

# *A Discussion of Social Issues and Horror Cinema*

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Horror is a polarizing genre. Though it has its diehard fans, horror seems to be plagued by an opposing flipside – some audiences vehemently refuse to watch anything even tangentially classified as horror, a problem that other genres such as adventure or comedy do not face. This can partially, if not wholly, be blamed on recent trends to rely on jump scares and gore for cheap entertainment. While such offenders like the *The Conjuring* and *Saw* franchises certainly have their place in the film industry, their prevalence has made them rather synonymous with “horror.” Association with simple tricks and shallow thrills, elements of low-brow film, has been detrimental to the growth of the genre. However, a new wave non-thriller horror films have begun to breathe life back into the genre.

Titles like *The Babadook* (2014), *Inheritance* (2018), and *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2011) have taken the genre back to its roots. They take advantage of the horror’s unique formula for story-telling – there is no “chosen-one” special protagonist or winding plot stuffed with visuals. Instead, they sport relatable protagonists, a simple plot, and an emphasis on emotion. In other words, these films are anything but grandiose. Horror is especially suited for these types of narratives, because it is inherently adversarial. It places much more emphasis on the antagonist, specifically as the cause of the protagonist’s struggles. This closed framework isolates the two, creating a much more personal story, and the point-of-view perspective helps generate discussion. This type of setting makes the horror genre a surprisingly well-suited platform to discuss social issues, something that the film *The Babadook* does exceptionally well.

*The Babadook* is a psychological horror film directed by Jennifer Kent. Amelia Vanek, a widow, is already struggling to raise her six-year-old son Samuel when the eponymous Babadook begins to haunt them. This strains their relationship with each other and those around them as Amelia is quickly driven to her breaking point. Amelia must learn to cope with her grief to overcome the Babadook, who often takes the form of her late husband Oscar to taunt her. It is no surprise that the Babadook is metaphor for grief, and discussing themes of the Babadook enables audiences to discuss coping both indirectly and directly. It is a perfect demonstration of how horror films can serve as platforms for social activism. The film accomplishes this textually and extra-textually by exploring fundamental horror elements and generating deliberately generating discussion outside of the film.

Monsters in the horror genre are typically representative of some larger issue. In [An Introduction to the American Horror Film](#), Robin Wood says that monsters in horror are projections of societal fears<sup>1</sup>. “...the relationship between normality and the Monster, that constitutes the essential subject of the horror film... the development taking the form of a long process of clarification or revelation” (Wood 118). Monsters often represent deviations from the norm, because they make easy targets for dislike. This sort of scapegoating is beneficial to generating discussions about social issues, because it provides an outlet for discussion about otherwise taboo topics. In the horror genre, the monster is used to personify something that everyone hates and, in the case of a social issue, not enough people talk about. Antagonists within other genres have much more character than pure evil, but as a result do not transcend their respective cinematic universes as easily as horror monsters do.

The Babadook monster does a fantastic job in blatantly representing grief. Throughout the film, it eats away at Amelia’s mental and physical well-being, and the audience can clearly see her progressing

through the five stages of grief. First came denial – Amelia initially adopts an “out of sight, out of mind” perspective when she just hides the mysterious book on top of the cabinets. Whether out of shame or disbelief, she continues to deny its existence to others and herself until the Babadook is strong enough to possess her the first time in her dream. This fulfills the unheeded warning written in the book, “I’ll wager with you, I’ll make you a bet. The more you deny, the stronger I’ll get. You start to change when I get in, the Babadook growing right under your skin. Oh come, come see what’s underneath!” Second came anger – overlapping with her denial, hatred and vitriol begin to spill out of Amelia towards those around her. She began to isolate herself and lash out at her neighbors, coworkers, and even family. Her anger culminates in the killing of Buggy and the attempted killing of Sam. Third came bargaining – When the Babadook takes on the form of Oscar, it tempts Amelia saying that they can be together again if only she gives up Sam. Despite a struggle, Amelia overcomes the temptation.

