child killer roots.

Why does this matter, and more specifically, why does it matter in 1984? It matters because 1984 was also the year the milk carton project was launched. The early '80s saw a sharp rise in paranoia revolving around child abduction. The milk-carton initiative was part of an awareness campaign, spawning the term "milk carton kids" and various melodramatic media for Lifetime.

When 6-year-old Etan Patz went missing on his way to school in 1979, panic swept Manhattan. The 38-year-old case was finally solved earlier this year, but its ramifications were felt long before, among every child growing up in the '80s and early '90s. Between stranger danger and family passwords, the fear of abduction was ever present. For years if not decades, the prime suspect in the case was a man named Jose Ramos, whose penchant for trying to lure young boys into a drain pipe gave him a striking resemblance to another of horror's heaviest hitters: Pennywise.

By 1983, President Ronald Reagan had declared May 23 (the anniversary of Patz's disappearance) National Missing Children's Day. With the milk carton launch the next year, that brings us back to Freddy.

Craven has reported numerous times that his main source of inspiration was the sudden deaths of refugees escaping the Killing Fields of Cambodia and, as The Nightmare reminded us, sleep paralysis (Freddy's look, including the hat, is a recurring theme among sleep paralysis nightmares since well before the film's inception). But that doesn't make the convenient timing of A Nightmare on Elm Street any less interesting in this context.

Right at the moment when parents' fears about harm coming to their children is peaking, Krueger arrives on the scene. In life, Krueger is a stranger striking children at random—the embodiment of parents' worst fears. In death, he attacks the children of his killers where their parents can't protect them: in their minds. Whether human or supernatural, his target remains the same and the parents feel helpless against him.

Even the end of the film can serve as an unsettling parallel to the rampant fear of the time. Ignoring sequels and later mythology for the time being, Freddy's return at the end leaves us wondering what's real and what isn't and it's that uncertainty that's so reminiscent of the paranoia around abduction.

And so while much of the conservatism that can be found in other slasher films of the era is designed to highlight the unique horrors of being a teenager, A Nightmare on Elm Street ends up in the unique position of accidentally speaking to parents' greatest fears. The fear not that their children will have sex or grow up too soon, but that they'll be taken from them and never grow up at all.

Gorr, S. (2017, October 31). In Context: Fears Real and Imagined in 1984. Retrieved from The Cinessential: http://www.thecinessential.com/a-nightmare-on-elm-street/in-context

POLTERGEIST (1982)

Growing up is hard to do, a truth that cinema, literature and society returns to time and again. Poltergeist's haunting builds on this same idea. The film revisits popular theories of the time that linked pubescence with poltergeist activity, especially in girls (i.e., 1973's The Exorcist). Even The Waltons – America's cosiest TV show – saw youngest daughter Elizabeth manifest fears of growing up via a haunting.

Poltergeist uses a ghost story for scares, but also as an examination of family, childhood and the afterlife. The film doesn't have vague theories about what happens after death, by the way – it has a whole university department. Several 80s movies did, in fact, including Ghostbusters and The Entity.

These parapsychology experts provide context for otherwise unbelievable events, and explain what's happening to the audience. Their scientific authority lends truthfulness to unnatural events, and simultaneously makes them more frightening. Yet while the film calls on science, it ultimately hands authority to a more folkloric type of knowledge keeper in Tangina Barrons (Zelda May Rubinstein). With her tiny frame and high voice, Tangina is yet one more 'child' in the movie. Tangina is both child and [grand]mother figure. She shares the latter role with parapsychologist Dr Lesh.

Together, the women explain that some people die and go straight into 'the light' – i.e., the afterlife. Others get lost and need a guide to show them the way. And still others don't realise they're dead at all, or aren't ready to leave. They linger in-between, mourning the lives they've lost and consumed with malevolent feeling.

Like 1983's WarGames, Poltergeist examines our burgeoning relationship with technology. In WarGames the danger is Artificial Intelligence. In Poltergeist, it's television. This may not sound particularly terrifying, but keep in mind that TV is much harder to avoid.

The Freeling's home is built on a former burial ground. But, rather than deal with this respectfully, the development company relocates the headstones and leaves the bodies behind. What happens to the Freelings is partly (and unfairly) a punishment for this. But the film also explains it's because Carol Anne was born in the house, and has a particularly bright life force. Robbie and Steve add to this at the start of the film, when they talk about how the scary tree was there long before the estate. Robbie's fear stems from the tree knowing everything about them – like the TV people, it's watching them.

