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NIGHTMARES THAT FRIGHTEN IN REALITY. THE CHILD MOTIF IN AMERICAN HORROR FILMS OF THE 1980s.

Fear is part of every child's experience. It fills dreams with spectres, frightens with the darkness of attics and cellars, transforms tree shadows into many-headed monsters kidnapping helpless victims. When the light is turned off in the children's room, dolls and teddy bears come to life, a gentle clown bares his teeth, green eyes glow under the bed and there is a persistent scratching sound in the wardrobe. Only the feeble stream of light under the door maintains contact with mummy, who keeps the powers of evil at bay. But when that light disappears too, the child is alone and the best thing to do is to hide under the duvet and close the eyes as tightly as possible. Imagination is at work, drawing on fairy tales of Baba Yaga, on a fear of mummy disappearing, of a memory of the granddad's funeral and a fear of the world, the twisted logic of which is so hard to understand. During the day light colours of life still rule, but the evening wakes various phantoms, whom the parents, inexplicably, cannot see anymore, having lost the key to imagination long time ago.

And the cellar... Mouldy, dark, with stairs leading deep down, with big spiders and hairy rats. It is full of dusty objects which have ceased to be useful upstairs, but now – who knows? – perhaps they will take revenge, for having been abandoned, on that weak darling of the family. In the prologue to his beautiful childhood tale, *It*, Stephen King writes about a little boy, George, sent by his elder brother to the cellar:

He did not even like opening the door to flick on the light because he always had the idea – this was so exquisitely stupid he didn't dare tell anyone – that while he was feeling for the light

switch, some horrible clawed paw would settle lightly over his wrist... and then jerk him down into the darkness that smelled of dirt and wet and dim rotted vegetables¹.

The child has always been a natural protagonist of all kinds of horror novels and films, though they were not written and made for children. However, horror needs fantasy and abandoning of common sense, and adults rarely believe in crooked-nosed creatures and tin soldiers (replaced by plastic transformers today) battling teddy bears every night. They do other things, incomprehensible to children: they quarrel, cheat on each other, leave, get depressed, drink themselves senseless and beat other family members or sit in front of the television set in a stupor, waiting for yet another day to pass. In this way they like to fill children's innocence with fear that will not only produce nightmares every night, but also shape their adulthood.

Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and elder siblings like to scare children, always choosing those forms of horror that seem to be the most credible in a given cultural context. In the past it was the Gypsies or black Volga cars that would kidnap children; today children are frightened with paedophiles and organ traffickers. Some forms of sadistic tales have not changed for years: "If you eat cherry stones a tree will grow in your belly and its branches will come out through your mouth", "If you're not careful when playing outside, the earwig will get into your ear and start eating your brain", "If you drink water from the bathtub, frogs will grow in your belly", "If you don't listen to me, the policeman will come and take you away" or the worst: "If you don't stop being naughty, mummy will stop loving you, will go away and will never come back". How many nightmares are generated by such tirades: nightmares about bushes ensnaring helpless bodies, about huge toads with their long tongues sucking their victims in or about a sad life in an orphanage run by gaunt spinsters with squeaky voices.

Horror. Adults have their ways to turn children's life into an ordeal. Perhaps by doing so they are preparing them for the horror of adult life, even more difficult than children's life – for this time it is real. Each culture, country and period had its own method to make children obedient. There are memorable examples from Carlos Saura's films, when little Antonio in *The Garden of Delights* (*El Jardín de las decias*, 1970) is locked in a cubbyhole with a big pig or when in *Cousin Angelica* (*La prima Angelica*, 1974) a boy, under the care of his aunt, is tormented with religion for so long that he begins to be haunted in his dreams by a nun with a deathly glance, sweeping movements and bleeding, vermin-infested stigmata. In the United States there emerged a tradition of the haunted house, deserted and ruined, in which murder had been committed many years earlier and which was still inhabited by ghosts. It was a point of honour for every 11-year-old to enter such a house in order to prove his courage in front of his mates. Again we see images – also literary ones,

¹ S. King, *It*, Polish translation by R. Lipski, Poznań 1997, p. 11.

