

FILM GENRE AND ITS VICISSITUDES: THE CASE OF THE PSYCHOTHRIller ¹

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This paper is the result of an exploration into the contemporary psychotriller and its matrix genre, the thriller. It was inspired by the lack of critical attention devoted to this type of film, so popular with the audience yet apparently a thorn in the critics' side. The main aim of this paper is therefore to contribute a small piece of criticism to fill this noticeable gap in film genre theory. It begins with a brief overview of contemporary film genre theory, which provides the background for a vindication of the thriller as a genre and specifically of the psychotriller as a borderline sub-generic category borrowing features from both the thriller and the horror film.

When I first started work on this paper I realised how difficult it was to find theoretical material on the thriller. Certain genre critics actually avoided the term thriller altogether and others mentioned it but often seemed to be either unsure about it or simultaneously, and rather imprecisely, referred to different types of films, such as detective films, police procedural films, political thrillers, courtroom thrillers, erotic thrillers and psychotrillers, to name but a few. But the truth of the matter is that "the thriller" as such has rarely been analysed in books or articles devoted to the study of genre and when it has, one can rarely find anything but a few short paragraphs dealing with it. Yet, critical work devoted to other acknowledged and well-documented genres such as melodrama, comedy, film noir, horror, the western, the musical or the war film is easily accessible. So, why is this? Why is it that although we all know what to expect when we are told that the film we are about to watch is a thriller, whether political or erotic, most critics seem to shun the term altogether?

In the bibliographical appendix to *Film Genre Reader II*, Barry Keith Grant (1995: 495-559) provides us with a good selection of articles devoted to what he considers to be *proper* genres, that is, clearly discernible and with well-known characteristics and formal features. He includes these categories, which he labels as follows: comedy films, crime films, disaster films, epic films, erotic films, *films*

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noirs, gangster films, horror films, melodramas, musical films, science fiction films, sports films, war films, western films. Additionally, he incorporates a miscellaneous section with a bibliography devoted to, for instance, teenpics, biopics, samurai films, B movies, conspiracy films, martial arts films, films from the Philippines and from Hong Kong and even a book devoted to the *suspense thriller*. He, however, clearly avoids considering the (suspense) thriller as a full-fledged generic category and refuses to include a chapter on it in his anthology. As a matter of fact, he admits that, under the heading "crime films", he has included "detective films, police films, mystery films, and spy films—in short, all films dealing with the perpetration or prevention of crime", purposely avoiding "the intentional fallacy inherent in the dubiously labelled genre "thriller", a term that is more appropriately used to describe tone and that, unlike the horror film, is too vague as a generic category" (503).

Nevertheless, other critics, such as Tom Ryall (1998: 330-31), disagree with him to a certain extent and propose a less strict categorisation, one which would encompass several types of genre and which would allow for different perspectives on genre. Ryall acknowledges and defends the necessary existence of different points of view when dealing with genre categorisation. As an example, he explains how classical parameters based on iconography and historical setting, which have traditionally been employed by genre critics to define some genres, may clearly identify and provide useful insights into the western and the gangster films but they can hardly be employed to characterise other genres such as comedy in very precise terms. Ryall thus proposes a wider-reaching model of generic classification. He contends that some genres, such as horror, comedy or the thriller may be better conceptualised by considering their effects, in other words, what they do to the audience, to their bodies.² Ryall also provides the reader with a list of the categories he considers to be *proper* genres (westerns, gangster films, musicals, horror films, thrillers, comedies, melodramas, *films noirs*, women's pictures) and comments on the different approaches adopted by critics attempting to identify both generic corpora and individual films. In his view,

[t]hese range from simple differentiation based on an array of protocols enveloping subject-matter, style, effects, and intended audience; to attention to the ways in which shared elements of subject-matter, theme, or style are handled differently in different genres; to the technical distinctions of semantics and syntactics that can generate a range of combinatory options or genres. (330)

He goes on to clearly exemplify the different approaches by linking (historical) subject-matter, such as the American west or urban America under Prohibition, with traditional definitions of the western or the gangster film, to provide an example. On the other hand, the musical, film noir and melodrama are best typified through their characteristic visual style (especially in the two latter cases) or their formal qualities

² For a similar approach to genre, see Williams (1995), where melodrama, pornography and horror are analysed from a similar point of view.

