Introduction
Post-Horror,
Horror for Non-Horror Fans?

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Horror is undoubtedly one of cinema's most multifaceted genres. Each decade, it seems, a new streak of films comes along which, while clearly subsumed within the overarching category of horror, feels so distinct from what preceded it that both fans and critics feel the need to categorize it as either a new cycle or a new subgenre: the 1980s notably saw the rise of slashers, and the 1990s that of postmodern horror. And while two widely discussed subcategories – torture porn and found footage – emerged in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s, it is safe to say that none of these cycles has been the subject of such heated taxonomic debates as the one that emerged in the mid-2010s. Following the release of such films as *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) or *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015), many fans and critics argued that the genre of horror was witnessing the birth of another cycle, yet no one seemed to agree as to how it should be named or defined – some even arguing that these films should not be considered as a distinct cycle at all.[1]

The purpose of this issue of *Imaginaires* is threefold. It aims at giving film scholars a chance to weigh in on this taxonomic debate which has thus far largely been held by fans and critics, with a few notable exceptions – chief of which David Church's only book-length study of the cycle (2021). It also purports to shed new light on the narrative and stylistic commonalities, as well as on the extrafilmic qualities, uniting the films of the corpus.

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1.   In their recent book on contemporary American horror, Jean-Baptiste Carobolante and Philippe Ortoli write that "genre cinema – and horror cinema in particular – is a cinema of *auteurs* (plural). It has always been so, even though the current terms of *elevated horror* or of *post-horror,* following that of *art-horror,* try to convince us that some films do not merely seek to scare the viewers but intend to elevate them towards higher spheres of thought" (2024: 175. My translation). Philippe Ortoli further develops his take on the concept of post-horror in this issue.

Finally, it seeks to offer in-depth analyses of the films themselves, the study of which has often been overshadowed by the many generic and axiological questions raised by their categorization as instances of "post horror" or "elevated horror".

The taxonomic debate

It is not the object of this introduction to dwell too long on the various cultural implications of the taxonomic debate surrounding the films – they have already been analyzed at length (Church, 2021: 27-67). Nonetheless, since one may not study the cycle without first defining and circumscribing it, I shall briefly do so, keeping in mind that the various articles of this issue testify to the plurality of academic opinions as to how one should refer to this body of work and situate it within the broader category of horror – it is, I believe, one of the issue's main strengths – and that the following remarks therefore only reflect my personal views. Following an early state of semantic fluctuation during which many terms co-existed to refer to roughly the same body of work, two terms emerged as dominant in the late 2010s: "elevated horror" and "post-horror", the former being mostly used in the United States, while the latter – coined by *Guardian* columnist Steve Rose (Rose, 2017) – is more widely used in the United Kingdom. I fully share David Church's opinion that

> 'elevated' is a more accurate descriptor for the *aesthetic strategies* used in these films, but […] it comes freighted with elitist biases against the horror genre itself. Meanwhile, 'post-horror' is also problematic, since it could erroneously imply that these are not 'actual' horror films – yet its very vagueness as a term also makes it more reclaimable, for my purposes, as a ready-made placeholder label for the many tropes, themes, affects, and political concerns that together constitute the corpus. (Church, 2021: 3)

Ever since Rick Altman's influential study (1984), the term "genre" has been understood as one used to group together various films sharing similar "semantic" characteristics – thematic and formal elements – and "syntactic" characteristics – sets of relationships between semantic elements. Naturally, genre names tend to hint at the common semantic and syntactic characteristics of the films they serve to categorize – for instance, the term "western" refers to the dominant setting of the films belonging to this genre. While such terms obviously pose taxonomic difficulties of their own – not all westerns take place in the American West! – the term "horror" does not refer to a semantic or syntactic characteristic but, rather, to an affect films of this category are supposed to elicit in the viewers – a

much more elusive quality, which may account for the perceived difficulty to grasp what holds together a genre encompassing such a large variety of distinct subgenres and cycles (Leeder, 2018: 94). Nonetheless, the terms used to categorize most horror subgenres or cycles frequently do refer to a semantic or syntactic characteristic supposedly giving a body of films a distinct identity justifying their being grouped into a separate subcategory – i.e., slashers are horror films focusing on a blade-wielding killer and found footage refers to a striking formal and narrative device: suggesting the footage constituting the film was made by one or several diegetic amateur filmmakers. While some cycles tend to be referred to by the name of the studios behind their making (i.e., Universal horror films or Hammer horror films), the very name of these studios becomes evocative of a set of semantic or syntactic characteristics that justify grouping these films as a distinct subcategory – such as, say, the distinctive use of color in Hammer films for instance.