There are a few gaps in this explanation. There must be other children who have been born on the estate, yet we don't hear of any other hauntings – the Freelings are singled out. That (and the vagueness of the backstory) adds to the terror. Ultimately, the film's dread comes from the things we don't know … and maybe can't avoid.

TheHaughtyCulturist. (2022, June 23). Poltergeist (1982) explained: TV, Terror and Suburbia. Retrieved from The Haughty Culturist: https://www.thehaughtyculturist.com/films/poltergeist-1982-themes-

explained/#:~:text=Poltergeist%20uses%20a%20ghost%20story,has%20a%20whole%20university%20department.

THE SHINING (1980)

The Shining is a Gothic tale of domestic violence, yet Kubrick's puzzlework inhabits the spaces between the lines of the film's genre. Far removed from its source in

Stephen King's best-selling novel from 1977, the film opens not unlike the grand overture of 2001: A Space Odyssey, ushering the viewer into the Rocky Mountain setting with panoramic shots captured from a low-flying helicopter. These are gliding, majestic images that feel ominous beneath the doomed tones of Wendy Carlos' synth version of "Dies Irae," the hymn performed at requiem masses in medieval times to evoke the Day of Judgment. The music suggests the Torrances, Jack and Wendy (Jack Nicholson and Shelley Duvall), along with their young boy Danny (Danny Lloyd), will be judged by forces of ghostly, mythical, and historical import. Once settled into their new quarters at the Overlook Hotel, Jack, who took the job as a winter caretaker so he could outline his latest writing project, goes mad from something: cabin fever, ghostly possession, alcoholism, or perhaps all of the above. The hotel's apparitions speak to him, compelling him to chop his family into pieces with an ax. But Danny, psychically warned of his father's impending murder, escapes the hotel with his mother, leaving Jack behind to die, frozen in the hotel's hedge maze. What remains is an enigma—a compendium of inadequate plotting, stirring imagery, and visual symbols that seem to conflict with Kubrick's status as a master filmmaker who took years to refine and perfect his projects.

What might be a spooky tale of a family entering the Gothic realm of a haunted house and maligned spirits gives way to a frightening domestic situation. Kubrick more readily sees the problem of Jack's alcoholism, misogyny, and abuse as an infection of the Torrance family unit. Alternatively, King had struggled with substance abuse at the time of writing his novel and undoubtedly empathized with the corrupted paterfamilias at the story's center. From the very beginning, Kubrick sees Jack as the destructive force he is. Watch as Jack dismisses Ullman's disclosure about Grady, quieting any concern by referring to Wendy as a "confirmed ghost story and horror film nut," despite no evidence later in the film that Jack ever told his family about the Overlook's horrible past. Rather, in his interview with Ullman, Jack looks like a man desperate for a job with his accommodating grin and cheery demeanor, a sharp contrast to the often sarcastic and degrading tone he uses with Wendy and Danny. Jack is an abusive patriarch, evident from the belittling way he speaks to his wife, including his nickname for her as "the old sperm bank." Wendy, chronically codependent, enables the behavior. When a doctor (Anne Jackson) examines Danny after a small seizure—a paranormal warning sign—down the mountain in Sidewinder, Wendy talks about Jack's abusive behavior like a battered wife, reciting justifications and Jack's empty promises to quell the doctor's evident concern. Indeed, the pervasive threat in the film does not originate from an outside source, such as a specter, as many Gothic tales do, including King's book. At the outset, the danger in the film stems from within the family. Cinematically, it's a concept that rethinks the traditional narrative drives of horror that bring the family closer together by experiencing a shared trauma, such as The Exorcist (1973) before or Poltergeist (1982) after. In another way, The Shining follows a trajectory in horror films after Rosemary's Baby (1968) in which a member of the family turns against their own.