(especially in the first case, with the diegetic inclusion of music and dance), which may in turn be combined with different subject-matters. For instance, family melodramas such as *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) or *A Rebel Without a Cause* (1956) include elements associated with the teenpic or "youth rebellion" film, and musicals such as *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), *Guys and Dolls* (1955), or even *Grease* (1978) combine the style of the musical with features normally linked to the western, the gangster film or, again, the teenpic respectively. The women's picture, for its part, may be characterised by taking into account not only its subject-matter (similar to that of melodrama) but also its intended (female) audience. Finally, Ryall concludes that

[s]ome genres can be defined in ways which highlight their intended effect on the audience, as in the horror film, the thriller, and the comedy, which elicit fear, suspense, and laughter respectively. Again, these are effects that are realizable across different subject-matters. (330)

The most characteristic feature of the thriller would therefore seem to be the psychological effect that unremitting relentless suspense produces on the audience through the delayed resolution of action, rather than elements that we could identify as generic features in terms of iconography, plot or formal structure. Once this interpretation is accepted, Grant's reticence to include the thriller as a generic corpus in his anthology becomes perhaps more understandable. As has been mentioned earlier, Grant refuses to incorporate the thriller on the grounds that it is too vague a generic category and maintains that this type of movie is best understood in terms of *tone*. In my view, however, this should not necessarily present a drawback for, do we not normally include different types of film under the umbrella term "comedy"? Is *Pretty Woman* (1990) less of a comedy than *A Day at the Races* (1937), *The Full Monty* (1997) or *Babe* (1995)? Even though they are different types of comedy they all share features that typify them as such, crucially their effect on the audience, the smiles or laughter they provoke. As Ryall argues, the comic effect may be combined with different subject-matters (a romantic relationship, some absurdly shadowy financial dealings at a racetrack and a sanatorium, a bold solution to unemployment or a fable about equal opportunities among animals).

As a starting hypothesis, we could thus claim a similar status for the category "thriller". Namely, it could be employed as a generic term under which we may include precisely detective films, police procedural films, spy films, political thrillers, courtroom thrillers, erotic thrillers or psychothrillers, that is to say "all films dealing with the perpetration or prevention of crime" (Grant 1995: 503), which share another common and structurally crucial characteristic: suspense. It goes without saying that even though these different types of films have elements in common, we may also trace "exclusive" elements which would demarcate the boundaries of each sort of film. In the case of the spate of films that came to be popularly known as "psychothrillers" in the late 1980s and early 1990s, these elements may be reduced to two: the almost excessively paranoid stress they place on the family as an institution and the presence of a "monstrous" (because mentally

deranged) figure, a "psychokiller" besieging the members of the families in these fictions.³

The more or less universally agreed-on point of departure for the "psychothriller" is Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), a breakthrough movie that inaugurated a new approach to the horror film. Not only did it present the audience with a killer that was obviously human (albeit psychologically monstrous), but also it spoke loud and clear about the (late 50's) family as a horrific site of repression. Yet, earlier Hitchcock films focusing on psychological deformity such as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Rope* (1948) or *Strangers on a Train* (1951) can be seen as antecedents of this subgenre. These references would then come to illustrate another generic characteristic of the films under analysis here: their proximity to the horror genre.⁴ But in fact, the recent (and perhaps even the not so recent) Hollywood film production has been characterised by some degree of generic criss-crossing and recycling, and critics have endeavoured to account for the current fluidity of generic parameters. Rick Altman (1998: 8), in fact, argues that the aforementioned generic flexibility is not exclusively contemporary. Hollywood, in his view, has always been characterised by such fluidity, interconnectedness and what he calls "poaching". The studios' interest in profitability encouraged such practices as a means to appeal to different sectors of the public and permanently maintain the audience's interest. This view may thus help us posit the psychothriller as a special combination of conventions borrowed both from horror films, especially as produced after *Psycho*, and from crime thrillers. This evolving combination would, in turn, produce the cycle of "teenpic slashers" of the 1970s and the erotic and family psychothrillers of the 1980s and early 1990s.

