

Since Infested Films is dedicated to bringing an end to spoon-fed, PG-13 horror films and re-makes, a few of us decided to take a moment and discuss just exactly what brought about this change in tide. In the 1970's and 1980's, horror films were balls-out, and so were their creators. Consider Peter Jackson and Sam Raimi, two modern-day Hollywood giants, and how they got their start doing ultra low-budget splatter films, and how that has morphed into their current careers, directing some of the highest grossing films of all time for the media conglomerate-run movie studios.

This round-table discussion was held between the following players, in order:

Brad Morelli, owner/operator of Morelli Media, who mainly does graphic design work, such as website, poster, and t-shirt designs. Brad is also an accomplished writer, film critic, and musician.

Derek LaShomb is an independent film writer, director, producer, and film critic, with such short films as The Unfortunate under his belt. His next film 100 Yards to Go will begin filming in 2010 in Oregon.

Sean Canfield is a screenwriter, director, and producer, having written many scripts in various stages of production, who is also in post-production on his first television pilot "Outside In".

**BRAD MORELLI:**

Like Nas said about hip hop; Horror is dead. Horror has been on a decline way before Rob Zombie decided to touch Halloween, and way before Freddy decided to square off with Jason. The 80's were no-holds-barred bloodbaths featuring sex, drugs, terrible acting, and some of the best looking F/X make-up you'd see in any genre. Some were controversial, some were gut busting, and some were literally disgusting. More importantly, they were fun.

Today's horror has been turned into cupcake material for the American teenager to eat up in the form of PG-13 ghost material. It's truly a sad moment when this generation lists the best horror films as *Scream*, *the Ring*, *the Grudge*, *the Eye*, and *Dead Silence*. Of course, the biggest stumbling block for horror is remakes. Call it a reinvention, a restart, or a reboot, but it will always be the same thing. New and eager filmmakers are repeatedly turned away in favor of the next remake of a horror classic.

I still remember my first horror experience as a kid, when I watched John Carpenter's *Halloween* with no lights on at about 9 years old. As a child, this was something that required great courage. To say I was terrified would be putting it lightly. The film was the perfect culmination of everything that horror should be about. It blended suspense, music, a great villain, and characters that you wanted to survive. I had nightmares about Myers for weeks.

Although drops of fresh blood show through in films like with originals like *Hatchet*, *Cabin Fever*, and *Slither*, it's obvious that the genre we grew up loving no longer exists. When is the last time we've had a great franchise horror character like Freddy or Jason?

Go out and ask a stranger for their favorite movie genre and I bet you'll get comedy or drama. Obviously, mine is horror. I always get people asking why I like "those" kind of films. You know, "those" kind. How could I possibly enjoy watching people being hacked to pieces? Do I ever fan-

tasize about cutting someone into pieces myself? Have I ever considered picking up an axe and wiping out my entire family? These are the typical questions I face when the subject arises.

For the moral majority, the horror film is useless. It is a perverse exercise in sex and graphic violence; a piece of schlocky entertainment that creates psychopaths and rapists. What exactly drives us to watch? The classic defense is that we like to be scared because of the response of adrenaline in our bodies. Well, that explanation is a little too simple for me.

Society may not be at its most violent point in history, but the access to real-life violence has never been easier with the innovation of the internet and technological advances in media communications. Flip on your computer screen or television set and you'll have immediate access to school shootings, Iraqi prisoners being tortured, our own Americans being beheaded, and countless murders explained in graphic depiction on any news broadcast. Like the Vietnam generation before us, we all start to feel veterans of this war as well.

Horror will always be a form of escapism from the real horrors of the world. The Greek philosopher Aristotle gave us his theory of the "catharsis." In this theory, Aristotle claimed that the pain we witness in tragedy will cure and purge the pain within ourselves. If we support this theory, then we can make the assumption that someone with an urge to commit acts of violence will be purged of his hurt and anger by watching someone do it on screen for him.