Here lies the main issue behind the term elevated horror: instead of evoking a group of films linked together by shared semantic and syntactic characteristics, it seems to evoke one linked together by shared axiological characteristics:[2] these films, the term implies, form a distinctive category within the overarching genre of horror because they are more "intelligent", more "artistic", or quite simply more "interesting" than regular horror films, thus perpetuating "classist attitudes towards popular culture that seek to categorize and grade art forms from 'low' to 'high'", as Eddie Falvey argues regarding yet another term – "art horror" (2021: 64). That the term elevated horror should raise the same concerns as art horror is no coincidence. Indeed, I agree with David Church that elevated or post-horror films may best be considered as a distinct category within the broader category of art horror (itself a subcategory of both horror and art cinema!):

> Some film critics have posited post-horror as a 'new genre' or 'new subgenre' – but it is far more accurately described as an aesthetically linked *cycle* within the longer and broader definition of art horror cinema. (Church, 2021: 4)

Following Church, one may argue that the term elevated horror, like art horror, is not purely axiological as it also refers to a set of semantic and syntactic characteristics proper to these films – characteristics close

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2. The reasons for the axiological implications of the term become apparent when considering the third dimension of genrification that Altman added to his theory in *Film/Genre*: pragmatics. Genres, Altman points out, tend to be considered as static and clearly defined artistic categories, yet they are above all labels co-created by a myriad of artists, producers, critics and fans who use them in discursive processes. Generic claims are "pronounced *by* someone and addressed *to* someone" (1999: 102, emphases by the author). The label "elevated horror" is indeed convenient for studios desirous to advertise their films to audiences more interested in art films than in horror films, as well as for non-specialized film critics and viewers desirous to label these films as more artful than the average horror movie.

enough to those of art horror but distinct enough so as to require a new term. It is safe to affirm that the dominant characteristics of elevated or post-horror films are also those that, according to Joan Hawkins – who coined the term in her influential study *Cutting Edge: Art Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (2000) – characterize art horror films, i.e. hybridizing horror conventions with art film conventions.[3] Before wondering to what extent elevated or post-horror differs from the rest of art horror, then, let us first keep on peeling the onion of genres by examining what distinguishes art horror from traditional horror. To do that, one must first define art cinema. Both Joan Hawkins and David Church summon David Bordwell's seminal 1979 article "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice". Church summarizes Bordwell's characterization of art cinema as follows:

> David Bordwell influentially outlines art cinema as less a genre in its own right than a *mode* of filmmaking inspired by modernist art, and internationally popularized during the 1950s-70s with the spread of independently owned arthouse theaters. More formally challenging than classical Hollywood cinema (a far more populist filmmaking mode), modernist art films frequently include drifting, circular, and open-ended narratives; ambiguous and psychologically complex characters; and various forms of spatial and temporal manipulations (including deliberate continuity violations, durational realism, and so on). (Church, 2021: 8)

Such semantic and syntactic characteristics may indeed enable one to separate an art film like Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) from a classical Hollywood film like John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), just like they may help distinguish an art horror film like Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) from a more traditional horror film like Richard Donner's *The Omen* (1976), and an elevated or post-horror film like Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse* (2019) from David Gordon Green's *Halloween* (2018) – a contemporary take on the slasher –, Darren Lynn Bousman's *Spiral* (2021) – the 9th installment of the *Saw* franchise, emblematic of torture porn –, or William Eubank's *Paranormal Activity: Next of Kin* (2021) – the 7th installment of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, emblematic of found footage.

Were it possible to use the term "elevated horror" to refer only to such a set of semantic and syntactic characteristics, I would consider it a viable one, aptly describing the hybridizing process between horror cinema and

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3. Hawkins coined this term to refer to a specific set of avant-garde films seeking to shock, horrify and disgust while clearly belonging to the category of art cinema. However, the term "art horror" has since come to refer to all films hybridizing the conventions of art cinema and horror.

art cinema that determines the cycle. I would even argue that the fact "elevated" implies a more "intellectual" form of cinema is an accurate description of the semantic and syntactic characteristics of the films since, like art films, they do tend to raise overt philosophical, ethical and ideological issues more frequently than most horror films – which, as Carol J. Clover (1987) and Linda Williams (1991) have argued, may be thought of as constituting a "body genre" striving to elicit a physiological reaction from the viewers. Such a distinction would therefore seem acceptable, if not for the longstanding assumption that "intellectual" art equals "High" art, while body genres form the bulk of "Low" art – an assumption proved wrong by the aforementioned studies of Clover and Williams which demonstrate that appealing to the viewers' bodies does not preclude thematic depth and cognitively challenging content.

Keeping in mind that "elevated horror" may never be received as a purely descriptive term without any axiological implications, I therefore propose to privilege the term "post-horror". The latter may also be said to be somewhat elitist – post-horror films would have "outgrown" the primitive state of traditional horror films –, though it is less obvious, and adopting it remains preferable to further complexifying the terminological debate by proposing yet another term. A comparison might be drawn with the term *Giallo,* which emerged in the late 1960s to refer to the films of such directors as Mario Bava and Dario Argento. Rife with derogatory implications – *Gialli* originally evoked Italian literary pulp fiction, although some more respected books were also published as *Gialli* –, the term implied the films represent the lowest of Low art. Yet its continuous use among fans, critics and scholars means the term now alludes to the semantic and syntactic characteristics of the films rather than to their presumed quality, even though any new study of the subgenre must inevitably remind readers of the initial axiological implications of the term *Giallo* (Laguarda, 2021). It is my hope that by adopting the term "post-horror", this issue will similarly contribute to stripping it of most connotations.

