

# A24 and Post-Horror: A Metamodern Studio for a Metamodern Cycle?



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**Abstract:** This paper examines A24's hegemonic status within the post-horror cycle, exploring how the studio's distinct metamodern sensibility has contributed to its success. Through an analysis of A24's history, branding strategies and film content, this study argues that A24's metamodern approach — characterized by oscillations between sincerity and irony, pragmatism and idealism — has allowed it to position itself as a generational touchstone at the forefront of cultural relevance. Though A24's metamodern sensibility appears most evident in its marketing strategies and “mini-major” studio ethos, this research claims that it also permeates some of the recurring motifs of its post-horror catalogue — namely its treatment of the supernatural, use of jump scares and portrayal of nudity. Rather than defining metamodernism as central to post-horror however, the study suggests that it primarily shapes the “collective affect” surrounding A24's brand identity, which in turn resonates with some of the cycle's characteristic traits.

**Keywords:** A24, Post-Horror, Elevated Horror, Hollywood, Film Studios, Film Marketing, Metamodernism, Postmodernism, Post-Postmodernism, Cultural Studies, Fan Studies, Affect Theory, Robert Eggers, Ari Aster, David Lowery, Alex Garland, Jump Scares, Supernatural, Nudity

**Résumé :** Cet article s'interroge sur le statut hégémonique du studio A24 au sein du cycle du « *post-horror* » en explorant la manière dont sa sensibilité métamoderne a contribué à son succès. À travers une analyse de l'histoire de A24, de ses stratégies de *marketing* et du contenu de ses films, notre étude soutient que l'approche métamoderne de A24 – caractérisée par des oscillations entre sincérité et ironie, pragmatisme et idéalisme – lui a permis de se positionner en tant que fer de lance d'une nouvelle tendance culturelle dominante. Bien que la sensibilité métamoderne de A24 se manifeste le plus clairement dans ses stratégies marketing et son statut de « *mini-major* », cette recherche avance qu'elle imprègne également certains des motifs du catalogue « *post-horror* » de A24 – notamment dans son traitement du surnaturel, son

utilisation des « *jump scares* » et sa représentation de la nudité. Plutôt que de définir le métamodernisme comme une donnée centrale du « *post-horror* », l'étude suggère qu'il façonne principalement « l'affect collectif » émanant de l'identité de marque de A24, qui à son tour entre en résonance avec certains des motifs saillants du cycle.

**Mots-clés :** A24, Films d'horreur, Post-Horror, Elevated Horror, Hollywood, studios de cinéma, marketing du cinéma, métamodernisme, postmodernisme, post-postmodernisme, Cultural Studies, Fan Studies, Affect Theory, Robert Eggers, Ari Aster, David Lowery, Alex Garland, Jump Scares, surnaturel, nudité

## Introduction

In July 2017, *Guardian* columnist Steve Rose coined the term “post-horror” to describe an emerging trend in horror cinema. In his article, he hinted at the importance of film studio A24, claiming that “if anyone’s pushing horror into new realms, it’s them” (Rose, 2017). However, he did not expand on the exact nature of A24’s role or the extent of its involvement in said trend.

Four years later, David Church reclaimed Rose’s neologism and published the first academic book on the topic, favoring the term “cycle” instead of “trend”. Out of the eighteen films that he included in his list of primary texts for a provisional corpus of the cycle, eight were either produced and/or distributed by the film company A24 (Church, 2021: 14).<sup>1</sup> Such a number both confirms the importance of A24 and puts it in perspective. More than half of the post-horror films listed by Church are *not* affiliated with A24. An observation that may come off as sobering to those who would hold A24 and post-horror as synonymous.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, the idea of having a film studio be the powerhouse of a horror cycle would seem in keeping with tradition. Indeed, it could be argued that most horror cycles have been — in part or completely — “in-house cycles”. Universal Studios’ monster films in the 1930s, RKO’s atmospheric, low-budget horror pictures of the 1940s, or Hammer Films’ idiosyncratic

1. The list includes: *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2014), *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2016), *The Blackcoat’s Daughter* (Osgood Perkins, 2017), *It Comes at Night* (Trey Edward Shults, 2017), *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019) and *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019). At the time of writing, A24 has distributed at least two horror films — *Lamb* (Valdimar Jóhannsson, 2021) and *Men* (Alex Garland, 2022) — that would be likely candidates for an updated version of this corpus. *Saint-Maud* (Rose Glass, 2019), released just before the publication of Church’s book, could also have been a fitting addition.
2. A good example of such a discourse can be found in an article written by Hannah Saab and Diego Pineda Pacheco for *Collider* which lists many of the films present in Church’s corpus of post-horror films — including *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *Raw* (Julia Ducournau, 2016) and *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016) — as “films that may feel like they were produced by A24, but actually weren’t”, even going as far as to wonder if they maybe are “more A24 than A24” (Pineda Pacheco & Saab, 2023).

“Hammer horror” are just a few of the more famous, early examples of this phenomenon (Brannan, 2021: 2-10). In the case of post-horror however, such a concept is not without its own set of challenges and shortcomings. Most notably, because positing that a studio could serve as its primary catalyst seems to directly contradict the commonly accepted definition of the cycle as horror films with an auteurist approach.

How, then, has A24 earned its status as a leading figure within post-horror? And to what degree does this standing hold merit?

To answer these questions, this paper shall delve into A24’s rich history as it relates to post-horror, paying particular attention to an aspect that has so far been left out of academic discourse: the shaping of A24’s “niche branding strategies” (Brannan, 2021: 144).<sup>3</sup> In doing so, I will argue that a key element to understand the studio’s place within the post-horror discourse lies in its distinct metamodern brand identity. Metamodernism, as defined by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in their essay *Notes on Metamodernism*, can be understood as “characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 2). It describes a dominant shift in sensibility emerging in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which not only coincides with the emergence of A24 and the post-horror cycle but has also been associated with — as well as claimed by — prominent A24-affiliated directors.<sup>4</sup> This specific structure of feeling, I contend, accounts for the studio’s hegemonic position within post-horror, as it aligns with the dominant cultural paradigm of its time. Yet, to what extent does this sensibility — most evident in the studio’s ethos and branding strategies — permeate and characterize post-horror cinema itself?

### From “Indie” Distributor to “Mini-Major”

In the span of only one decade since its creation, A24 has transformed from an obscure distribution company to one of the most influential studios in Hollywood, garnering an impressive tally of forty-nine Oscar nominations, resulting in a remarkable sixteen victories. A success

3. As Alexander Joseph Brannan remarks at the end of his work on A24 and the elevated horror: “It would be worthwhile to examine A24’s niche branding practices in more depth, particularly in relation to the practices of other contemporary independents.” (Brannan, 2021: 144)
4. Daniel Kwan, co-director of A24’s biggest success to date *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), has described his own work as metamodern (Puchko, 2022). A24-affiliated films *Eight Grade* (dir. Bo Burnham, 2018) as well as *Ladybird* (dir. Greta Gerwig, 2017) have also been associated with the label (Dember, 2018; Roberts, 2019). Yet, to my knowledge, all of these associations have remained outside of the horror realm.

that seems far from waning, as eighteen of these nominations and nine of these victories were only just obtained at the 2023 Oscar ceremony, which according to the *Los Angeles Times* was a record for any independent distributor.<sup>5</sup> This edition’s triumph was owed in large part to the presence of Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert’s<sup>6</sup> *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), which was also the company’s biggest box office hit to date, exceeding \$140 million in ticket sales worldwide on a mere \$25 million investment (Sakoui, 2023). Such critical and commercial prowess coming from an independent studio is all the more noteworthy as only 3.4% of independent film companies in the U.S. generate profit, while a vast majority — 90% — fail to secure a theatrical deal (Gabriele, 2023).