We can't deny the temporarily loss of control when watching. For at least 90 minutes, you will willingly submit yourself to the horrors that the director is prepared to unleash on you. The need to be in control relates directly to our fear of death. In our life, death is the only thing you will never conquer. We all know it's coming, we all deny it, and we all delude ourselves into believing we somehow control it. After our movie victims are hacked to bits, the credits roll and our lives return to normal. In essence, we have conquered death, at least temporarily. It is the same reason why we ride roller coasters or sky dive. We can safely look death in the face and walk away.

I've always enjoyed filmmakers who explore the rebellion against the false promises we were raised with. Call it nihilism or call it realism, but the fact remains that we have grown up in a world much different than what was promised to us. In the majority of horror films, the endings aren't happy, the hero doesn't get the girl, and we don't live happily ever after. The world isn't a safe place, and good does not always triumph over evil. The capability of evil that resides in the human heart will always be greater than any monster that can be brought to the screen.

If a psychopath decides to snap because of a reaction to the Texas Chainsaw Massacre, that doesn't place the blame on the creators of that film. Not only would such nonsense never hold up in a court of law, but it's irresponsible to place blame on external factors that have no real relevance to the cause. After all, I can go on a killing spree and say that MTV's My Super Sweet 16 drove me over the edge, but does that somehow make that show a dangerous entity?

The art of horror is like any other counter-culture that has been outclassed from the good graces of society. Parents are afraid of what their children are getting into, the critics see no artistic value, and modern society waits for the next fanatic to mass murder. Horror is in your face, confrontational, and offers no apologies on the world view it presents. In essence, it is the

sub-culture your parents warned you about. Horror movies are a blast, but the horror of reality will always await us after the credits. As long as humans inhabit the earth, evil will not go away. Unless we find a cure for evil and conquer death, horror will not die. It's true; you can't keep a good monster down.

DEREK LASHOMB:

We all remember the walls at the video store, lined with those famous covers that we can all remember seeing. That was my initial first introduction to horror. Then came *Child's Play* in the summer of 1997, at ten years old. What was it followed with? *Friday The 13<sup>th</sup>*, the following summer. I was a Jason freak, despite being a bit freaked out by the dude. He was awesome. From there, it was like a gateway drug. Any and all horror I could get my hands on became mine. People might not know why we like it, but to me, it's the ultimate escapism. Horror is a trip into the macabre, into dark fantasy. Horror is absurdity at its absolute best. The good films can make us believe in whatever fantastical fright is going on on-screen, the bad ones are still entertaining in their own right, albeit for different reasons. Horror USED to be a culture all its own. It's anti-establishment. It's violent and in your face, and totally unapologetic. Like metal music, horror's bastard brother, it's a subversive form of entertainment with a niche audience.

At least that's the way it used to be. Gone are the days of thriving straight to video horror. Gone are the days of more horror films being shown at the multiplex than any other genre. We've got remakes coming out the wazoo and generic, rehashed, SAFE shit, but nothing even remotely close to what the last three decades had given us. If I had to pinpoint a downfall, it would be with *Scream* in 1997. There's a saying that as soon as you satirize a genre, it's dead, and I sort of believe in that. Some people will call "*Scary Movie*" the death, but really, it all began with *Scream*, which gave us a slew of carbon copy rip offs. Perhaps that was the beginning of the mass-marketed crap era we're in today?

Horror is not dead. There are still good films being made for us. There just aren't enough of them being put out anymore. Violence and gore in cinema is at an extreme point. Look at *Hostel*, *Hatchet*, and the *SAW* films; us gorehounds are being given a healthy serving of plasma. So why are we complaining?