Should post-horror be considered a distinct cycle?

Now that I may safely use the term post-horror, a question remains: why refer to post-horror as a specific cycle, instead of simply envisioning the films as new instances of art horror? In other words, do these films form a body of work distinct enough from other art horror films so as to require a new subcategory? In his book (2021), David Church argues that these films do bear certain common aesthetic and thematic characteristics which justify grouping them into a distinct cycle, among which:

- A rejection of jump scares, favoring a diffuse feeling of lingering dread instead

- Rhythms and tones influenced by slow cinema

- Recurrent themes such as grief and familial trauma

- Progressive perspectives on racism, sexism, and other social issues

Of course, the commonalities identified by Church can be debated. As he himself argues, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), a film frequently identified as one of the most successful instances of post-horror, shares few of the formal characteristics listed by the author – its rhythm and tone have little in common with slow cinema – and its being called post-horror mostly seems to stem from the way it uses "the horror genre as a timely platform to 'smartly' intervene in American racial-equality debates during the Black Lives Matter movement" (2021: 38-39). On the other hand, several films released prior to the mid-2010s seem to share most, if not all, of the characteristics attributed to post-horror films. For instance, M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense,* released in 1999, does favor lingering dread over jump scares. Its rhythm is particularly slow and it deals with themes such as grief, trauma, loss, and the difficulty of accepting our inherent mortality. Its focus on the family unit, and especially on a mother-son relationship, is also evocative of a key characteristic of post-horror. The film even stars Toni Collette, who would go on to play the leading role in Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2017), one of the most emblematic instances of post-horror!

It is therefore unsurprising that some scholars, such as Jean-Baptiste Carobolante and Philippe Ortoli (2024), refuse to envision post-horror as a distinct cycle. One could object that such is the lot of every attempt to categorize a group of films according to a shared set of semantic and syntactic characteristics – see, for instance, the endless debate as to whether film noir constitutes a specific genre (Naremore, 2008: 9-39). The fact remains that in the mid-2010s, a great number of films released within a few years exhibited enough shared characteristics so as to be perceived as representing a distinct cycle by many viewers and critics. And while it is essential to point out that post-horror films favor thematic and formal elements that several art horror films had already developed – as various articles of this issue do –, I believe it is nonetheless useful to envision them as forming a distinct cycle, even though doing so requires taking all the methodological precautions mentioned above. Just as slashers did not invent blade-wielding antagonists, post-horror films may not have invented many, if not all, of the semantic and syntactic elements which characterize them, but they

do represent a turning point in that for the first time, these elements have been shared by a large number of films released during a short timeframe, so that they have come to represent an alternative take on horror cinema, eliciting specific expectations and developing easily recognizable conventions. In other words, post-horror may be envisioned as a cycle, not because the films share characteristics that clearly sets them apart from all art horror films, but because the post-horror cycle represents the first time that art horror films formed a coherent body of work with some level of thematic and formal consistency.

Before post-horror, art horror films tended to be seen as isolated works made by *auteurs* desirous to toy with the genre to better distort it from within. With the possible exception of German expressionist films in the 1920s, art horror films were perceived as an inherently oppositional form of cinema – the works of maverick *auteurs* opposing the generic constraints of mainstream horror by integrating art film conventions into the genre. Art horror cinema was therefore liable to gain some level of critical recognition among non-specialized critics yet at the same time, it risked being rejected by traditional horror fans as looking down on the genre it attempted to transcend. See, for instance, the hostile reaction of a horror film buff such as Pauline Kael upon the release of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, which she saw as excessively cold and intellectual, a film made by a man incapable of appreciating the "true" appeal of horror cinema (Kael, 1980). In 1979, Robin Wood argued that the works that would come to be called art horror films frequently fail to attract viewers due to their perceived elitism – as many regular art films do: "most horror films make money; the ones that don't are those with overt intellectual pretensions, obviously 'difficult' works like *God Told Me To* (*Demon*) and *Exorcist II: The Heretic*" (Wood, 2018: 82).[4]

Like the 1970s films described by Wood, post-horror films also tend to be more critically acclaimed in non-specialized media than other horror films, and several of them have been rejected by the public as horror made for non-horror fans. Yet the large number of commercially successful films released in the 2010s – from *Get Out* to *Hereditary* – shows that post-horror may represent the first cycle of art horror films to have established art horror as a potentially profitable subgenre of horror. It therefore comes as no surprise that whereas most art horror films used to be made by filmmakers who had already established their reputations as *auteurs*

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4.   Naturally, it would be erroneous to affirm, following Wood, that art horror films were never commercially successful before the post-horror cycle – films such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968), or *The Sixth Sense* are obvious counterexamples. Nonetheless, these were all one-shot successes which never gave birth to a streak of profitable art horror films the way the first post-horror films did. In fact, whenever a cycle of films attempted to capitalize on the success of an art horror film, the resulting films tended to be perceived as exploitative B-horror bearing few of the art horror characteristics of their forebears. Cf., for instance, William Castle's *Psycho*-like 1961 *Homicidal*.

before turning to horror – Roman Polanski, Stanley Kubrick, Pier Paolo Pasolini, John Boorman –, many young directors – Jordan Peele, Ari Aster, Robert Eggers, Oz Perkins – were entrusted by the studios to make their first feature films a post-horror film.