The Shining offers an enigma from which there is no escape, and with that in mind, the essential metaphor of the film becomes the hedge maze. Kubrick conceived of the maze as a necessary replacement for the silly living topiaries of King's novel, and he even lost himself in the walls of the real maze when the film's crew challenged him to enter. Kubrick harbored a lifelong fascination with the Minotaur of Greek mythology, the beast who stalks those who enter the Labyrinth of Crete. Jack serves as a stand-in for the Minotaur, and in one scene, he looms over the maze, looking down in a shot that transitions from a model to a bird's eye view of the actual maze with Wendy and Danny inside. Perhaps Kubrick intended Danny as a Theseus figure, one who guides the Jack-Minotaur to his cold death inside the hedge maze. And could Danny's ability to elude Jack be hinted in his love for Road Runner cartoons, which Danny watches more than once on television in the film? By extension, in the realm of Looney Tunes symbolism, Danny's nickname, Doc, is a reference to Bugs Bunny's saying, "What's up, doc?" Of course, Bugs Bunny was an expert at evading everyone from Elmer Fudd to Daffy Duck. Just as the Road Runner avoided becoming lunch for Wile E. Coyote, Danny avoids his Minotaur-father in the maze in the finale. Then again, this line of thinking demonstrates how easily the viewer can make logical, plausible hypotheses through detail-oriented readership and stretch them into pure conjecture that, for instance, somehow encompasses both Greek mythology and Looney Tunes.

Eggert, B. (2019, October 27). The Shining. Retrieved from Deep Focus Review: https://deepfocusreview.com/definitives/the-shining/

THE EVIL DEAD (1981)

Originally shown in the US in 1981, it sat finished for a few years, slowly gaining traction before it actually saw a wide release in 1983, and yet it still seemed to come out of nowhere to take the world by storm. People weren't prepared for The Evil Dead. But

that's exactly what Raimi designed it to be: something you weren't prepared for, something you didn't even know how to react to.

Like many of the most classic horror movies, the premise is extremely simple. Friends go to a cabin in the woods and accidentally unleash demons when they play a recording reading from an ancient, evil book. At the same time, it plays on tropes of the time in interesting ways. Most movies like this rely on suspense and dread, showing almost nothing, yet Evil Dead is an exercise in excess. Most feature a female protagonist, yet Evil Dead features a male survivor—it seems right to call Ash that, as he doesn't reach "hero" status until the second or maybe even third installments of the franchise.

Ash is not even a traditional male protagonist in the original Evil Dead. The only characteristic that really stems from any specific maleness in the narrative is his relationship with Linda. Even then, his relationship with his sister, Cheryl, feels much deeper. He's even given a gender-neutral name. Ash is, of course, short for Ashley, and it is the name his sister regularly calls him by. While this could all be interpreted as simply one of Sam Raimi's rules of horror filmmaking ("You must taste blood to be a man") there's nothing that Ash goes through in the film that is explicitly, stereotypically male in nature.

We leave him in an almost identical place to where we leave Sally Hardesty at the end of The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974). Ash, at least in the original film, is a feminized male hero, and arguably one of the best.

It's a technical achievement made even more impressive by how little it had to work with. From the opening shot of a sinister force moving through the woods, to the last shot of the camera zooming toward Bruce Campbell's screaming face, The Evil Dead is a manic, energetic thing. It continues to prove that some of the best horror films are created with limited resources that force the creators to be innovative and imaginative. During this era especially, that often led to pushing the boundaries of what was expected of the genre, as well as what was even thought possible. Raimi and Co. didn't set out to make something better than the horror films that had preceded Evil Dead, but they expected to make something different. And in that, they certainly succeeded.

SOURCE: https://diaboliquemagazine.com/join-us-revisiting-evil-dead/

SLEEPAWAY CAMP

Robert Hiltzik's Sleepaway Camp (1983) is an uncommonly touching slasher film, even if its political and social viewpoint is dubious (as is true of many films in the horror genre). It turns on the interplay between the manifest and the mysterious, wherein there

are some images of abject horror that demand to be looked at, as well as other moments or aspects of a character's actions that are alluded to but never explained. It feels as if Sleepaway Camp is told and styled in a way that approximates how a child — even younger than the teens featured in the film — might tell a story about their experience at camp that strains credulity even as it leaves a lasting impression on the listener.