As Barbara Klinger concludes in her discussion of Robin Wood's work on the subversiveness of horror,

Psycho ... is the film that transforms the genre's formula and instigates the progressive/subversive character of horror films of the seventies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper 1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven 1977), and *Night of the Living Dead* (George Romero 1968). The formula for the genre, "normality threatened by the monster", which represents the conventional core of narrative/thematic oppositions, is in horror films preceding *Psycho* usually dramatized less problematically: that is, the monster is always foreign, exotic, radically other than the family it threatens, as in the thirties with *Dracula* (Tod Browning 1931) or *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B.

³ The following films are usually considered to be integral part of this subgenre: *The Stepfather* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Dead Calm* (1989), *Pacific Heights* (1990), *Shattered* (1991), *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), *Cape Fear* (1991), *Unlawful Entry* (1992), *Consenting Adults* (1992), *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (1992), *Single White Female* (1992), and *Blind Side* (1993).

⁴ Tony Williams (1996: 72-86; 212), incidentally, considers these films to be integral part of what he considers to be the long-lasting "horror in the family" tradition in Hollywood cinema.

Schoedsack 1933) or in the fifties with its proliferation of giant, mutant insects. The strategic importance of *Psycho* within this trajectory is in revealing the *locus* of horror as specifically familial, as being produced from within the family institution itself. (1995: 79)

Towards the end of the 1980s, the subgenre under analysis here, together with some other films that came to be known as "erotic thrillers", had somehow succeeded in substituting in popularity not just for the slasher films of the 1970s, but also the dystopian futuristic horrors of the 1980s. Nevertheless, they still managed to maintain the powerful figure of the threatening monster, the "Other", generally contained at the end "by means of an ideological defense" (Deleyto 1997: 21). As was mentioned above, it is significant that certain critics should associate these psychothrillers with horror and even refer to some of them as "Yuppie Horror Movies" (Grant 1998: 280-93),⁵ or actually include them in anthologies devoted to horror (Williams 1996: 212). It seems therefore clear that these films have maintained some affinities with the horror genre, especially as produced in the wake of *Psycho*, the most obvious ones being the presence of the recognisably human monster and their focus on the family. Nevertheless, if, in the 1970s, the figure of a quasi-supernatural monster was often located within the family and hardly ever completely destroyed, its undying presence often lurking in the background, the monstrous "psycho" of the 1990s is expressly placed outside the family and finally destroyed in a reassuringly violent cathartic finale.⁶ In the "stalk and slash" cycle initiated in the 1970s, sexually active (often female) teenagers were often the victims of patriarchal horror. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, horror is at first glance clearly marked as alien to the besieged family. Yet, upon closer analysis, it becomes patent that the psycho's evil and violent influence is simultaneously represented as inevitable or even as already internalised by the family. Consequently, we can observe how some aspects of horror have been maintained but at the same time transformed. Additionally, there is actually an attempt to avoid the excessive representation of blood that we find in the slasher films of the 1970s.⁷ But this is a constant within the genre system. Films must necessarily adapt to and reflect social tendencies to which audiences can relate and, by the same token, genres are subjected to a constant process of redefinition. The 1970s' social climate generated

⁵ Interestingly, by 1998 Grant had also come to accept the generic category "psychothriller", as his continuous use of this term in his paper clearly indicates.