Aside from providing opportunities to talk, the horror genre helps create a better understanding of social issues through empathy. Horror protagonists are more relatable than those in other genres. They rarely have special powers or hidden heroic qualities; they are regular people with uncertain futures. In other genres, the outcomes are fairly telegraphed. A young couple falls in love or the hero overcomes all the obstacles to success – there may be some bleak moments or small twists, but ultimately the audience know that everything will turn out well in the end. The horror genre is different though. Along with the perfectly good endings are perfectly horrific endings. The protagonist may manage to escape or could easily die by the end of the film.

*The Babadook* takes a middle ground. Amelia does not heroically vanquish the Babadook. Instead, she learns to coexist and cope with the monster inside of her. This highlights the difficult truth that sometimes depression does not go away and that is okay. Everyone likes fully resolved endings, the bad guy defeated, but realistically it is almost never that simple. These are Amelia’s last two stages of grief, ongoing depression and acceptance via coping. It might not be the most satisfying ending, but it is by far the most realistic. This realism helps Amelia become more of an emotional proxy for the audience, so the audience can better understand her situation.

Horror films tend to place a lot of emphasis on emotion. Since the plots are relatively straightforward, this must be accomplished through formal elements of the film. In *The Babadook*, there are three main themes for formal elements: muted colors, dim lighting, and claustrophobic setting. All of these represent the world as Amelia experiences it. There are no vibrant colors, only sickly versions. The lighting is either dim in the house, or harsh outside like the nursing home where she works. Aside from the visuals, the film takes place primarily in the house, which in horror films typically represent the state of her mind. Their home, which starts off ordinary and tidy, deteriorates through the film. Glass is shattered, furniture is broken, and even an imaginary roach infestation occurs. The neglect of the house is indicative of Amelia’s own personal neglect for her mental well-being.

In the scene where Amelia starts to see the Babadook on the television, all these themes come together. Rather than being colored, the pictures are black and white; The movie already uses a drab color pallet, but even this is scene. The lighting is incredibly dim and harsh, which would certainly strain for Amelia’s eyes. For someone adverse to the grotesqueness, this scene feels like waterboarding. It switches back between Amelia’s horrified face and feverish scenes of rolling heads and creepy figures 20 times in the span of 45 seconds, with 25 seemingly arbitrary cuts. More so than any other, this scene helps the audience feel the living nightmare of Amelia’s life.

*The Babadook* has successfully spurred conversation about mental health. It is the topic of many interviews with Jennifer Kent. In a prerelease interview with The Guardian, Kent talks about how the film relates to motherhood:

Apart from *We Need To Talk About Kevin*, I can't easily think of other examples [of the strain of motherhood] and it's the great unspoken thing. We're all, as women, educated and conditioned to think that motherhood is an easy thing that just happens. But it's not always the case. I wanted to show a real woman who was drowning in that environment. (MacInnes)

In another interview with The Complex, she talks more generally:

I always was drawn to the idea of grief, and the suppression of that grief, and the question of, how would that affect a person? ... another young guy had lost both of his parents when he was 21, and he felt like the film was a really honest portrayal of the pain caused by grief. Those kinds of comments are why I made the film. (Barone)

It is evident that Kent deliberately used her film to speak up about different issues. Throughout these interviews and many others, she repeatedly explains the effort spent redirecting every detail towards these discussions. From grey-washing the grass to using minimal special effects all captured on camera, each choice has helped Kent enjoy a wild success. Ironically, the film has even spurred LGBT acceptance discussions after several people joked that the *Babadook* was gay after a Netflix classification error.

Horror can be a strikingly realistic genre with a lot of parallels to our own lives. Once all the ghosts and boogeymen are taken out of the equation, what is left is perhaps the most human instinct of all – terror. As a genre, horror can help society face its own fears and taboos. It is about time horror starts to be utilized in such a way.

## References

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