Founded in 2012 by three American producers Daniel Katz, David Fenkel and John Hodges, A24 — or A24 Films — as it was initially called, began as a New York-based independent company working exclusively in distribution. Initially a startup, it is said to have adopted a Silicon Valley-inspired horizontal structure, encouraging bold and disruptive ideas (Gabriele, 2023; Barnes, 2018).

They achieved their first breakout success while working on the release of Harmonie Korine’s experimental film *Spring Breakers* (2012), which they marketed as a mainstream teen comedy, using “memetic content” to lead a mostly online-based viral campaign. Since then, they have gained recognition for their penchant for unconventional publicity stunts and their utilization of cutting-edge digital techniques, including the strategic application of big data.<sup>7</sup> For the promotion of *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014), for instance, A24 used an A.I. generated bot to mislead or “catfish” suitors on a dating app by sending them a link to an Instagram account inviting them to go see the film in theaters (Goldszal, 2022).<sup>8</sup> Such tech-savvy strategies highly benefited the small studio, especially at a time when older, bigger studios were slow to adapt to the fast-evolving codes of online culture.

Concomitantly, A24 was able to limit its initial spending by focusing exclusively on the distribution of small arthouse films that were pre-selected in reputable independent film festivals like Sundance. This strategy

5. At the time of writing, the 2023 Oscar ceremony was the latest edition. While the 2024 ceremony saw fewer accolades for A24, it was notable for the two awards won by the A24-distributed film *The Zone of Interest* (Jonathan Glazer, 2023).

6. Also known as “the Daniels”.

7. As *New York Times* journalist Brooks Barnes details, A24 is estimated to spend around 95% of its marketing budget online. Watson/DG, a “web-focused marketing agency” as well as Operam, a “stealth data and marketing start-up” have helped A24 develop algorithms to target specific audiences on social media platforms “in ways that prompts movie lovers to feel a sense of discovery and pass the message on organically” (Barnes, 2018).

8. Similarly, for the promotion of *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015), A24 created Twitter (now X) accounts for the different characters of the film, including the satanic goat. For *Hereditary* (Ari Aster, 2018), they distributed eerie dolls to influencers and critics (Sanders, 2022).

also enabled them to develop the reputation of a company favoring the artistic over the commercial, while securing a strong following amongst a very select audience of cinephiles. Such a stance answered to a growing demand in a market dominated by sequels and reboots.

In 2016, a major turning point in A24’s burgeoning history took place, as the company made its debut in film production with none other than *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) which caused a stir by surpassing Lionsgate’s *La La Land* (Damien Chazelle, 2016) and winning the 2017 Oscar for best picture. From then on, A24 cemented its status as a key player in the industry both as a distribution and production studio.

Often dubbed a “*Miramax for millennials*” (Guédon, 2022), A24 has built its reputation by fostering relationships with a vast array of emerging young directors who have birthed some of the most critically acclaimed auteur films of the past decade, including Greta Gerwig, Sean Baker, Yorgos Lanthimos, Kelly Reichardt, the Safdie Brothers and the Daniels — just to name a few of their non-horror affiliated directors. It has also successfully supported the first directorial efforts of famous comedians like Jonah Hill (*Mid90s*, 2018) or Bo Burnham (*Eighth Grade*, 2018), as well as collaborated with pop and hip-hop superstars like Drake, Travis Scott and Megan Thee Stallion (Goldszal, 2022). Such collaborations account for A24 often being described as having its finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist and being a “trendsetter” for the rest of the industry (Lodge, 2023).

In 2019, A24 successfully transitioned to the production of TV series, with the Emmy-winning hit *Euphoria* for HBO.<sup>9</sup> It also made numerous deals with streaming platforms and is now operating worldwide. The current valuation of the studio — at the time of writing — is of \$2.5 billion (Sakoui, 2023).

Much like Miramax in its heyday, A24 has grown so big and influential that it has earned the title of “mini-major”, a kind of intermediary status attributed to large independent companies which compete directly with the Big Five Hollywood major studios. As journalist Nate Jones noted for *Vox*, A24 actually releases more films than certain major studios. In 2022 alone, it put out twenty films, which is two more than a major studio like Paramount (Vega, 2023).<sup>10</sup>

9. Averaging 20 million viewers for its second season, *Euphoria* is HBO’s “second-most-watched show since 1994, behind *Game of Thrones*” (Gabriele, 2019).
10. As Jones argues, A24 actually floods the market with films, but has a knack for having their more mediocre productions “fly off the radar” by selling them to online streaming platforms. Thus, A24 is able to maintain the illusion that a large portion of its catalog is of exceptionally high quality (Vega, 2023).

## An Intrinsic Connection to Post-Horror

Hailing A24 as synonymous with post-horror may seem quite paradoxical when one considers that so far, the films or TV shows that I identified as instrumental to A24's ascent — *Moonlight* (2016), *Euphoria* (2019-), *Everything Every Where All at Once* (2022)... — do *not* belong to the cycle, let alone the horror genre in general. And yet, A24's surge to popularity coincides almost perfectly with that of the post-horror cycle. A correlation that, according to Alexander Joseph Brannan — who wrote his master's thesis on A24 and post-horror — is no coincidence:

A24's rise to prominence in American independent cinema coincides with the rise in popularity of the elevated horror cycle. I believe this correlation is no coincidence. No company has done more to promote elevated horror and give filmmakers working with that aesthetic a platform to present their work (Brannan, 2021: 99).

As I have noted in my introduction, the horror genre has evolved mostly through “in-house cycles”. In the 2000s, the two dominant cycles were the “neo-grindhouse” or “torture porn” cycle spearheaded by Lionsgate, and the “found footage” cycle, mostly produced by Paramount. By the late 2000s, both cycles were waning, and the market seemed to polarize around blockbuster franchises produced by the majors, like Warner's *The Conjuring* (Wan, 2013) or *Annabelle* (Leonetti, 2014) on the one hand, and independently produced, arthouse “post-horror” on the other (Brannan, 2021: 7). Demand and offer were developing around this niche, and it seemed natural that a company like A24 distribute these types of films. Indeed, as previously established, A24 was, in its beginnings, involved in the distribution of small arthouse films, and had developed innovative marketing strategies that could target niche audiences.

The first two films to spark a conversation about an emerging trend in horror films were *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014) and *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014). Initially grouped under the umbrella term “mumblegore” (Brannan, 2021: 24), these two films were produced and distributed by independent companies unaffiliated with A24. However, it must be noted that a debate remains open regarding the true origins of the cycle. In Church's corpus, which was constituted retrospectively, the earliest film to appear in chronological order is *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013), which was in fact distributed by A24.