⁶ One of the basic features distinguishing the psychothriller from the horror/slasher film is the fact that the psychopaths, whose "monstrosity" is initially indiscernible but eventually revealed, are *conspicuously* present in the narrative from the onset. The unsuspecting victims respond to their friendly approach until their fiendish potential starts to become evident. This is why suspense, rather than shock and surprise, can be said to characterise the psychothriller until the final confrontation, a staple of the horror film, is reached.

⁷ In his Introduction to *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* (1996), Tony Williams contends that the excessive representation of blood and violence in these films has a fetishistic component that aims at diverting attention from something else, be it the dangers of female sexuality or repression in the family. I would add that in some of these films the gory display of blood often seems to be avoided in an attempt to silence something that the films appear to be only metaphorically representing: the bodily invasion of AIDS and its terrible consequences.

some fictions that were incompatible with the social climate towards the end of the 1980s. In the 1970s, the impact of liberationist movements engendered a number of progressive fictions that represented the bourgeois family institution as a fundamental source of horror and repression but also a spate of more conservative fictions that represented the sexually liberated female or teenagers as the apt victims of horror. The more conservative 1980s, however, witnessed the resurgence of Familialism as an ideology, hence the status of the U.S.-American middle-class family as the real victim in the more recent psychothrillers.⁸

Retaking a point made earlier, it could be argued that this is a recurrent pattern in the Hollywood generic system. In order to ensure economic profit and the maintenance of interest on the part of the public, Hollywood renews and reinvents itself and its products constantly. Contemporary genre criticism has tended to account for this practice from a postmodern stance (Altman 1998: 24). The dominant current approaches acknowledge and take as their point of departure the questioning of generic boundaries together with the historical specificity of the different genres. Most critics seem to agree on an evolutionary and historically-specific approach to film genres that may, incidentally, be easily applied to any kind of cultural artefact in contemporary western societies. As Linda Williams argues, "genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problems they address; but genres thrive also on their ability to recast the nature of these problems" (1995: 156).

In this light, and by taking all the previous arguments into consideration, we may begin to make some sense out of the ambiguity and indeterminacy with which the often superficial study of the psychothriller is undertaken. The affinities of this subgenre with horror, already referred to, may point in the direction of genre criss-crossing and indebtedness. On the other hand, the use of the term *psycho-thriller* may be analysed from a different perspective and perhaps even considered to be a misnomer since, as Altman (1998: 34) puts it, "[m]ost generic labels [the thriller, for instance] carry sufficient prestige that they are retained for the designation of newly formed genres [psychothriller, erotic thriller], even when they are only *partially appropriate*" (emphasis added). For, is the erotic thriller not a more or less obvious Technicolor reworking of film noir? Think, for example, of recent examples such as *Body of Evidence* (1992), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Final Analysis* (1992) or *The Last Seduction* (1994), but also of not so recent ones, such as *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Black Widow* (1986), or *Body Heat* (1981) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), remakes of *Double Indemnity* (1944) and the original 1946 film, respectively. Apart from the obvious technical difference (colour versus black and white film), we may trace similarities that exceed the text. Film noir is often understood in terms of patriarchal anxieties regarding female independence and empowerment away from traditional roles during and after World War II (Kaplan 1978). The more recent "erotic thrillers", for their part, seem to be addressing similar male anxieties regarding parallel gender issues (fuelled to some extent by the rise of

⁸ For an interesting account of these changes and how they affected film production see Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner (1990) and Leonard Quart and Albert Auster (1991).

the New Conservatism and the anti-feminist backlash movement at the beginning of the 1980s, together with the crisis of masculinity on both sides of the Atlantic). Critics such as John Orr (1998) have actually identified and perhaps more coherently termed this contemporary trend in filmmaking as "90s' neo-noir" and the same line of argument has been followed by Richard Martin in *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls* (1997).