from Mark Twain's works, with the psychopathic Injun Joe lying in wait for Tom Sawyer, with magic marbles and a labyrinth of caves, in which, if you got lost, you could starve to death – in absolute darkness, of course. On our side of the Atlantic, in the first half of the 19th century Heinrich Hoffmann wrote *Shockheaded Peter (Struwwelpeter)*, warning children against getting into mischief, a work so beautifully translated into Polish by Waclaw Szymanowski in the collection *Złota różdżka. Grzechy 4–6 letniej dziatwy, opowiadane wierszem*. From this collection comes the famous poem about thumb-sucking Conrad and a terrifying tailor – Freddy Krueger's 19th century predecessor:

One day, Mamma said,
 "Conrad dear,
 I must go out and leave you here.
 But mind now, Conrad, what I say,
 Don't suck your thumb while I'm away.
 The great tall tailor always comes
 To little boys that suck their thumbs.
 And ere they dream what he's about
 He takes his great sharp scissors
 And cuts their thumbs clean off, - and then
 You know, they never grow again."
 Mamma had scarcely turn'd her back,
 The thumb was in, alack! alack!
 The door flew open, in he ran,
 The great, long, red-legged scissorman.
 Oh! children, see! the tailor's come
 And caught our little Suck-a-Thumb.
 Snip! Snap! Snip! the scissors go;
 And Conrad cries out - Oh! Oh! Oh!
 Snip! Snap! Snip! They go so fast;
 That both his thumbs are off at last.
 Mamma comes home; there Conrad stands,
 And looks quite sad, and shows his hands;-
 "Ah!" said Mamma, "I knew he'd come
 To naughty little Suck-a-Thumb."²

Today we continue to scare our children and cinema invariably keeps returning to tried and tested models. Sometimes it is a residential community built on the site of a forgotten Indian burial ground from which graves were not removed in order to save money (*Poltergeist*). It might be a case of summer camp participants haunted by the spectre of a boy who, left alone by his carers, drowned in the lake years before (*Friday the 13th*). Or it might be a sadistic child killer, returning to the

² H. Hoffmann, *Der Struwwelpeter*, Polish translation by W. Szymanowski, Warsaw 1987. English version quoted after *Slovenly Peter or Cheerful Stories and Funny Pictures for Good Little Folks*, Philadelphia, John C. Winston Company, n.d. (1900?).

waking world through the gate of nightmares, a son of maniacs lynched by a mob of righteous Americans giving vent to their brutality (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*). We recognise these motifs as transformations of Poe's prose, Grimm brothers' or even Andersen's fairy tales: of the handless girl, Baba Yaga's cannibalism, man-eating wolf or frozen girl with matches. Children like to be scared in the company of their mum and dad, so they drink in the tales with their eyes wide from fear, and then see a Baba Yaga in many an elderly lady. Thus the parents teach them to be distrustful. Perhaps they protect them against a paedophile's cunning, warn them against getting lost in the woods, impose moral imperatives, frightening them with possible consequences of rebellion.

Although horror films are not made for children, a child is often their protagonist, usually a victim, a wronged creature paying for the sins or imprudence of adults. Identification is a characteristic feature of these films: we do not identify with the child protagonists, but more with their adult defenders, returning to the once abandoned imagination. Horror films with child protagonists are melancholic journeys to the times of lost innocence, which, however, is not a complete return, for it is tainted by the bitterness of adult experience; it is a critical return, because we find in adults that manifestation of evil which chooses children as its victims – vulnerable travellers in the world of overwhelming imagination.

1980s HORROR FILMS

Child protagonists became especially popular in the 1980s, when Hollywood horror films experienced the greatest heyday in its history. Low-budget horror films for teenage audiences were by no means artistic achievements of ambitious cinema, though they did carry a diagnosis of their times more insightful than art films made in that period. Fantasy has always claimed to have the right to judge, predict and metaphorise fears. Such cult series as *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* or *A Nightmare on Elm Street* not only are a charming picture of fashions, fascinations and terrors of the decade, but also describe contemporary social, political and cultural phenomena.

There are many causes behind the popularity of horror films and it is worth paying special attention to some of them. First, this popularity stemmed from a renaissance of the genre, which after the 1970s, in a refreshed, more modern form began to win back favour of the public and the producers. Although this will sound somewhat simplified and stereotypical, the time of rebellion and Vietnam war was conducive to genre-dismantling practices. This was done by means of two methods and both of them turned out to be extremely important to horror films several years later. First, artists resorted to demythologising practices, regarding the deconstruction of genre rules as a possibility of entering into a polemic with the foundations

of American culture (the case of Robert Altman, but also Herschell Gordon Lewis). Horror film, which had always been countercultural, showing the dark side of human nature and the terror lurking behind the facade of institutions, was perfectly suited to such actions and entered the first stage of its impressive heyday. It obviously corresponded to the mood of teenagers, rebellious as always and twice as much in the 1970s – as part of standardised rebellion. These were the circumstances of the emergence of the gore horror genre, with numerous subgenres, especially slasher films, which ten years later became popular in the form of teen films familiarised by pop culture.