In any case, it is unquestionable that A24 was a major distributor of post-horror films in the early days of the cycle. Most notably, it released the highly successful *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2016), which recouped

ten times its budget in box office revenue (Goldszal, 2022), making it, as Church claims, one of “the most influential films to inaugurate the post-horror cycle” (Church, 2021: 142).

In 2017, A24 produced its first post-horror film *It Comes at Night* (Trey Edward Shults, 2017) followed shortly after by Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018), which, to this day, holds the record for the highest-grossing horror film that A24 has ever produced (D’Alessandro, 2022). Another watershed moment, which affected both A24’s trajectory and that of post-horror, took place in 2019, when A24 released, back-to-back, Ari Aster’s *Midsommar* and Robert Eggers’ *The Lighthouse*. These two horror films proved profitable in theaters, despite their bold artistic choices (one is mostly shot in broad daylight while the other is in black and white) at a time when most post-horror films were distributed on streaming platforms. With these sophomore efforts, the two up-and-coming directors, chose again the horror genre, using the same distinctly auteurist approach, thus confirming a coherence in the trend of post-horror, and its maturing into a real cycle. In doing so, they also became the *de facto* spearheads of this trend, and A24 its stable.

This is not to say that A24 has been behind all of the post-horror hits. In fact, the box-office record held for a post-horror film belongs to Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* (2017), which was produced by Blumhouse and distributed by Universal. However, it could be argued, as Brannan has, that much of the media attention and commercial success stemmed from the film’s original take on post-racial discourse, and less from its original approach to the horror genre (Brannan, 2021: 97-98). What is more, Peele’s second release, *Us*, can be perceived as a return to a more conventional strand of horror<sup>11</sup> (Brannan, 2021: 20). Moreover, although Blumhouse does stand as the clearest rival to A24, as it also produced *The Invitation* (Karyn Kusama, 2015) and *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2017) — two films included in Church’s corpus — it must be noted that Blumhouse, unlike A24, had made a name for itself long before the emergence of post-horror. In fact, most of its horror catalog belongs to the found footage and neo-grindhouse cycles, which represent the very antithesis of post-horror.<sup>12</sup>

Another independent film company, Neon, which has distributed *The Lodge* (Veronika Franz and Severin Fiala, 2019) and *She Dies*

11. It is worth mentioning however that other articles in this issue argue that *Us* does belong to the post-horror cycle, if only due to its intertextual depth making it more “savant” than traditional horror films.

12. Whereas neo-grindhouse is typically known for its raw, unpolished aesthetic and conventional narratives that emphasize sensationalism and action, post-horror is characterized by meticulous cinematography and slow-building, character-driven narratives that prioritize subtlety and complexity.

*Tomorrow* (Amy Seimetz, 2020), appears to be another potential contender for the title of post-horror powerhouse. Indeed, Neon’s catalog both inside and outside the horror genre, so closely mimics that of A24, that it seems to be a competitor for A24 in general. However, its young age (it was launched in 2017) makes it stand out more as a byproduct of A24’s success than anything else.

Regarding majors, it must be noted that Universal is not the only Big Five studio to have been involved in the release of post-horror films. Paramount Pictures, in particular, distributed *A Quiet Place* (John Krasinski, 2018) which was another stand-out post-horror box office hit.<sup>13</sup> Its involvement in Darren Aronofsky’s *Mother!* (2017) and Alex Garland’s *Annihilation* (2018), however, did not yield the same level of success, as both films struggled to find an audience in theaters. Eventually, *Annihilation*’s rights were sold to Netflix, following the example of Amazon which distributed *The Neon Demon* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2016), and *Suspiria* (Luca Guadagnino, 2018) on its own streaming platform.

In that respect, A24 stands out as the only studio that was capable of repeatedly attracting audiences in theaters to watch post-horror films. A feat that it ironically seems to achieve partly by not marketing these films as post-horror. Indeed, time and time again, A24 has been accused of misleading audiences by marketing its slow-paced arthouse horror films as mainstream horror (Rose, 2022). Though many online reviews left by spectators express some confusion and frustration due to unmet expectations, it appears that this strategy helps boost ticket sales by reaching a wider audience. However, as we have established, A24 does not limit this strategy to post-horror. It resorted to it before the birth of the cycle and still does to this day. *Spring Breakers* (Harmony Korine, 2012), for instance, was marketed as a mainstream teen movie while *The Northman* (Robert Eggers, 2022) was sold as an action-packed blockbuster, instead of the arthouse — and to a large degree experimental — films that they are.

Regardless, A24’s post-horror films have been, for the most part, met with critical acclaim — a phenomenon corroborated by Brannan’s thorough examination of the media response to A24 horror films. In this study, he remarked that A24 films were consistently lauded by critics, including those known to reject conventional horror films (Brannan, 2021: 10). This shift in critical discourse can be partly attributed to A24’s surge in popularity outside of the horror genre, which itself owes much to the studio’s successes within the horror realm. Indeed, as Brannan contends, a film

13. It must be noted that *A Quiet Place*’s inclusion within the post-horror cycle is up for debate. It certainly is not widely regarded as a “core” post-horror film, unlike many of the A24 productions. The same could be said of the aforementioned *The Invitation* (Karyn Kusama, 2015).



like *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016), which clinched the Oscar for best picture in 2017, likely benefitted from the attention garnered by *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2016) for its exceptional performance in 2016 (Brannan, 2021: 33).

## A Metamodern Brand Identity



A final — yet crucial — element to appreciate A24’s supremacy in the post-horror realm lies in its “incredible triumph of branding” (Sanders, 2022). Although A24’s “niche branding practices” (Brannan, 2021: 144) have so far been overlooked by academic discourse, film critic Alison Willmore estimates that they account “perhaps more than anything else” for the company’s success (Sanders, 2022). Indeed, A24 is widely acclaimed for having built a cult following around its distinctive brand identity. As of writing, A24 commands an impressive 3 million followers on Instagram, surpassing the combined followers of Blumhouse and Paramount. It also fosters an active community of film enthusiasts who engage in numerous acts of fan labor,<sup>14</sup> whether it be on the A24-dedicated subreddit boasting over 180,000 members, on the film-centric platform Letterboxd, or within the cinephile enclave of “Film Twitter” on social media platform X (formerly Twitter). A24 has capitalized on this devoted fanbase by introducing a highly successful line of apparel adorned with the A24 logo, as well as podcasts, magazines, books, collectibles, and even cosmetics. Emulating the business model of online streaming services, it has also launched a \$5 per month “A24 All Access” (AAA24) online membership program, offering exclusive brand content to its most dedicated followers.