The community aspect is still there on the convention scene, but the subversive aspect of the genre seems to be gone a little bit, at least for me. Consider this though: we used to treasure these little B-movies, the undiscovered, cheap, full of charm gems that were our favorite slasher films, our favorite monster flicks, creature movies, and zombie gore-fests. Those B-movies are still around, only they're the "A-movies" now. Everything in Hollywood, or nearly everything, is a B-Movie. The studios are making B-movies now, and selling them as "A" movies, so to speak. Violence is being given to the masses from every media outlet imaginable nowadays. Is there really anything left to exploit?

I think there is. There's balls and potential in a few of the upcoming horror directors, it just looks like the landscape has changed, hopefully only for the time being.

SEAN CANFIELD

What killed horror? That's the problem, it's no single event, rather a wide variety of factors, and I plan to touch on all of them right now. If it were any singular problem, then it would just be a matter of putting that back in place, and there we go. Trouble is, it's not that easy.

First and foremost, the biggest problem with horror today is the loss of independence, and the over-commercialization of the genre. The reason horror really came about like it did was because it was a new form of expression in filmmaking, and it was brought about by new filmmakers, people like Wes Craven, Peter Jackson, Sam Raimi, John Carpenter, and Sean Cunningham to name a few of the top dogs. Of course, there were many more people that helped with the revolution (Joseph Zito, Stuart Gordon, Bob Clark, etc), but the one thing all these men had in common, the one unifying factor they all shared, was the fact that they had complete control over their output creatively. Even those with worrisome financial backers had the fact that many of these backers had no knowledge of the film business playing to their advantage. They were allowed to go off and make their films with few creative restrictions, and usually only had a very loose set of parameters when they were sent out to make their films.

This fact resulted in some of the best feature films that the 1980's had to offer. Consider the fact that when Sam Raimi went out to shoot *The Evil Dead*, their standard investor contract stated that there was no completion bond, that if something happened and the production failed, oh well, there was nothing that could be done. I believe I remember Stuart Gordon saying the investors for *Re-Animator* gave him these guidelines: Has to be horror, has to be feature length (which at the time was 75 minutes at minimum, same as now, I believe), and had to have a final cut delivered by a certain date, which was around a year after they were to begin principal production. Nowadays, these types of deals are unheard of.

So what was once independence in the horror genre, has now become commercialization. Because one of these films became a hit, the capitalists moved on in, and decided in order to try to make more money, they had to give more people the opportunity to make more films. Of course, this also meant that people beyond the best candidates would get a chance to make a horror film, and not only the first rate ideas would get made. This started become more evident when rip off films became all the rage. Sure, *The Burning*, *The Prowler*, *April Fool's Day*, and *My Bloody Valentine* all are basically rehashes of the hits *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween*, but for the most part, a lot of them are still entertaining, and a few are even very well made in their own right.

The problem is though, as the market kept expanding, and commercialization took over, like with any booming product, the supply ends up exceeding the demand, and the audience is left with an overabundance of product, and it gets hard to differentiate what is good, what is bad, and if it's even worth sitting through any of it to be able to tell the difference. Naturally, with a booming industry, money kept coming in despite the fact that not all the product was making money. The illusion of making money was enough to keep people pouring budgets into the laps of sub-par filmmakers, and of course this led to sub-par films, and of course, at some point, it had to backlash. As we all know, this came about at the tail end of the 1980's, when people were over-saturated with Freddy, Jason, and Michael Meyers, and the general populace began to ignore horror as a whole, because of the over-saturation and a few bad examples of what horror had become. This over-saturation of horror led to the direct-to-video market, which became a phenomenon in its own right. For the few shining examples of filmmaking,

one had to sit through probably 10–15 terrible examples. Well, once that number of direct to horror videos hit 20 coming out every week, there became a certain point where even the most hardcore fans couldn't sit through all of them just to find the good ones. So they gave up.