Why did the mid-2010s see so many relatively successful art horror films? While it is impossible to say with certainty, I would mention two determining factors. It may notably be the result of the critical reevaluation of horror cinema from the 1990s onwards, giving birth to a new generation of scholars, viewers and filmmakers who grew up considering horror as a respectable genre – thus leading many young directors desirous to establish themselves as *auteurs* to invest the genre. Undoubtedly, this cycle also resulted from the willingness of several independent production and distribution companies – chief of which A24, the company behind the films of Ari Aster and Robert Eggers –[5] to make horror films while attempting to set their works apart from the rest of the production.

When does post-horror begin and end?

The centrality of A24 in the constitution of post-horror makes it relatively easy to approximately establish when post-horror started, as the birth of the cycle more or less coincides with the first commercial successes of the company. It was founded in 2012 – the year Peter Strickland's *Berberian Sound Studio* (sometimes regarded as a precursor to post-horror) came out. In 2014, A24 released *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer), a film which arguably bears some of the characteristics of post-horror, while two other non-A24 films released that year – *The Babadook* and *It Follows* – are now widely considered as the first landmarks of post-horror. A24 would then distribute *The Witch* in 2015, and a myriad of other horror films later on. Therefore, one could safely argue post-horror was born between 2012 and 2015. By 2022, it had become so easily recognizable as to be jokingly referred to in the fifth installment of *Scream* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett). However, in mid-2024, as I write this introduction, it is much less clear whether post-horror will continue to be one of horror's main current trends for much longer.

While 2022 has seen new horror films bearing most of the characteristics of post-horror – from Alex Garland's *Men* to Kyle Edward Ball's *Skinamarink* –, it seems fewer were released in 2023. In addition, many of the landmark directors associated with the cycle may now be steering away from horror. After releasing the horror comedy *Beau is Afraid* in 2023,

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5.   The pivotal role of A24 is examined in an article of this issue.

Ari Aster is set to direct a Western (Ruimy, 2023), while the last films of Robert Eggers (*The Northman,* 2022) and Jordan Peele (*Nope*, 2022) had little to do with post-horror – on the other hand, Eggers is about to come back to the genre with his planned remake of Friedrich W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu,* and David Robert Mitchell, who stepped away from post-horror after *It Follows,* has recently announced his intention to shoot a sequel entitled *They Follow.* And even though A24 keeps on producing numerous horror films, most of the company's most successful recent horrific releases – Ty West's *X* trilogy (2022-2024), Halina Rejin's *Bodies Bodies Bodies* (2022) or Danny and Michael Philippou's *Talk to Me* (2023) – are not easily identifiable as instances of post-horror. *Talk to Me,* for instance, does focus on a central theme of post-horror – grief – but the film relies heavily on jump scares and adopts a fast-paced rhythm, thus moving away from two of the main formal tenets of post-horror.[6] I do not wish to imply that such films are somehow inferior to "pure" post-horror films or in any way "derivative". As Janet Staiger pointed out (1997), the belief in the purity of a genre often rests on a selective interpretation of a genre's history and believing that one ought to distinguish between "core" and "peripheral" instances of a genre "can easily degenerate into a contest over 'purity'" (Leeder, 2018: 97). We have seen that *Get Out* may be as peripheral as *Talk to Me* from a stylistic point of view, and yet the former is usually considered one of the foremost instances of post-horror!

I simply wish to suggest that the departure of some of the leading post-horror directors to other genres, combined with the diversification of A24, means that starting in 2023, fewer films were released that could unambiguously be labelled as new instances of post-horror, so that it is likely future film historians may consider the core of the cycle spanned from the mid-2010s to the early to mid-2020s. Beyond the specific case of A24 productions, there seem to be more and more films mixing some of the core characteristics of post-horror (a focus on grief, racial or gender issues, dysfunctional family relationships) with some of the characteristics most antithetical to post-horror, such as a heavy reliance on jump scares. Let us mention *The Invisible Man* (Leigh Wannell, 2020), *Smile* (Parker Finn, 2022), or even *Halloween Ends* (David Gordon Green, 2022), whose focus on trauma adds a distinctly post-horror feel to the last installment of the celebrated slasher franchise.[7] This growing hybridization of "traditional" horror and post-horror may be interpreted as a sign that post-horror may cease to stand out as a distinct cycle in the next few years. Naturally, such an assertion is purely speculative.