This growing popularity of the A24 brand has reached such heights that it is increasingly detached from its individual films. As Willmore remarks: “When moviegoers gush over an “A24 film,” it can be hard to tell whether they’re more excited about the “A24” part or the “film part” (Sanders, 2022). This phenomenon is particularly striking considering that such fervent devotion is seldom associated with film studios.<sup>15</sup> As humorously noted by *Guardian* journalist Chloe Mac Donnell: “There may be

14. This section draws extensively on fan studies, and particularly on the work of Henry Jenkins, who observes that “fandom constitutes [...] its own distinctive Art World founded less upon the consumption of pre-existing texts than on the production of fan texts which draw raw materials from the media as a basis for new forms of cultural creation” (Jenkins, 212). The concept of “fan labor” is used in this context to describe such forms of fan-made cultural creations. Jenkins further argues that fandoms operate as “a distinctive mode of reception”, “a particular interpretative community”, “a particular Art world”, and “an alternative social community” (Jenkins, 209-213). Particularly within the framework of the latter two aspects, I argue that A24’s fandom has played a crucial role in shaping the studio’s unique brand identity.
15. A notable exception being of course The Walt Disney Company and to a lesser extent its subsidiary Pixar Animation Studios.

millions of Potterheads in the world, but how many have a tattoo of the Warner Bros logo?” (Mac Donnell, 2024).

What adds to the intrigue is that this craze precisely revolves around a studio renowned for the eclectic nature of its filmography, one that celebrates the unique visions of its directors. Nevertheless, both fans and critics alike have observed an ineffable yet distinct “aura” or “vibe” emanating from A24 films. As cultural commentator Mario Gabriele suggests: “though the [A24] titles mentioned differ in subject matter and style, they possess some shared DNA, an A24 allele, difficult to articulate but there nonetheless” (Gabriele, 2023). But how can we account for this elusive, yet ever-present “DNA”? And what are the reasons for its mass appeal?

As I shall argue, a significant aspect of A24’s identity and broad cultural resonance may lie in its distinct metamodern sensibility. Metamodernism, as explained in my introduction, designates a dominant shift in culture emerging in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, striving to move beyond modernism and postmodernism while negotiating between the two. As such, it is characterized by a movement similar to a “pendulum swinging between [...] innumerable poles”:

It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 6).

It is no coincidence that the term “metamodern” has been claimed by the Daniels themselves to qualify their film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022), A24’s biggest success to date, which has arguably contributed more than any other film towards making A24 a household name. Responding to a journalist who identified a “poignant form of postmodernism” in his film, Daniel Kwan declared:

I think that’s the version of post-postmodernism that we’re hunting for — that metamodernism, if I’m going to be obnoxious. [...] We’re so film-literate that it’s really hard to surprise [the audience]. And this film is basically trying to acknowledge that weird thing that’s happening right now, where we are at peak media saturation, peak story saturation. ... [But] it’s not about references. It’s more about what is honest and what is personal (Puchko, 2022).

More broadly, this term has also been used to define “the current generation’s attitude” which can be thought of as “a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism” (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 5).

Though this structure of feeling is most apparent in A24’s merchandising and branding strategies, which oscillate between sincerity and irony, I argue that it also reflects in A24’s distinct “mini-major” ethos which oscillates between pragmatism and idealism. Ultimately, this overarching structure of feeling could likely explain why A24 was able to maintain an ineffable yet cohesive “aura” despite its highly heterogeneous filmography. It could also be understood as a factor that enabled A24 to establish itself as a generational touchstone at the forefront of cultural relevance. By aligning itself with prevailing cultural trends, A24 met a growing market demand, thereby cementing its hegemonic status within post-horror.

In the following sections, I will explore how exactly this metamodern sensibility is embedded in both A24’s marketing strategies and “mini major” ethos, contributing to a broader metamodern “collective affect” that shapes the reception of its films.

### A Cultural and Generational Marker

At first glance, A24 appears to be devoid of a fixed identity. Its name carries no real meaning (Vega, 2023).<sup>16</sup> As for its logo, it regularly changes its layout during opening credits to match the film’s visual universe (see illustration “Some Layouts”).<sup>17</sup>

The A24 podcast, launched in 2018, abides by three strict guiding principles (“no host, no ads, no rules”) allowing for the spotlight to shine exclusively on its participants. Likewise, its fanzines are supervised by actors and directors who are invited as guest editors. As a result, the “zines” systematically adapt their aesthetic to fit the guest editors’ sensibilities<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, A24’s clothing line, which consists mostly of basic clothing essentials, like tee-shirts, socks, shorts, hoodies and caps, with no ornament other than the minimalist A24 logo, seem conspicuously neutral.<sup>19</sup>

However, a closer inspection of A24’s website reveals a distinct brand identity tailored for a specific target demographic. Certain products available on its online store, such as a movie crosswords book, a movie-inspired cookbook, or a vintage tee-shirt with a logo of the 1996 Cannes

16. It is a reference to an Italian freeway whose name producer Daniel Katz deemed aesthetically pleasing.
17. Redditor “u/wesreadit”, “Some Layouts”, 2022, A compilation of A24 layouts, <http://tiny.cc/p4fszz>.
18. A Sample of A24’s Fanzine catalog, 2023, <https://shop.a24films.com/collections/zines>.
19. Such a neutral backdrop, it should be noted, also allows A24 to reinforce its reputation as an auteur-driven studio, one that always adapts to the unique artistic vision of its directors.

Film Festival, hint at the expected high cultural capital of their consumer, pertaining to the specific domain of cinema.<sup>20</sup>

As *Guardian* journalist Chloe Mac Donnel explains, A24 functions as a “club for cinephiles”, answering to a longstanding demand in the market:

For years, there has also been a lack of memorabilia for cinephiles. Unlike music fans who can easily buy ephemera at concerts, fans of TV shows and films were often only left with sourcing bootleg T-shirts online (Mac Donnel, 2024).

What is more, the brand also bears the traces of a generational marker, addressed mostly to a young, urban, progressive, and fashion-conscious demographic. A prime example of this status is the company’s involvement in the trend “#euphoriamakeup” — which has been dubbed “the biggest trend beauty has seen since contouring” (Rao, 2023). A hashtag originating from the A24-backed TV show *Euphoria* which found significant favor among the Gen Z demographic. To this day, it has garnered over 2.5 billion views on TikTok and “averages over 100,000 online searches monthly”. A24 has capitalized on this trend by collaborating with the Euphoria-inspired brand of cosmetics Half Magic (Gabriele, 2023).<sup>21</sup>

Yet, what are the defining ideological and aesthetic traits that constitute this generational phenomenon? A closer examination of A24’s apparel, collectibles, and magazines reveals a diverse array of references — tie-dye T-shirts, zines, hoodies — emanating from various subcultures emblematic of past generations. These include — among others — psychedelic, punk, hip-hop, and skateboarding subcultures. What results is an impression of a postmodern collage, blending elements from fringe cultures that were themselves already considered postmodern in their own right. Yet, the blending of these codes with those of a more recent internet culture as well as those of high-end fashion<sup>22</sup> signals a desire to move beyond these postmodern references, ushering in a kind of post-postmodern culture.