My point is that if these "erotic thrillers" might be understood as part of (or an extension to, or a cycle) within the film noir tradition, we might, by the same token, be able to understand the "psychothriller" as a borderline cycle between the horror film and the crime thriller. After all, the umbrella term "thriller" may just be, as Altman points out, a convenient label reflecting critical self-serving attempts to "fold the cyclical differences into the genre, thus authorizing continued use of a familiar, universalizing, sanctioned, and therefore powerful term" (1998: 25).⁹

Admittedly, the use of the term (or suffix) "thriller" generates confusion as it is often employed lightly to describe films that have clear connections with film noir or horror. After all, both genres deal to some extent with "the perpetration and prevention of crime" (the definition applied to the thriller at the beginning of this essay), albeit in different ways. Film noir has some characteristic formal features (e.g. lighting, dark urban setting) and horror elicits more fear than suspenseful anxiety. Besides, we should acknowledge the existence of other differences. By way of an example, the 1980s' and 1990s' erotic thriller or neo-noir differs from its seminal predecessor in the sense that the *femme fatale* is *not* invariably represented in negative or perverse terms. For example, in the remake of *The Postman* the Jessica Lange character is often sympathetically portrayed, and in *Body Heat* or *The Last Seduction*, Kathleen Turner's and Linda Fiorentino's characters are not finally punished and in fact manage to get away with all their crimes. In the case of the borderline psychothriller, there is a noticeable reluctance to show blood-covered victims of gory crimes or the actual perpetration of the crimes themselves. In fact, in most of these films there is a total lack of gore, but a definite presence of stalking psychotic murderers.

Yet, this fact should come as no surprise, bearing in mind the arguments for generic criss-crossing referred to earlier. If the term "psychothriller" may seem to be only partially appropriate, this is because most films nowadays can hardly be accommodated within one single generic category. In this type of film, suspense is intermingled with features belonging to the horror genre, therefore likely associations with both the thriller and the horror film are equally valid. It seems that the studios continue to produce films that are ambiguously typified and which critics, in turn, group into convenient labels such as "erotic thriller" or "psychothriller" in order to facilitate their own work. As Altman perceptively puts it,

⁹ In this case, the term *psycho-thriller* establishes an obvious connection with the thriller. However, it cannot be denied that the prefix *psycho* establishes another explicit connection with the horror film. Therefore, attaching this label to this hybrid genre may not be such an inadequate option after all.

[w]e critics are the ones who have a vested interest in using generic terminology, which serves to anchor our analyses in universal or culturally sanctioned contexts, thus justifying our all but too subjective, tendentious, and self-serving positions. We are thus the ones that see to it that generic vocabulary remains available for use, [even though] producers are actively destroying genres by creating new cycles, some of which will eventually be genrified. (1998: 25)

Let us take, for example, the case of *The Stepfather*, perhaps the closest to horror of all the recent psychothrillers, which has incidentally been analysed both as a horror film (Williams 1996), and as a "psychothriller" (Barton 1998). Here are some of the critical responses used by the jacket of the video edition of the film for publicity purposes:¹⁰ "Makes *Fatal Attraction* look like high-gloss trash"; "A remarkably gripping picture... Full of tension and suspense"; "A macabre thriller of the most dangerous kind"; "Witty, stylish and bloody scary" (*The Stepfather* 1996¹¹). By considering these blurbs we can perceive how terms traditionally applied to horror and also to the thriller are interchangeably employed, and the film in point is directly related to *Fatal Attraction*, a film produced one year later and which is taken to have initiated the contemporary "psychothriller" cycle.¹² On its video jacket, *Fatal Attraction* itself is ambivalently described as "the ultimate thriller, gripping the audience from the start to the cataclysmic end as Alex's obsessive passion erupts into a whirlwind of hate and madness", a characteristically "terrifying love story ... culminating in an unforgettably nerve-jolting finale" (*Fatal Attraction* 1987). *Single White Female* provides another good case in point. On its jacket we read "An innocent Flat Share ad opens the door to murderous, unrelenting terror in this pulse-pounding psychological shocker ... The perfect room-mate becomes the perfect nightmare". Here the word "thriller" has been noticeably replaced by "shocker" (*Single White Female* 1993). Finally, *Pacific Heights* is defined on its video jacket as "a riveting, suspenseful, very classy thriller", and, further down, described in the following terms: "a powerful psychological thriller about two young homeowners fighting a pathological tenant [who] turns out to be a landlord's worst nightmare ... The sadistic schemer soon has Patty and Drake fighting to save their home, their relationship and ultimately, their lives" (*Pacific Heights* 1993). These four different examples clearly show that the terms used to describe these films apply both to the thriller and the horror film. And yet, some critics have chosen to validate the label