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6. Unlike *X, Pearl* and *Bodies Bodies Bodies, Talk to Me* does, however, fit the definition of post-horror according to another characteristic – subverting the perceived formula – I develop below.

7. Jamie Lee Curtis insisted upon the film's focus on trauma in so many promotional interviews that her multiples utterances of the word were turned into a popular internet meme.

The horror of post-horror

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As previously mentioned, Church argues one of the key characteristics of post-horror is its focus on "lingering dread" over other horrific affects (Church, 2021: 1), also pointing out that the films tend to eschew "explicit gore" scenes (Church, 2021: 181). This may be a key reason explaining why the cycle has often been accused of reintroducing a hierarchy within the genre of horror. Indeed, dread has long been perceived as the most refined affect horror may produce. Throughout history, the genre of horror and its various siblings (the Gothic, the fantastic, etc.) have often been looked down on, and the artists working within these genres seeking critical recognition have frequently pitted the feeling of dread they strived to elicit against other horrific affects in order to distinguish their works from more "vulgar" counterparts.

In her essay "On the Supernatural", Ann Radcliffe, one of the first authors of Gothic fiction, famously opposed horror and terror (Radcliffe, 2017). While horror refers to the vulgar thrills felt when a character encounters a monster or is subjected to violence, terror describes the feeling of dread one feels when facing the unknown and fearing a dangerous or supernatural encounter. Terror, for Radcliffe, is a far more worthy affect to pursue, as it leads to the sublime, the most noble sentiment gothic fiction may produce. This hierarchizing of horror continues to impact the reception of the genre up to this day. In his 1978 *Danse Macabre,* Stephen King makes a distinction between terror (letting the readers imagine the monster), horror (describing the monster) and revulsion (describing the revulsive acts of the monster), and argues that producing terror is his ultimate goal, even though he sometimes reluctantly aims for horror or revulsion (King, 2012). So firmly established is this distinction that horror films privileging gore and graphic violence over dread are still considered by many as the least respectable form of horror. As Philippe Rouyer points out, even gore film directors sometimes refuse to acknowledge their interest in gore: "For a Herschell Gordon Lewis or a Peter Jackson claiming that "my motto is: 'the gorier, the better'", how many others rather think, like Tom Holland, that gore "is the last recourse of the talentless"" (Rouyer, 1997: 19). In the last few decades, however, fans and critics such as Philippe Rouyer have attempted to reevaluate graphic horror as a worthy pursuit.

One may therefore understand the frustration of such fans and critics against art horror[8] and post-horror films which tend to favor the

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8. When coining the term art horror, Joan Hawkins actually referred to avant-garde films seeking to elicit revulsion and disgust through graphic images, like Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975), as the purpose of her book was to discuss "the way that consumers of both low and high culture, during the postwar period, attempted to define themselves in opposition to a dominant mainstream taste aesthetic" (2000: 205) in

supposedly more noble dread. However, a closer look at post-horror films reveals that several directors of the cycle do not wholeheartedly reject gore and other forms of horrific imagery eliciting revulsion. From the rotting severed head of the family's daughter in *Hereditary* to the smashed corpses of the elders committing suicide in *Midsommar*, Ari Aster always includes lengthy gore shots in his work. In *The Lighthouse,* Robert Eggers repeatedly shows hallucinatory close-up shots of tentacular, slimy marine creatures liable to disgust viewers. In *Get Out,* Jordan Peele revels in filming the gory details of Chris killing his oppressors. One might therefore argue that despite their reputation for cultural elitism, post-horror directors often challenge the High/Low dichotomy of dread vs graphic horror. Nonetheless, this assertion is to be nuanced, as disgust and revulsion are never the dominant affects elicited by post-horror films, even during the most gruesome scenes. For instance, while the lengthy close-up shot of the daughter's rotting head in *Hereditary* may disgust viewers, this shot is part of a scene stressing the mother's suffering after losing her daughter, so that the feelings of grief and psychological turmoil trump that of revulsion throughout the whole scene.

Challenging the perceived formula

As we have seen, the thematic and formal commonalities previously identified as symptomatic of post-horror pose certain taxonomical problems, since some films are considered as belonging to the corpus for essentially thematic reasons, and others for essentially formal reasons. In both cases, however, it appears that for a film to be considered as an instance of post-horror, it needs be perceived as a horror film challenging the basic formula of horror cinema. Naturally, countless other horror films also challenge the characteristics seen as the genre's basic formula, and one might even argue that as soon as a genre is sufficiently codified for filmmakers and viewers to perceive a formulaic set of characteristics, any film released within that genre will, one way or another, seek to challenge it. It is therefore in the way post-horror films challenge the horrific formula that they may be recognized as a distinct horrific cycle. The various aforementioned formal and thematic characteristics – lack of jumpscare, focus on grief, etc. – all participate to fostering the feeling of a specifically "post-horror way" of challenging the formula. To finish this introduction, I will add two characteristics to the list. Here too, not all the films considered as post-horror share these characteristics, but enough of them do that these may be considered as symptomatic of the cycle.