20. A “Cannes’96” tee-shirt sold on A24’s online store, 2023, <https://shop.a24films.com/products/cannes-96-tee>. The price of said tee-shirt (\$100) also denotes high financial capital. While the online shop does offer high-end luxury items like a *Priscilla*-inspired necklace created in collaboration with high-profile jewelry brand J. Hannah (\$1,280-\$1,480), it must be noted however that it also sells caps, beanies (\$35) or socks (\$12) at a price deemed more affordable for a young, middle-class U.S. audience.
21. A brand created by makeup artist Donni Davy who worked on the A24-produced TV show *Euphoria*.
22. Indeed, A24 resorts to limited-edition “drops” and unexpected collaborations with high-profile brands to artificially generate a hype and sense of exclusivity around their products. A strategy reminiscent of high-end street-ware brands like Supreme.

At the heart of this particular strand of “post-postmodernism,” I argue, lies a distinct metamodern oscillation. Moving between “innumerable poles,” it oscillates between plurality and unity, the authentic and the inauthentic, the popular and the elitist. Indeed, the overarching discourse is not simply one of apathetic exploitation of fringe cultures for commercial gain or a nihilistic blending of high and low culture. Instead, what transpires is — concomitantly — an earnest appreciation for these subcultural codes, referenced through memorabilia that evoke a sense of authentic nostalgic yearning — for epochs that, ironically, many have not experienced. What is more, the traditional distinction between high and low culture is both abolished and re-affirmed,<sup>23</sup> as these pop culture elements are ultimately exploited to signal an appreciation for a more “elevated” cultural taste.

This distinct metamodern discourse, I argue, is even more obvious in A24’s unusual selection of collectibles.

### Between Irony and Sincerity



A *Hereditary*-inspired “Evil grandmas wall calendar” at the price of “\$6.66”, a “*Midsommar* Incense Temple”,<sup>24</sup> or a “*Lighthouse* Grooming Set”,<sup>25</sup> seem at first to be purely ironic statements. One could see in these absurd collages a self-aware parody of film memorabilia mixing art with the hyper-mundane. All the more so, as these objects make light of some of the most unambiguously sinister aspects of the horror films they reference. And yet, whereas a truly deconstructed, ironic trinket would find no practical use, these products all serve a clear practical purpose. Additionally, the connection that they bear with the film they are referencing — though humorous in nature — is also somewhat clever and sophisticated. Lastly, these objects are carefully designed to be aesthetically pleasing and their limited editions make them highly sought-after collectibles for many fans.

Similarly, A24’s eccentric “widescreen beach towel”<sup>26</sup> and “aspect ratio blankets”, seem at first to be ironic collages of high and low culture. Mixing the elevated technical film discourse with the triviality of a beach towel could in theory serve the purpose of an anti-elitist discourse

23. As opposed to the cultural logic of postmodernism which is, according to Fredric Jameson, characterized by “the effacement [...] of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” (Jameson, 2).

24. A *Midsommar*-inspired ceramic incense holder, 2023, <https://shop.a24films.com/products/midsommar-incense-temple>.

25. A *Lighthouse*-inspired grooming set, 2023, <https://shop.a24films.com/products/the-lighthouse-joya-grooming-set>.

26. A Blue Widescreen Beach Towel, 2023, <https://shop.a24films.com/products/blue-widescreen-beach-towel>.

deconstructing our preconceptions about legitimate and illegitimate culture. And yet, such products are precisely aimed at consumers who would like to signal that they possess cultural capital while not being too self-serious about it. They are earnest markers of cultural elitism disguised as cool ironic detachment.

In the same vein, the “Beau Embroidered Pajama Set”, a replica of the pajama worn by the protagonist in *Beau is Afraid* (Ari Aster, 2022), could traditionally pass as a costume to wear at a Halloween party. Yet, here it is sold in the “apparel” section of the online store, thus blurring the line between ironic and authentic use. It becomes unclear whether this piece of garment is to be used in the context of pastiche performance of the film, or a sincere appropriation of the film’s universe in everyday life.

All of these products perfectly capture the metamodern concept of “ironesty”, as defined by Greg Dember in his simultaneously ironic and sincere website, whose sole purpose is to assert the origin of the term.<sup>27</sup>

A comparable fluctuation between irony and sincerity is evident in the studio’s distinctive marketing campaigns. To promote *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), for instance, A24 launched a pop-up store called “A Ghost Store”. This unique store encouraged visitors to try on fitted sheets as a kind of mock cosplay of the film. Much like the quirky merchandising available online, the store appeared to be the result of an ironic play on the word “story”. Yet, judging by the elaborate production that went behind this event, as well as the participant’s reactions,<sup>28</sup> it seems that the store offered an experience that oscillated between the light and the profound. A curtain separating the store in two invited the visitors to “check out the other side”, both in the literal sense, but also figuratively calling for a meditation on the afterlife, thus prolonging the film’s experience in a playful manner while transposing it from the virtual to the physical (which is also a central theme in Lowery’s film).<sup>29</sup>

## Pragmatic Idealism

Lastly, I contend that A24’s metamodern sensibility transpires in its unique blend of “pragmatic idealism”. As previously established, metamodernism involves an oscillation between the sincere and the ironic, but also between the pragmatic and the idealistic. This distinctively

27. See: <https://icoinedthewordironesty.com/>

28. A “Beau is Afraid” inspired Pajama Set, 2023, <https://shop.a24films.com/products/beau-pajamas>.

29. Sam Reed, Tweet about “A Ghost Store”, Twitter (now X), July 2, 2017, <https://x.com/spamreed/status/881582858879610886>.

metamodern fluctuation is evident in A24’s approach to cinema. In a rare interview for *Les Cahiers du Cinema*, the press-shy founders David Fenkel and Daniel Katz make this point particularly apparent. Using *Good Time* (Joshua and Ben Safdie, 2017) as an example, the A24 founders explain that part of their involvement in the film entailed the creation of a “positioning statement” to promote it. For that purpose, they counterintuitively chose to focus the promotion on the directors, instead of superstar Robert Pattinson, who plays the lead in the film. Similarly, on other projects, they sometimes deliberately opt for a “less commercial” casting. However, as David Fenkel makes clear, these seemingly anti-commercial “counterintuitive” choices are not the result of a purely idealistic stance favoring artistic over commercial considerations. Rather, they are precisely taken to make the film even “more commercial [...] because the result will be more original” (Elliott, 2019: 14; my translation).<sup>30</sup> The traditionally auteurist rhetoric — which could be considered idealistic insofar as it prioritizes the director’s artistic vision over commercial concerns — seamlessly blends here with a much more pragmatic — almost cynical — calculation. Such a discourse takes aback the journalist from *Les Cahiers du Cinema*, who notes: “Their rhetoric, highly focused on marketing and ‘positioning,’ contrasts with the perception one might hold of independent cinema, yet it reflects a certain reality” (Elliott, 2019: 14; my translation).

The reason why A24 exploits a rhetoric of pragmatic idealism that appears so unbecoming of an independent studio, is perhaps both the cause and consequence of its “mini-major” status. Indeed, this status implies an oscillation between independent and major ethos, between auteurist and studio philosophy. Though these two poles might not be canonically metamodern in nature, I argue that they do resonate with a broader metamodern structure of feeling, insofar as they showcase a desire to transcend two major trends of the past by negotiating between the two.<sup>31</sup> What is more, I argue that it is precisely A24’s capacity to artfully navigate between these two poles that enabled it to dominate the post-horror cycle.