Of course, as mentioned, this all changed again in the mid–90's with Wes Craven's *Scream*. As many people know, I'm not a fan of the movie, but I do realize what it did for the horror genre in general. The problem is, for as much good as *Scream* did, it again spawned even more knock offs and sequels, which quickly quelled the hope that had been built up, because not enough of the knock-offs or sequels could provide anything worthwhile, and once again, the majority of the fans gave up on trying to sift through the crap to find the gems. Now, the only thing that slightly corrected this problem was the popularization of the internet. As a huge source of information, people had everything at their fingertips, and instead of sifting through crap, they could sit back and find out which movies were worthwhile, and select those at will. The problem with that, which continues to this day, is the over-saturation of crap and the reluctance of many casual horror fans to find out which ones are good. Really, can you blame Joe Average for not wanting to have to spend an hour on the internet doing research just to find out which movie may possibly suit their needs?

Now, in the new millennium, there is a new, even stranger problem plaguing horror. The internet has become the source of over-saturation. For every good recommendation that used to be made by a trusted source, who was the "website of the people", they now make far too many bad recommendations, which means that fans are reluctant to even believe these sites when they do make a good recommendation. At the same time, when a horror movie is widely recognized as being well made, or a good example of old style horror, there are two types of backlash. Those who don't want to be caught conforming to the new trend of liking what other "underground" cinema fans like (and really, with the internet, there is no underground anymore) or as I mentioned, the up front non-belief that these movies are actually any good. Let's face it, for every *Cabin Fever*, *Slither*, or *Hatchet* that comes out, there are immediately knock offs of those movies, so people can easily lump them into the category of "Stuff I'm not going to watch because it's all the same" (*SAW 7*, anyone?). It's a vicious cycle, and unfortunately, the movies that are original and authentic get lumped in with the stuff that is riding its coattails.

As much as I like horror culture, and conventions, these are just more examples of over saturation and commercialization of the horror genre. Again, this is great for the movies that truly deserve the notoriety and the attention (such as *Black Devil Doll*) but at the same time, it just leads the common populace to think these are just parts of a bigger marketing machine, and they can't tell the difference. Nor can the studios, who see a horror film do well, and then they figure that ANY horror film can do that well. That leads to the increasing of budgets, and ultimately, the whoring of horror as a whole genre. This is where we get remakes of Japanese movies that became internet sensations, because according to a studio, *Ju-On* and *The Ring* remake are the same thing, right? I mean, if they are both similar stories, and they are marketed to audiences right, they'll both sell, right? Unfortunately for people looking for quality product, this is actually the case. The ignorance of the general movie-going populace thinks that by watching the Halloween remake in theaters, they are supporting horror, and therefore doing good by their genre. Right? Wrong.

The problem is, the quality product is overshadowed by inferior product, and the face of the

consumer has changed, like it always does when over-commercialization takes root. I see it first hand working in the rental industry. Someone will come up and say, for example, they love Evil Dead. Do I have any recommendations? Well, I tell them, if they like Evil Dead, they would probably like Return of the Living Dead. The problem is, this uneducated consumer has already seen this movie, and thinks that there are TONS more shining examples like these two previously mentioned films. The problem is, there aren't. When I try to tell them that, they don't believe me, and figure that The Eye remake will be just as good a substitute, and either gladly lower their standards, or they come back pissed they rented a crappy movie. Yeah, I tried to tell you, just because it's in the same genre doesn't mean it's going to be as good. People can't accept this fact, they believe, because of the internet and their previous experience (such as finding out they love a film that they had previously never heard of, like Re-Animator, just for example) that Lake Dead has to be a good movie too, just because they haven't heard of it.

So when Lake Dead sucks, they are mad, and either go on renting even worse movies, looking for that one elusive "hidden gem" or they give up on the horror genre as a whole, sales for horror dip, and the genre suffers as a whole either way. So the real problem is, fewer projects get picked, and the ones that do get picked have higher budgets, and less creative control from the people actually making them, because horror has become, like every other genre of film, a studio controlled genre. This isn't always true, but it does show that less and less independent horror films get made, and the bulk of them that do get made are cheap and easy ones, which are the previously mentioned forgettable Direct-To-Video films that populate so many video store shelves.