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order to argue that "low and high culture are always linked, always dialectically paired" (2000: 215). Beyond this specific form of avant-garde cinema, however, there is little doubt that many art horror films favor dread over gore.

The first one concerns both horror's archetypal narrative structure and its perceived ideological subtext. In his landmark 1979 article, Robin Wood attempted to identify the ideological underpinnings of horror cinema, which led him to come up with "a simple and basic formula for the horror film: normality is threatened by the monster" (Wood, 2018: 83). This formula, Wood argued, holds true for both the most progressive and the most reactionary of horror films, the difference between both extremes lying in the films' propensities to encourage the viewers to either identify with or reject a monster symbolizing the threatening emergence of an other standing for everything our society represses (79). And while he suggested that horror may be the most potentially subversive of all film genres, since "central to the effect and fascination of horror films is their fulfillment of our nightmare wish to smash the norms that oppress us and that our moral conditioning teaches us to revere" (85), Wood also noted that horror films often contain a happy ending which typically signifies "the restoration of repression" (79). Wood's theory remains a pillar of horror studies which has profoundly influenced the perception of horror cinema. Adam Lowenstein recently challenged the theory, which he considers as too rigidly dichotomic, arguing that the relationship between normality and monstrous otherness developed in horror films is much more fluid than what Wood's analysis entails – an ongoing and constantly evolving struggle rather than a fixed opposition. For Lowenstein, "horror never settles into comforting solutions and certainties about 'progressive' or 'reactionary' approaches to otherness" (6). In addition, Lowenstein suggests, most horror films end up questioning the boundary between normality and monstrous otherness, as in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) in which, by the end of the film, there is "no easy way to distinguish between [zombies and humans]" (10).

In keeping with Lowenstein's understanding of the horrific formula, post-horror films all blur the boundary between monstrousness and normality. However, the narrative strategies employed to do so frequently differ from previous horror films, since post-horror films tend to reject the narrative dichotomy of normality/monstrous otherness altogether. In many post-horror films, the monster is not a repressed other threatening normality: the monster is an expression of normality itself.[9] According to Wood, normality "in horror films is in general boringly constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them" (Wood, 2018: 84). Lowenstein criticizes Wood's portrayal, suggesting that "normality and monstrosity are variations on self and other that cannot

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9. Naturally, there are obvious antecedents in which the monster also explicitly stems from normality, chief of which *Psycho*. However, in *Psycho*, Norman Bates' sexual repression and schizophrenia still allow for the character to be understood as a monstrous other, though one created by an apparently normal White middle-class household and, symbolically, by oppressive American sexual and social mores.

be fixed but are always shifting, always metamorphosing." (6). However, post-horror films often do focus on the archetypal instances of normality identified by Wood, yet they unambiguously depict them as inherently monstrous. Let us take the example of a fundamental unit of normality in American horror cinema: the white nuclear family. Earlier films such as *Rosemary's Baby* or *The Shining* already displaced monstrosity within the family unit itself, but the emergence of the monster was caused by some foreign influence (satanic neighbors or ghosts), thus establishing the traditional dichotomy of normality/monstrous otherness before complexifying it. In *Hereditary,* Paimon, the demon that tortures the white upper middle-class family, is summoned by the family's very matriarch (the dead grandmother) before inhabiting the daughter, the mother and the son. In *The Babadook,* in *The Witch* and in *Relic* (Natalie Erika James, 2020), the monster emerges as an outgrowth of the tensions, the frustrations and the traumas inherent to the family unit.

Another illustration of post-horror's portrayal of monstrous normality can be found in *The Blackcoat's Daughter* (Oz Perkins, 2015) which, like *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) focuses on another staple of normality – a young white girl – possessed by a demon. Unlike Friedkin's character, the young girl of Perkins's film wishes to be possessed, thus actively trying to become monstrous. Likewise, As David Church analyses, the monster of *It Follows* expresses the horror inherent to the sexual practice considered as the norm, heterosexual monogamy (Church, 2021: 181-212). Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) may prove a counterexample as it posits a more traditional opposition between normality and monstrous otherness: the monsters are underground doppelgangers spawned by the normal inhabitants living above ground. However, the way that initial dichotomy is eventually blurred is in keeping with the post-horror focus on monstrous normality. Rather than eventually suggest monsters and normal characters mirror one another, as *Night of the Living Dead* does, *Us* fully abolishes the distinction between the two since a twist eventually reveals the main protagonist was actually an underground dweller all along.