Indeed, at first glance, A24’s “mini-major” status might have appeared incompatible with the post-horror cycle. In his book, David Church defines post-horror partly as: “an emerging cycle of independently produced (and potentially profitable) horror films” which share a “sense of handmade artistry, low-budget ingenuity” (Church, 2021: 1), thereby making the independent mode of production a key component to understand its ethos. Yet, as previously discussed, A24’s dominant status within the

30. Original quote in French: “Parfois c’est contre-intuitif, par exemple quand on refuse un casting plus commercial. On préférerait ne pas faire un film plutôt que de le faire de la mauvaise façon. Et nos décisions rendront le film plus commercial” (Elliott, 2019: 14).

31. It should be noted however that A24 is not the first studio to oscillate between these two poles. Miramax, New Line Cinema, Orion Pictures, or Focus Features for instance have also navigated in a similar way between auteurist and studio philosophy.

cycle can be attributed precisely to its ability to oscillate between the major and independent studio paradigms. This oscillation is evident in how A24 promotes niche auteurist content using mainstream studio codes, while simultaneously screening stream-bound content in physical venues,<sup>32</sup> or how it brands itself as a club for cinephiles akin to Miramax while expanding into a multimedia conglomerate using marketing strategies reminiscent of Disney.

### A Collective Affect



This oscillation between opposite poles, I argue, can be interpreted as both impetus and result of a broader metamodern structure of feeling that is constitutive of A24’s identity. As such, I contend, that this metamodernist approach to filmmaking participates in generating a characteristic “collective affect” that emanates specifically from A24 films. The term “collective affect” here is understood in keeping with U.S. scholar Lawrence Grossberg’s definition of the notion, used to describe the “‘socially constructed domain of cultural effects’ that makes the text matter in a specific historical situation and place, and makes it come alive giving it a resonant tone” as opposed to “something inherent to the text itself (supposed meaning)” (Duffet, 2013: 136). This “collective experience of emotion” perhaps best explains why so many fans or journalists of the popular press have identified a persistent, yet ineffable “aura” or “vibe” specific to A24 films (Pineda Pacheco & Saab, 2023).

In his book, David Church also resorts to affect theory, this time to characterize the “more generalized, ineffable block of sensation, such as free-floating anxieties without an apparent cause or solution” that “the aesthetic form and narrative strategies of post-horror films produce” (Church, 2021:7-8). Yet, is there a correlation between these two types of affects? Does A24’s unique metamodern sensibility — most evident in its branding and marketing strategies — reflect in the content of its post-horror films? If so, is it inherent to post-horror as a whole, or should A24 horror films be considered a cycle within the cycle of post-horror?

32. Further accentuating this oscillation between independent and major studio ethos, A24 has recently acquired the Cherry Lane Theater in Manhattan. This move resonates with the classic Hollywood studios’ strategy of vertical integration within the market and mirrors the recent developments of major platforms like Netflix and Amazon, which have also begun investing in physical locations. However, A24 maintains its elevated, auteur-driven and New York-centric discourse, asserting that their new theater will serve to promote plays, live entertainment, and foster innovative interactions between their writers and directors (Paulson, 2023).



## A Cycle within the Cycle?

As evidence of A24's surge in popularity and its intrinsic ties to the post-horror cycle, the term "A24 horror movies" seems to have made its way into public discourse. It can be found in products of fan labor such as social media posts, memes, tribute posters, or even online music playlists. On the music streaming platform Spotify, for instance, several users have constituted public playlists around this idea of "A24 horror", from the generic "A24 Horror" by user "Cam???", to the oddly specific "Huckleberry Finn but make it an a24 [sic] horror movie" by user "not.justa.simpletess".<sup>33</sup>

Such a phenomenon confirms the conflation in the public's mind of "A24 films" into a coherent entity, which seemingly includes all of the films that A24 collaborated on, regardless of whether they were involved as producers or mere distributors. However, it remains unclear if in the case of the term "A24 horror films", A24 is used as a metonymy to include the whole of the post-horror cycle, or if it could describe a type of horror specific to A24 films alone. As we shall see, several journalists of the popular press as well as academics have explored this second possibility.

In August 2022, *Vulture* journalist Nate Jones, who claims to have "maybe seen more A24 films than the people who work at A24", took on the impressive feat of ranking the 113 films that A24 had released from best to worst. In this article, Jones included another ranking, entitled "10 Signs You're Watching an A24 Film". Most of the tell-tale signs that he identified, like "White Teens Are Rapping in a Car", or the complementary "While Driving Over a Bridge in Florida" don't apply to A24's horror catalog, and reveal the self-deprecating, overly specific nature of this mock-ranking. Regardless, he does identify a stylistic device — the use of "Unconventional Aspect Ratios —" which does apply predominantly to A24 horror films, including *A Ghost Story*, *It Comes at Night*, and *The Lighthouse*. Regarding recurring themes, he notes the prevalence of woods and "creepy birds" as well as the basic plot-line "True Happiness Is Found Through Satan", which surprisingly do seem overrepresented in A24 horror films. This basic plot line, he contends, applies to *The Witch*, *The Blackcoat's Daughter*, *Midsommar*, *The Lighthouse*, *Hereditary*, and *Saint Maud*.

Nate Jones is not alone in picking up on these themes. Illustrator Nick Charge posted on Instagram a fan-made tribute poster to the horror films of Ari Aster and Robert Eggers, reposted on Reddit under the

33. "Spotify playlist referencing A24 horror movies", 2023, Screenshots, <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2NB7aOTKQlSx1m9qPXGhXI>; <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/50CMn0ZuHD8cOhKGvWZDbC>.

name "a tribute to A24 horror" (see illustration), which highlights the recurring animal motif in every film (a goat for *The Witch*, a bear for *Midsommar*, and a bird for *Hereditary* and *The Lighthouse*). Similarly, user Lukeymcgarry turned A24's formulaic plot lines based on the occult into a meme by posting a mock-graph entitled "How to Make an A24 Film" on Instagram (see illustration). In it, one reads that the only thing differentiating an A24 horror film from a non-horror film is that it: "end(s) with pagan/satanic ritual"!<sup>34</sup>

In a more academic context, Eddie Falvey, in his article on "'Art-horror' and 'hardcore art-horror'" also remarks that many of A24's horror films are "either within or adjacent to the supernatural sub-genre", despite "a few outliers such as *Green Room* [Jeremy Saulnier, 2015], *Climax* [Gaspar No , 2018] and *High Life* [Claire Denis, 2018], which arguably earn their art-horror stripes on different terms, as psychological horrors perhaps". Rather than categorizing "A24 horror" as a supernatural cycle within the post-horror cycle however, Falvey isolates *A Ghost Story* and *The Lighthouse* as displaying a "substantial variation" among post-horror films, stating: "while *The Lighthouse* exhibits a markedly different style to a franchise slasher for instance, it also feels different to some 'post-horror' films with a less ostentatiously dissonant style such as, say, Jordan Peele's *Get Out*" (Falvey, 2021: 71).