The film ends with two counselors searching for Angela, and they find her sitting by the water, humming as she cradles Paul in her lap. Given the circumstances, it is an unnervingly serene image, and it beckons the curiosity of the counselors who move in closer. In doing so, they see that Paul has also been murdered, and it is implied that she has been the one behind the attacks. Not only this, but in the film's true reveal, the counselors learn that Angela has male genitalia. The almost entirely non-verbal Angela now communicates only with a slow, blood-curdling growl, her mouth dropped open and her eyes fixed in a state of delirium as she stands before the two counselors, entirely nude. Astonished, one of the counselors, Ronnie (Paul DeAngelo, a fitting name), exclaims "God! She's a boy!" and the film ends with a freeze-frame of Angela's monstrous face as the hissing and growling continues.

Given this presentation, it is entirely plausible for audiences to take issue with Sleepaway Camp as a potentially transphobic film. Since Angela's identity is forced upon her by Martha, it is possible to take this as implying that trans or nonbinary identities are artificial constructs in violation of some natural association between biological sex and gender: That is, children who are born male are necessarily boys, and females are girls, and there is no alternative to this that is not a perversion of human socialization. Aunt Martha, in this sense, is horrifying for her breach of the sacred trust between child and (figurative) parent, in that she only sees Angela as a vessel for her own fulfillment and purpose (wanting to be a mother to a daughter), and sees the traumatized child standing before her as easy prey who cannot resist or consent to taking on this identity as "Angela." Moreover, not only can Sleepaway Camp seem to suggest that any non-cisgendered identity is "fake" or the construction of nefarious adults who harm children by promoting the idea, but it can also seem to pathologize trans identity as a form of "madness" that leads to murderous impulses. Essentially, Angela's "gender confusion," as it were, is part and parcel with her inability to control her violent outbursts, which therein suggests that the girl is in need of psychiatric intervention to "cure" herself of her abnormal tendencies. Of course, the freeze-frame foregrounds how lost Angela really is. She has crossed the threshold from human to monster, which seems to feed the perception of trans persons being wolves in sheep's clothing. The film could be seen as promoting the same kind of conservative paranoia we see spread about how kids need to be protected against trans people using public restrooms.

Despite these perfectly legitimate issues to raise with Sleepaway Camp, I think there is also a more charitable reading of the film, which sees it as being quite

sympathetic to Angela and her alienation from the people around her. Setting the reactionary attitude toward Angela's trans identity aside, there is a kernel of truth to the film's presentation of the gender. Angela's struggle to fit in, or to simply be left alone and not be made to feel like she must socialize with the other girls (or almost any of the other campers) is a very recognizable situation. It is terrible, especially at such a young age, to be forced to socialize with other people you don't know, just because you're the same age and gender as them. Of course there is an edifying value to this kind of interaction, but it can be a hard thing for a kid to do, especially when being coaxed by an adult who is seemingly indifferent to the strangeness of the situation. From this perspective, Angela's horrifying violence takes on a certain importance: It tears at the social fabric of the camp and its supposed normalcy. This pertains especially to the way that boys and girls are expected to act together. Judy and Meg demand that the rest of the girls comply with their alpha status. Ricky encounters the same problem with the boys on the other side of the camp. The boys and girls are even expected to have their camp flirtations and jealousies. Although this does not negate the potentially problematic dimensions of how Angela is depicted, her violence and monstrosity is sympathetic, to a degree, because the conformity and restrictiveness at the camp is such a difficult thing for the outcast Angela to navigate. There is, in a way, a radicalness to what Angela does at Camp Arawak, even if the film does not lionize her for what she does.

This is what makes the ending of Sleepaway Camp, with the freeze-frame in particular, such a loaded image. The technique and close-up suggest that Angela is incapable of changing, that she has been so traumatized by what the boating incident and her Aunt Martha have done to her that she is incapable of even expressing herself with human language. Even so, this shot also calls to mind the possibility that something might have gone differently for Angela, or possibly even that she could change or get better somewhere in the distant future. The freeze-frame brings out the oppositions of motion and stasis, life and death, and perhaps socialization and isolation as well. In this shot, we are left to contemplate not just Angela in her monstrosity but also in her detachment from others — she is, after all, alone in the frame, and it's hard, upon a first viewing, to avoid the suspicion that the film might resume normally. We are left waiting for Angela to move out of the frame and continue to interact (violently) with the other characters. Perhaps Angela might destroy the camp and its oppressive and abusive strictures? Or maybe Angela will somehow be subdued by the counselors and get the help that she needs?

SOURCE: https://www.splittoothmedia.com/sleepaway-camp/