Some post-horror films retain a structural opposition between heroes and monsters, and never end up blurring the boundary between the two. But more often than not, those which do so define the heroes as members of social minorities, while the monsters yet again embody normality, here understood as the socially dominant group – be it Whites, men, or white men. Most prominently, *Get Out* shows a White liberal[10] American

10. The film's focus on a monstrous upstate New York liberal family is essential for the Armitages to embody a form of monstrous normality. As Claire Dutriaux points out, throughout the 20th century, films showing White monsters often focused on characters portrayed as rednecks, thus symbolically othering White monsters as backwards rural Southerners (2022).

family as monstrous.[11] In *Men,* as in *The Invisible Man* (Leigh Whannell, 2020) – a film often left out of the post-horror canon even though director Leigh Whannell himself stated his intention to make the film a work of "elevated horror" (Whannell, 2020) – the monster embodies a toxic form of heterosexual masculinity. Such a focus on monstrous normality may explain why post-horror has been perceived as a distinctly liberal cycle of films, in spite of the fact countless other horror films released before also developed liberal themes.[12]

In addition to challenging the normality/monster dichotomy, many post-horror films also seek to rework the very figure of the monster and to break away from past cinematic embodiments of monstrosity. Various films explore the possibility of horror without either supernatural or human monsters. In *It Comes at Night* (Trey Edward Shults, 2017), most of humankind has been wiped out by a disease, and the few survivors mistrust and kill all aliens for the sake of protecting their family; and even though the film's title and atmosphere suggest the disease has turned the victims into zombies or other monstrous figures, no such monster is ever shown throughout the film. On the other hand, *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017) does show its eponymous ghost in almost every scene, yet the ghost hardly fits the generic expectations of what a monster is, both formally – the creature is stereotypically represented as a man covered in a white sheet – and thematically – it does not haunt the living but simply observes them.

Like *A Ghost Story*, various films rework some of the most archetypal monsters of the horror genre. Witches (*The Witch*), demons (*Hereditary*), body snatchers (*Get Out*), boogeymen (*The Babadook*), possessed children (*The Blackcoat's Daughter*) and archaic communities (*Midsommar*) abound in post-horror. The films seeking to reinvest these archetypal figures purport to offer a fresh take on these creatures not by playing with previous filmic representations of these monsters, but by discarding these previous representations altogether. I do not mean to imply that no post-horror film draws any inspiration from previous filmic representations of monsters, although some indeed do not: as Jean-Baptiste Carobolante argues, "a film like *The Witch* does not seek to go back to

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11. In this regard, *Get Out* exemplifies post-horror's tendency to turn the monster into an expression of normality, and can be compared to *Candiman* (2021), directed by Nia DaCosta and produced by Peele. Both films similarly focus on the ravages of racism, yet treat it very differently. *Candiman* is in keeping with Wood's formula as the monster is indeed a repressed other – here, a Black Man. Tellingly, Da Costa's film is the remake of Bernard Rose's 1992 version, and therefore does not distort the normality/monstrous other dichotomy the way most post-horror films do.

12. Naturally, focusing on monstrous normality does not prevent the relation between normality and otherness in post-horror films from being developed with the same complexity and nuance that Lowenstein perceives in the horror genre as a whole and which, in his opinion, justifies rejecting the rigid binarity of Wood's opposition between progressive and conservative horror films. In fact, Lowenstein examines two post-horror films, *The Babadook* and *Get Out*, in his own book (2022: 129-182).

the roots of witch movies – rather, it seeks to go back to the roots of the archaic belief in witchcraft" (2024: 244).[13] Some, like *Midsommar,* clearly drew inspiration from previous films (in this case *The Wicker Man,* Robin Hardy, 1973) to portray their monsters. However, post-horror films tend to allow viewers to discard the weight of past filmic representations of archetypal monsters, developing a form of suspension of disbelief that allows viewers to engage with these monsters as if they were encountering such creatures for the first time. In this regard, post-horror films radically differ from postmodern horror films such as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), filled with intertextual references to previous filmic monsters and metafilmic acknowledgements that their monsters are indeed cultural archetypes. Carobolante's claim that "[Ari Aster] knows the history of horror cinema, but rather than winking at it, he chooses to absorb it and start anew" (2024: 244 – my translation) therefore seems fit to describe the work of several post-horror directors, and I fully share Carobolante's belief that in this regard, these directors develop a "neo-classical view of horror" (2024: 243 – my translation).[14]

Outline of the issue

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In this introduction, I have argued in favor of considering post-horror as a distinct cycle of films, but the first article of this issue offers a very welcome alternative perspective. In « *Que reste-t-il de l'horreur dans l'*elevated Horror ? » (one of the two articles in French in this issue), Philippe Ortoli argues that if a genre or subgenre is to be defined by a set of aesthetic criteria, then the very concept of post-horror poses a problem, since none of the films' formal or thematic characteristics are unique to the cycle. On the other hand, in "A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?", Antoine Simms examines the status of the studio which, for many, is synonymous with post-horror, and wonders whether A24 films share a distinctive style. Simms argues that a "collective affect" emanates from A24 films, one that stems from the studio's "metamodern" sensibility.