Looking precisely at the early post-horror films, it is striking to see that nature and the occult are overrepresented in A24 horror films, in a way that is not shared by other non-A24 post-horror films like *It Follows* (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014), and *The Invitation* (Karyn Kusama, 2015). However, I found that this observation ceases to be pertinent after 2016, as nature and the occult become themes that run through most of the cycle. Hence, Church has dedicated a whole chapter to the importance of natural landscapes in the cycle, which includes several non-A24 films, namely *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse* (Lukas Feigelfeld, 2017), *A Quiet Place* (John Krasinski, 2018) and *Gretel & Hansel* (Oz Perkins, 2020) (Church, 2021: 142-180).

Such an observation leaves us with the possible conclusion that maybe A24 set a precedent. Rather than create a cycle within the cycle, A24 films could have infused the cycle with its own in-house style and motifs. An interpretation that seems closer to Brannan's take on the matter, as he states: "I argue that there are a set of shared traits which these elevated horror films display, and these traits comprise the house style of A24's horror product" (Brannan, 2021: 8).

34. Nick Charge, "Modern Horror", 2022, fan-made poster, <http://tiny.cc/a9fszz>; Lukey McGarry, "How to Make an A24 Film", 2022, Instagram publication, [https://www.instagram.com/lukeymcgarry/p/DBhXeTlzBiE/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/lukeymcgarry/p/DBhXeTlzBiE/?img_index=1).

In this final section of this article, I would like to defend the idea that among those “set of shared traits”, may lie traces a distinct metamodern structure of feeling.

### A Metamodern Strand of Supernatural



Upon initial consideration, A24’s distinct metamodern sensibility — most evident in its “ironest”<sup>35</sup> merchandising — would seem to stand in direct opposition with its post-horror repertoire. Indeed, by definition, what characterizes these post-horror films is precisely their serious aspect and general lack of humor.<sup>36</sup> And yet, I argue some of these films’ approaches to the supernatural resonate with a metamodernist structure of feeling, particularly in the way they oscillate between the naturalistic and the stylized, sincerity and irony, naivety and knowingness.

This metamodern strand of supernatural, I argue, is most apparent in David Lowery’s *A Ghost Story*. The film’s narrative structure, which follows a ghost tethered to a single location over an extended period, can be considered postmodern insofar as it dismantles traditional storytelling conventions. However, the film also explores themes of love, loss, and existential longing in a heartfelt manner, which is more aligned with a modernist sensibility. Central to this metamodern structure of feeling is the oscillation between the naturalistic and stylized. On the one hand, there is a conspicuous lack of special effects to represent the ghost. He is not seen as flying or translucent and does not produce any sounds. This evokes a sense of earnestness and simplicity. On the other hand, the highly stylized representation of a ghost draped in a fitted sheet is inherently absurd and even verges on the comical, thus subverting recent horror conventions.

*Mutatis mutandis*, I argue that a somewhat similar oscillation can be observed in Robert Egger’s approach to the supernatural — though I concede that Egger’s markedly darker and heavier strand of horror stands out precisely because of its seriousness and lack of irony. Much like Lowery however, Eggers re-explores the most archaic representations of the supernatural: Satan as a goat, evil women as witches in the woods, or mermaids by the sea... in a manner that oscillates between the naturalistic and the stylized. On the one hand, his films display a “fetishistic” attention to

35. We refer here once more to the term of “ironesty”, which encapsulates “the braiding together of irony and sincerity (honesty) in a unified aesthetic expression.” The term was coined by Greg Dember, a prominent critic of metamodernism, in his simultaneously ironic and sincere website <https://icoinedthewordironesty.com/>.

36. The gravitas of A24’s post-horror catalog is particularly apparent when contrasted with Jordan Peele’s humor-infused strand of horror. Yet, it should be noted that humor is not entirely absent from A24 horror films. Ari Aster’s filmography, in particular, incorporates many elements of dark humor.

detail in the costume and set design, as well as in the dialects of the characters, which make for a particularly immersive and believable world.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the representation of the supernatural is heavily symbolic and accompanied by carefully crafted cinematography that is all but documentary-like. In so doing, these films adopt a stance that oscillates “between naïveté and knowingness” into a kind of “informed naivety”<sup>38</sup> (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010: 6).

In this light, we could interpret the repetitive depiction of flatulence emanating from the character of Thomas Wake — portrayed by Willem Dafoe — in *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019) as a distinctly metamodern motif.

Initially, it might be perceived as an ironic deviation from horror conventions, relieving tension through crude humor. However, it also serves as another hyper-naturalist element, enhancing the film’s believability and thus its horror. In this regard, *The Lighthouse*’s incorporation of flatulence finds a surprising parallel with another contemporary supernatural metamodern — though not horror-related — A24 film: *Swiss Army Man* (The Daniels, 2016). Despite being marketed as a surrealist comedy, “Swiss Army Man” also contains disturbingly macabre elements typically associated with the horror genre, as it depicts the unlikely friendship between a marooned man and a corpse whose flatulence can propel him over water. Moreover, in both films, the significance behind these instances of flatulence oscillates between the ironic and the sincere. However, while in *Swiss Army Man*, flatulence renders the horrific supernatural world unbelievable and comedic, in *The Lighthouse*, it contributes to making the narrative seem more believable and thus more horrifying.

### The Non-Jump Scare



Drawing inspiration from an article by Linda C. Ceriello entitled “The Big Bad and the Big ‘Aha!’: Metamodern Monsters as Transformational Figures of Instability” which undertakes a classification of the different types of monster narratives through the lens of metamodernism, I would like to suggest an alternative classification for another recurring trope in horror films: jump scares. The non-ironic, classical jump scare would take

37. Eggers, who describes his approach to design in *The Witch* as “fetishistic”, flew in a thatcher from Virginia and a carpenter from Massachusetts to faithfully recreate elements of the 1630s New England setting (Crucchiola, 2016).

38. A24’s archaic representations of the supernatural can be considered “naïve” insofar as they seemingly lack awareness of more recent and elaborate conventions. Yet, they are also “informed” since they display a highly realistic and sophisticated portrayal of the historical and cultural context within which these myths appear.

place when a sudden change in the image — often accompanied by a loud jarring sound — reveals an actual threat or monster. The ironic, anti-jump scare would use the same device to reveal a non-threat. The metamodern non-jump scare, on the other hand, would oscillate between the ironic and the non-ironic. It would occur when the protagonist unknowingly comes into contact with the monster in a conspicuously silent and drawn-out sequence.<sup>39</sup>

Such a stylistic device can be observed in Alex Garland’s *Men* (2021) when the threat suddenly appears in the background and remains lurking behind the unknowing protagonist over a two-minute-long sequence without any added music. The fact that we identify a threat that the protagonist doesn’t notice naturally generates dramatic irony. The lack of jarring sounds or sudden visual shifts further highlights this dissonance between the dramatic tension we experience, and the lack of tension the protagonist feels. And yet, this irony<sup>40</sup> and serene cinematography do not lead to our emotional detachment. Instead, we oscillate between feelings of detachment<sup>41</sup> and authentic discomfort. A similar — though perhaps less dramatic — “non-jump scare” can be found in *A Ghost Story* (David Lowery, 2017), which shows the “monster” standing in the background while the unaware protagonist eats in silence over a drawn-out four-minute sequence.<sup>42</sup>