Changes were also happening in the opposite direction, with artists seeking to reconstruct the film genre in new, usually hybrid configurations. A return to old forms was impossible; western films and musicals had become anachronistic, and costume drama as well as disaster films had begun to smell musty. Thus, from the mid-1970s (even more clearly in the 1980s) popular films included dynamic action films (replacing western films), teen comedies, thrillers, horror and science fiction films (drawing teenagers away from road films) as well as veristic police films (more credible than nostalgic gangster films). Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Brian de Palma, Robert Zemeckis, James Cameron or Ridley Scott saw the power of American cinema not in formal experiments and constant deconstruction of the genre, but in its frenetic form of story-telling, in the veering between rebellion and conservatism, in special effects and a note of self-referencing as well as in stable plot models and younger audiences. This strategy, called by Jim Collins *new sincerity*³, gave rise to the slasher genre of the 1980s – far removed from the anti-establishment energy of old horror films, but still cruel and gory, finding its ideological foundations and narrative format in the tradition of film fantasy of the 1950s.

Thus we have come to the second cause behind the flourishing of horror films in the 1980s. Undoubtedly the sudden popularity of the genre was associated with the reaganomatography phenomenon, i.e. films that were more or less clear responses to worldview changes taking place in the United States, changes that brought Ronald Reagan to power. His views were influenced by a need to return to the traditional values of the Midwest – with elevation of the family (instead of hippy communes), counteroffensive of the Christian religion (instead of New Age-inspired movements), with a confrontational attitude to the USSR (instead of the détente doctrine), with a vindication of Vietnam War veterans (instead of contempt and oblivion awaiting them) and restitution of economic liberalism (instead of demands of the left in the flower power era).

In the exercise of power Reagan's role model was to some extent Dwight Eisenhower, and for the decade the point of reference was the 1950s. It was at that time

³ J. Collins, *Architecture of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age*, New York 1997, pp. 149-150.

that today's standard of living emerged – with fast-foods, highways, supermarkets, colonies of detached houses, defrosted dinners, cable television and mass entertainment. The myth of the Eisenhower's era remained alive, with the yank-tanks, drive-in movie theatres, rock and roll and immaculate lawns in front of the houses (no fences) making up the iconography of the decade, resurrected during Ronald Reagan's term in office.

It would be difficult to blame the protest movement for depriving Americans of innocence and idealism – this was done by political assassinations, Vietnam debacle, Watergate, economic crisis and social unrest. However, counterculture became a diagnosis and document of the times which people in the 1980s wanted to forget first of all. Thus, the hippies cut their hair and began to formulate the yuppie ideology; rebellious rock was replaced by the ideologically lighter disco, while successful cinematic productions were either remakes of the 1950s horror films: *The Blob* (1988, Chuck Russell), *The Thing* (1982, John Carpenter), *The Fly* (1986, David Cronenberg); or nostalgic films about a lost decade: *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986, Francis Ford Coppola); the popular (though taking place in the 1960s) series *The Wonder Years* or the most symptomatic among them – Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future* (1985). In literature an ideological bridge between the decades was built by Stephen King in *It*, describing, alternately, the fate of several kids, who in 1958 have to deal with evil that assumes various forms, and their actions as adults, who, drawn by a childhood promise, return to their home town to complete the fight.

The popularity of horror films and novels stemmed, therefore, from the period's conservatism – which sounds paradoxical, for horror films were more often associated with the anarchy-advocating *exploitation cinema* and usually served as a negative of the cultural models of the day. The incredible flourishing of horror films in Reagan's decade grew from an ability to combine 1970s gore elements, attractive to young viewers, with rebellion-soothing conservatism of the period. Thus, on the one hand, the protagonists of films were still teenagers on the look-out for sexual adventures during weekend parties or summer camps, and the silver screen was full of cruelty stemming from a dysfunction of social institutions – despite the fantastic origin of evil. On the other hand, artists softened (at least when it came to the main threads) generational conflicts, glorified family solidarity and rarely criticised the church or religion, which sometimes – as in the Freddy Krueger series – was referred to in the fight against evil. Above all, conservatism in that decade considerably weakened the significance of the road movie genre, tied the protagonists to their family home and their home town, setting socially acceptable goals for them: high school, college, university, then starting work and a family. It channelled rebellion into genres that were attractive to teenagers, who by that time had become tame and imbued with a conservative worldview.