However, the few films that do succeed both critically and commercially, on the internet from armchair critics and real proponents of horror alike, are most often independently produced, just like their predecessors of 20 years before. Just think, Hatchet and Cabin Fever were both made without the cooperation of any studio. Of course, the problem is, to get proper distribution and media presence, they have to sell the movies themselves to the major studios for proper distribution upon completion, otherwise these films just end up going straight to video, they have no market presence, and they might as well be Motor Home Massacre as far any average consumer can tell. So confusion abounds.

I don't believe the horror genre is dead, if anything, the funds that go towards it often just get misappropriated in the muddled and confusing market that now represents horror. With conventions everywhere, and people that used to be only known by a handful of people becoming regular names amongst more people, therefore spreading their fame thinner than it already was, it just furthers the fact that horror is a small market, and far too many people with too little passion get involved because they believe there is huge money to be made. And for a small amount of films, there is good money to be made. But when there are 1,000 films a year fighting for the same amount of money that used to go to 100 films a year, no single film gets the same recognition as it used to.

If the original Friday the 13th were to come out in this market, it would easily get lost, forgotten as just another mediocre horror film. However, in 1980, it was one of a kind, the first of its kind, and that is the fact that garnered it \$40 million in box office receipts on a \$700,000 budget. The problem is, that just can't happen anymore, and even the films that deserve that kind of attention and money (Hatchet, for example) get lumped in with the crap, and people are

hard pressed to believe they are any good. I tried recommending Hatchet to people at my job in a video store, same with Inside, until I found out that we only carried the R rated versions. Even still, if the unrated versions were available, I would've gotten the same unenthusiastic responses from people that asked me for horror recommendations. I tell them this is the next big thing in horror, and even though they are looking for EXACTLY THAT, they still won't believe me, because they've become jaded by the fact that they've sat through far too many terrible movies to actually believe good ones are out there anymore.

Then, there are films that become box office hits, and they completely divide horror fans, and this is the remake. The Dawn of the Dead remake was well done. I liked it. I did not support it in theaters, however, because I decided to reserve that type of support for movies I actually wanted to see more of made, which are original horror movies. The problem is, so few make it into theaters, that the horror starved fans see something slightly familiar (Texas Chainsaw Massacre, oh, I liked that!) so they support these films, but really, it's only because they want more films like the original Texas Chainsaw Massacre. They don't realize they are destroying the potential for that, and instead creating a whole new market for more remakes, they think supporting horror in general is the right thing to do. Not true. Like I stated, these people aren't supporting horror, they are reaffirming the big studio decisions to keep remaking horror movies, instead of putting more money into the hands of new filmmakers, the ones that have the ideas and spirit of John Carpenter, Wes Craven, and Sam Raimi circa 1980.

That's the other problem, these independent visionaries of old have themselves become the biggest studio whores. Their names have become nothing but nostalgic memories of what they once produced. I mean, with Carpenter producing stuff like Ghosts of Mars, what are people supposed to think? Our horror heroes have sold out to the big studios just to make shitty, overblown, big budget studio movies. How is that teaching young filmmakers to go out and try new things? It's not, it's telling them that you might as well sell out now, make the Friday the 13th remake, because it's the best you're ever going to do. Like so many other people in the world, even filmmakers look up to the old masters for direction, and when their direction is "Make another Scream trilogy...trust me, it'll work." from Wes Craven, well, what's their inspiration to go off and write a film like High Tension? Instead, they would rather take the easy road, take the high paying job to direct the Prom Night remake, I mean, it's the type of behavior that Wes Craven is displaying, right? Even worse, the people that come out and make good, original horror such as High Tension, are now doing remake after remake. Really Aja, High Tension was your only original idea? It's sad to see a guy that could have been the Jesus of Horror doing his third remake in a row. He has become his own Judas, and here we are, the horror fans, holding the bag as he climbs off the cross and makes a run for the money.

And that is the sad state of horror films today.