## Nudity and Nakedness



The example of the “non-jump scare” sequence taken from Alex Garland’s *Men* (2021) in which the monstrous threat takes the form of an unclothed intruder, also points to another recurring motif in A24 horror films, that can be studied through the prism of metamodernism: nudity and nakedness. I rely here on the distinction made by John Berger in his

39. However, as with all taxonomic propositions, this typology — which seeks to highlight dominant trends — has its limitations. It should be noted that traditional jump scares and anti-jump scares appear across a variety of contexts whether in modern or postmodern horror films. Similarly, non-jump scares are also prevalent in J-horror films such as *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998), which are not commonly labeled as post-horror.
40. It should be noted that the effects of dramatic irony are complex and very much context dependent. In a comedic context, dramatic irony may lead to the spectator distancing himself from the characters’ foolish actions, whereas in a tragic or horrific context — as is the case here — it typically leads to a heightened empathy. Yet in all cases, it could be argued that knowing something that the character does not know necessarily generates a cognitive (or epistemic) distance between the spectator and the character.
41. A feeling of “ironic detachment” which is heightened here not only by the peaceful cinematography, but also by the incongruous and ambivalent nature of the perceived threat or monster. In *Men*, this is embodied by an unknown, silent and fully visible naked man lurking in the garden. He is an intruder, yet seems oblivious of the fact, showing no clear signs of hostility. In the case of *A Ghost Story*, the “monster” takes the form of a silent, still, and fully visible draped figure devoid of ill intentions.
42. Alex Garland, *Men*, 2022, Film still, <https://ibb.co/ysSzbNW>; David Lowery, *A Ghost Story*, 2017, Film still. <https://ibb.co/w6yW7kV>.

essay *Ways of Seeing*: “To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself [...]. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise” (Berger, 1972: 54).

Representations of nudity are ubiquitous in the horror genre. From the early frills of erotic bodies revealed in Hammer films and early grindhouse to the graphic images of bodies being tortured in neo-grindhouse of “torture porn” films, the unclothed body has always been used for its titillating qualities as an object of spectacle. A canonic example of this can be found in the iconic “Room 237” scene in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). In it, the protagonist, Jack Torrance, comes upon a vision of an attractive nude woman posing for him, before suddenly transforming into a monstrous decaying body covered in special FX makeup. The alternative here is clear: the body is either a spectacle of beauty or of horror. But each time a spectacle.<sup>43</sup>

In A24 horror films, the unclothed body is also a recurring motif, but we can notice an evolution in the way it is represented. In *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013) and *Ex Machina*<sup>44</sup> (Alex Garland, 2014), we can identify something that could qualify as a postmodernist stance. The two women, who are objectified by the male gaze throughout the film, end up peeling their skin, thus revealing nudity for what it is: a mask. However, in a typical postmodern, ironic twist, we discover that there is no human subject to be found behind this mask either: one is an alien while the other is a robot.<sup>45</sup>

In *The Witch*, *The Lighthouse*, *Hereditary*, *Midsommar*, and *Men*, we start to see representations of the body as truly naked: neither ideal nor monstrous. What is more, it is often the “monster” that is naked, thus leading us to question its “monstrosity”. In *The Witch* and *Hereditary*, low-key lighting artificially enhances the horrific quality of these visions, though no horrific music is added. In *Midsommar* and *Men*, nakedness is shown in broad daylight and at length, using full frontal shots. We are not surprised but invited to sit with the feeling of uneasiness that stems from these uncanny visions.

Keeping in mind that A24’s audience is mostly young, urban, and hyperconnected (a social demographic that is overrepresented in A24’s non-horror catalog), it seems somewhat fitting that these horror narratives would feature as monsters their audience’s antithesis: old naked

43. Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining*, 1980, Film stills, <https://ibb.co/zH1LCdk>; <https://ibb.co/b73qBSG>.

44. Which I would argue possesses elements of a horror film, though it is more commonly categorized as science-fiction.

45. Jonathan Glazer, *Under the Skin*, 2013, Film still, <https://ibb.co/Sd8RBRX>; Alex Garland, *Ex Machina*, 2014, Film still, <http://tiny.cc/hgfszz>.

people in the woods. What seems metamodern about this representation of nakedness, however, is that it is not artificially presented as monstrous as in *The Shining*’s “Room 237” scene. In showing us the naked body as is, without any added artifice, these films seem to veer towards authenticity, transparency, and non-judgment. Nevertheless, somehow, they also manage to make the familiar seem unfamiliar, obscene, and/or threatening. We oscillate between fascination and repulsion, between the natural and the unnatural, the innocent and the perverse: a metamodern oscillation that triggers the “ineffable block of sensation” that Church identified as constitutive of post-horror (Church, 2021: 7-8).<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

In Greek mythology, rogue bandit Procrustes was known to stretch out and cut off his victims’ limbs to fit the size of his iron bed. A lot of exercises in taxonomy can feel similarly contrived and arbitrary. In the case of this study, however, questioning why A24 was hailed as the driving force behind post-horror has proven to be a rather fruitful exercise.

Delving into the rich — albeit brief — history of the studio, this study was able to appreciate its key role within the cycle both as a distributor and a producer. Benefitting from a virtuous dynamic, A24’s dominant reputation in the horror realm was owed in great part to its triumphs outside of the genre, which in turn capitalized on its successes within it.

Crucial to these successes, this paper argues, is A24’s metamodern sensibility. This dominant cultural trend — which A24 embraced — enabled the studio to position itself as a generational touchstone at the forefront of cultural relevance. Though this structure of feeling is most apparent in the company’s “ironest” branding strategies, this paper contends that it also permeates its “mini-major” status, as it oscillates between the pragmatic studio and an idealistic auteur ethos.

Given A24’s — and post-horror’s — distinct auteurist quality, it proved challenging to make sweeping generalizations about the style and content of the films under study. Moreover, the genre’s characteristic seriousness initially appeared incompatible with the ironic components of metamodernism. Despite these hurdles, certain motifs within A24 post-horror films were identified — particularly in their treatment of the supernatural, use of jump scares, and portrayal of nudity — that echoed

46. Ari Aster, *Midsommar*, 2019, Film still, <https://ibb.co/GJNMgqw>; Ari Aster, *Hereditary*, 2018, Film still, <https://ibb.co/B6bXZq7>; Robert Eggers, *The Witch*, 2016, Film still, <https://ibb.co/j5tbKVH>.

the metamodern structure of feeling. Yet, rather than holding metamodernism as a central characteristic of post-horror, this study argues that it manifests primarily in the collective affect of A24’s brand identity, which in turn finds resonances — as well as dissonances — with the cycle’s own characteristic affects.

While A24 stands as the clear hegemonic studio behind post-horror, restricting the cycle to the alternative of “in-house cycle” and “auteur cycle” may appear somewhat limiting. Faithful to the metamodern image of the pendulum swinging endlessly between innumerable poles, one might wonder if the defining feature of this cycle lies precisely in its constant negotiation between these two paradigms.

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