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13. This might explain why vampires are so far absent from the post-horror cycle. Indeed, several films, from *Nosferatu The Vampyre* (Werner Herzog, 1976) to *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992) had already sought to reinvent this figure by discarding previous filmic representations, long before post-horror. Nonetheless, this should soon change as Robert Eggers is set to release a new version of Friedrich W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu.* One may assume that, as in Herzog's version, adapting Murnau's seminal vampire film will enable Eggers to disregard the countless other filmic representations of the monster.

14. Which does not mean that post-horror films have no metafilmic ambitions. As various articles of this issue point out, post-horror films often develop a reflection upon the nature of images and upon the relationship between fiction and reality, thus fitting Patricia Waugh's definition of the metafilm (1984). However, as is apparent in the articles of these issues, their metafilmic reflections often entail little to no overt intertextual references to and overt quotations of specific horror films, unlike postmodern horror films.

The question of post-horror's place within contemporary audiovisual productions also infuses the next article of this issue, "Of Mothers and Witches: Performative Spaces of Femininity in "Post-Horror" Works, from *Antichrist* to *Sharp Objects*". Lucie Patronnat analyzes the topic of femininity and witchcraft in three post-horror films – *The Witch, Hereditary,* and *Hagazussa* (Lukas Feigelfeld, 2017) – as well as in an earlier film (Lars Von Trier's 2008 *Antichrist*) and a miniseries (*Sharp Objects*, Jean-Marc Vallée, 2018) – and highlights the works' thematic and aesthetic coherence in their portrayal of femininity. The following article, "Lee Haven Jones, *The Feast* (2021): a Tale of Retaliation", also focuses on the figure of the witch. Céline Crégut studies the character of the witch in Welsh film *The Feast* and highlights its ambiguous and multifaceted function, simultaneously a symbol of Welsh cultural resilience, an image of nature retaliating against modernity and industrialism, and a catalyst of modern flaws and weaknesses.

In my own article, "Embracing the Horrific Other: Problematizing Identification, Cultural Relativism and Empathy in Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019)", I examine the tendency of post-horror films to offer a fresh take on the normality/otherness dichotomy central to the horror genre. *Midsommar*, I argue, challenges the assumption that horror films enable viewers to identify with others, and metafilmically questions cinema's very capacity to enable viewers to embrace the worldviews of others. Gilles Menegaldo then focuses on another work considered a core film of the cycle, *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017). As the article's title points out, Lowery's film may indeed be deemed a "Quintessential Post-horror Film". However, Menegaldo argues that the film also blurs the generic boundaries between horror, gothic, fantasy, melodrama and even comedy. The following article focuses on another archetypal monster, the zombie. Zombie films create a form of corporeal horror that may seem antonymous with post-horror. Yet in "*The Girl with all the Gifts*, Colm McCarthy (2016), as post-horror, post-apocalyptic, post-modern and post-Romero zombie film", Hubert Le Boisselier, drawing on both ecocriticism and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, shows that Colm McCarthy's film develops a specific grotesque imagery that does connect the film to the post-horror cycle.

The next three articles all examine the work of one of post-horror's leading directors, Jordan Peele. In "You'd better look twice!: Annexation and De/Colonization of the Gaze in Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017)", Isabelle Labrouillère sheds light on *Get Out*'s metafilmic dimension. Labrouillère shows that *Get Out* questions our gaze as well as the power of images in order to lay bare the clichés with which our societies have internalized the horror of racism. In doing so, she argues, Peele's film both decenters and decolonializes the viewers' gaze. In this issue's second article in French,

Georges Pillegand Le Rider then examines the intermedial links between Peele's films and Edgard Allan Poe's literary work. Pillegand Le Rider shows that not only do the films of Jordan Peele echo and pay tribute to the master of horror, they also intertextually adapt Poesque motifs to develop contemporary takes on race and gender. Finally, Yann Robloux's article, "Contemporary Trouble in America: *Us*, Jordan Peele, 2019", studies the complex portrayal of the United States developed in Peele's second feature film. Robloux suggests that by depicting what troubles the surface of America's representation of itself, *Us* makes apparent the nation's fractures and disconnections, while questioning its very identity.

While Jordan Peele is undoubtedly the most famous Black director whose work has been linked to post-horror, others have also contributed to cement the links between Black horror and post-horror. In the last article of this issue, Sophie Mantrant focuses on the first feature film of British director Remi Weekes, *His House*. In "Revisiting the Haunted House: Remi Weekes's *His House* (2020)", Mantrant studies the film's uncommon generic hybridization of horror cinema and social realism. Centered on an immigrant couple from South Sudan, *His House* revisits the *topos* of the haunted house and, Mantrant argues, develops a double narrative of liminality exploring the feeling of "(not)-at-homeness".

Together, these articles help shed light on the formal and thematic complexity of post-horror, while contributing to further situating the films within the broader history of horror cinema. That is why I want to thank all the authors for their rich and stimulating contributions to the issue. My thanks also go to David Church for his valued feedback on this introduction, as well as to all the reviewers who contributed to this issue and to Yannick Bellanger-Morvan for guiding me throughout the whole editorial process.

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