Thus, the appearance of children in this world was by no means a surprise. After a decade of individualism and crisis of the family, traditional forms of hu-

man relations were back in favour. In the 1980s – like in the 1950s – artists portrayed a family of five with a hard working father, a mother who took care of the house, three children, one of whom was approaching the end of high school and the youngest who had not yet started school, with a dog, an estate car and immaculate lawn in front of the house. This was to be the model of the period depicted by cinema, the model which was the first (like in science fiction films of the 1950s) to be targeted by the countercultural evil. Even implicit meanings, weaving the metaphoric imagery of the various works, lost the subversive sparkle of their message. Authors refrained from reviling the school system, the police, the church or the family, reviling instead promiscuity (threat of AIDS), divorce and marital infidelity (because the families, weakened as a result, became victims of evil), otherness (because it produced sexual maniacs) and irreligiousness. These were the circumstances of the emergence of optimistic horror films, in which no one thought yet about political correctness.

WAITING FOR KRUEGER

The most impressive series in American horror cinema appeared on the scene in the mid-1980s, with *A Nightmare on Elm Street* displaying the highest mastery of film craft and skilful paraphrase of the myths of reaganomatography, drawing on the tradition of the old slasher films. The first film in the series, by Wes Craven, was preceded by hundreds of other films, usually made by small production companies with small budgets at their disposal, and then distributed via one of the icons of the decade – VHS cassette. As I have mentioned, these films usually had teenage boys or, more often, girls as their protagonists, who paid for their initiation into adulthood with the death of their friends and a confrontation with a sadistic and cruel enemy. There were very few child protagonists in such films, because teenage viewers could not really identify with them. However, the presence of children in some films became key to the plot.

Their role varied – like in the two previous decades, when horror films were made by big budget, prestigious studios. Sometimes the child would be an incarnation of evil (e.g. *Omen* [1976, Richard Donner] and *Rosemary's Baby* [1968, Roman Polański]), sometimes it became its medium (*The Exorcist* [1973, William Friedkin] and, in the next decade, *The Believers* [1987, John Schelsinger]). Sometimes children would be observers and the first witnesses to the emerging manifestations of evil (*The Shining* [1980, Stanley Kubrick] or *Poltergeist* [1982, Tobe Hooper]). These themes also returned in teenage versions of horror films, in which teenage protagonists became defenders of their vulnerable brothers or sisters, or, more often, became aware of the evil done to them in early childhood (this theme was developed in the Freddy Krueger stories).

An example here is the several-part slasher *Silent Night, Deadly Night* (1984) by Charles E. Sellier, Jr., in which a few-year-old boy witnesses the brutal murder of his parents by a killer dressed as Santa Claus. This outfit, like that of a clown, was among the most deceptive in horror films. Though it had positive associations – with presents, play and laughter – it usually presaged some danger threatening children, with the Santa Claus in a slasher film becoming either a killer in disguise or his victim. Little Billy from *Silent Night* was sent after the death of his parents to a Catholic orphanage, famous for its strict discipline, and gradually became mad. When then now adult Billy is forced by his employer to put on a Santa Claus outfit, bad memories culminate in murderous deeds. Billy begins to kill randomly selected passers-by and wants to take revenge on a hated nun. Although this last crime does not happen, the terrible scenes are witnessed by another boy, who in the second part of the series continues the bloody practice. All values are reversed in *Silent Night* – childhood is an ordeal full of punishment, horror and lovelessness. The boy's life is shaped by sadism experienced in a constant game of deception in which the child is involved – symbols of goodness (Christmas, presents, Santa Claus, adults' care) always lead to pain, disappointment and suffering, while crime and violence bring comfort and just revenge.

The Santa Claus motif also appears in *You Better Watch Out* (other title: *Christmas Evil*, 1980) by Lewis Jackson, in which a few-year-old boy secretly watches presents being placed under the Christmas tree, discovering that the man in the Father Christmas outfit is his own father, who is more interested in his wife's sexual charms than in the children. This disappointment turns Harry into a psychopath, obsessed with a mission to reward good and punish naughty children, a killer who, dressed as the Santa Claus paralyses his home town with a series of murders. The kitchen Freudism predominant in those films contained a clear warning against the cruelty of carers to the children, who, inevitably, would take revenge when they became adults.