¹⁰ It is of course always difficult to ascertain the veracity of the precedence of the alleged quotations included in these jackets. I use them here not for their value as criticism of the films but because of their importance in the extratextual construction of the films by the industry. These constructions, no less than other types of propaganda, influence the way in which spectators approach the films.

¹¹ The years in this and subsequent references to the video jackets are not the years of exhibition of the films but of the video versions.

¹² In this sense we should maybe trace even earlier seminal examples of this type of film or perhaps consider *The Stepfather* as the seminal film. Unfortunately, it seems to me that the reason why *Fatal Attraction* "attracted" so much public attention that it spawned a cycle of films was the fact that the "psycho" was a successful career woman. Nevertheless, at a time when this emerging type of woman was being unfairly demonised by some sectors of society, a misogynous film of this type came as no surprise.

"psychothriller" because "[i]n the regeneration process, [critics] regularly take on the cycle formation function previously associated only with film production" (Altman 1998: 35).¹³

As has been pointed out earlier, other critics, nevertheless, refuse to accept such a term as a generic subcategory. They prefer to typify these movies simply as contemporary instances or reinterpretations of traditional horror. It has already been stated how genres may intermingle in the way that Altman has theorised. He is right to point out that generic products, like the horror film or the thriller, are constantly subject to change and necessarily adapt to the times, and that generic criss-crossing is quite inevitable.

Such is the case which has been under analysis here. Since films must adapt to the times when they are produced, I would suggest that they inevitably strive to address various contemporary concerns to which different cross-sections of the audience can relate. On the other hand, it seems that the studios will produce films that are ambiguously typified and which critics, in turn, group into convenient (though admittedly limited and not always fully adequate) labels to facilitate their own work, which often results in ambiguity and confusion, especially when their approximations are not sufficiently deep. It could be said that the "psychothriller" is a good example of this tendency, which leads me to a final consideration. By straight jacketing more or less eclectic films (such as the recent psychothrillers) into specific but only partially suitable genres (such as the horror film), critics seem to be falling into the same ideological trap that the old genre system, with its stereotyped yet popular plots and characters and satisfactorily predictable resolutions, has been traditionally understood to pose.¹⁴ But then it is only natural that they, like uncritical audiences, should try to make sense of the chaos around us. In an age of uncertainty, perhaps the best option would be to leave the issue of strict categorisation (is this a thriller or is it a horror film?) open to discussion.

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¹³ For instance, it is well known that the generic category "Film Noir", now universally accepted, did not "exist" previous to its "invention" by the critics associated to the French publication *Cahiers du Cinema*. Therefore, one should not dismiss the "(psycho)thriller" solely on the grounds that critics have tended to validate this term through constant use.

¹⁴ Traditional generic products have been invariably criticised, not only for their lack of originality, but also for their ability to impose a particularly conformist ideology on the audience through their rigid sets of generic expectations. According to Steve Neale (1992: 55), for instance, audiences, accustomed to finding the same reassuringly similar film patterns, try to make sense of the confusion inherent in the real world through these cliché-ridden formulaic productions.

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