Film makers were also helped by fantasy. The hero of the decade was Jason Voorhees, the evil spirit of the *Friday, the 13th* series – a tale of crimes committed against teenagers either by Jason's mother or Jason himself, changed into a ghastly monster taking revenge for the inattention of summer camp counsellors. The counsellors, preoccupied with a sexual intercourse, did not notice a few-year-old boy, left alone, who was drowning in the lake. A special kind of revenge is also what the ten-year-old protagonists of Ed Hunt's *Bloody Birthday* (1981) have in common. In the film two boys and a girl, born during a lunar eclipse, become sadistic murderers killing for fun people who do not like them. Sometimes they kill their peers, sometimes their teachers and even, on one (this time unsuccessful) occasion – guests at a birthday party (by adding ant poison to the birthday cake). Very few people suspect the truth. Most cannot even admit the possibility that the crime could be committed by such delicate and innocent-looking creatures,

although – a fact noticed by the audience already in the very first scenes – these children are far too obedient and incapable of expressing emotion. The theme of children with murderous inclinations had also been popular in the previous decades. It was brilliantly used in Wolf Rilla's *Village of the Damned* (1960), in which blond-haired and emotionless children wreak terror in their home village, or in Narciso Ibáñez Serrador's impressive *Who Can Kill a Child* (*Quién puede matar a un niño?* 1976), telling a story of a small island inhabited only by teenage killers of their parents.

Another hugely popular film was Tom Holland's *Child's Play* (1988), in which a rather ugly toy, possessed by the ghost of a psychopathic murderer is given to Andy, brought up by his poor single mother. Good Guy was his dream present; unfortunately, his mother cannot afford it, so she buys the ill-fated doll from a thief she meets by chance. Brought home, the doll, Chucky, comes alive, uttering the famous line: "I'm Chucky. Wanna play?" and leading Andy from one crime to another. When the lonely boy, who yearns for closeness, rebels against his friend, Chucky decides to kill him too. Again, it is the world of adults that uses a child to achieve its objectives and the child again becomes its victim, paying in his adolescence and then adulthood (in the subsequent parts of the series) for the mother's purchase of stolen goods and for the killer's sadism.

However, the most beautiful tale of childhood afflicted by evil emerged not in cinema but in literature. Stephen King's *It* (1986), transferred so far only to the small screen in a decent but not outstanding adaptation by Tommy Lee Wallace from 1990, is among the writer's greatest works. Particularly captivating are episodes from the 1950s, when seven kids, bullied by older boys and embittered adults, witness manifestations of evil, which usually takes the form of Pennywise the clown handing out balloons. "We all float down here. And you'll float too," he repeats the now famous line many times. Evil in King's novel is pure, generally shapeless and eternal; it keeps coming back every several decades or so, using destructive human energy: racism, intolerance, greed and sexual desires. It is no coincidence that children become its main victim, kidnapped and murdered "by an unknown perpetrator". It is no coincidence either that only children fight the monster, finding strength in solidarity, innocence and the last emanations of faith in fantasy. King's evil is pure but it stems from the attitudes of adults: a sadist who quenches his paedophile desires by tormenting his daughter, an overprotective mother who turns her son into a helpless hypochondriac, depressed parents who see in their son the cause of their younger child's death, an embittered racist who, unable to bear the successes of his black neighbours, turns his son into his bloody avenger. *It* is a beautiful and at the same sad tale of childhood, permeated with melancholy and a feeling of loss, and, first of all, a conviction that the time of passage and initiation into adulthood already contains a note of disbelief in a possibility of being happy in the future.

THE HORROR OF NIGHTMARES

When Stephen King was finishing his vast novel, the silver screen was being conquered by Wes Craven's series⁴ *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984–2010) – the most interesting work in this context. Craven had been honing his idea since the 1970s, sublimating his personal experiences and political-cultural tropes in the script and the character of Freddy Krueger. The starting point for the plot was a special status of the monster, existing on two ontological levels. First, Freddy was a sexual maniac, brought up in poverty, humiliation and an atmosphere of contempt – as a bastard conceived when a nurse in a lunatic asylum was gang-raped. Growing up with this stigma, he was slowly descending into madness, manifesting it in his hatred for children – usually better and happier than himself. Craven saw Freddy as a paedophile, but the New Line Cinema producers made the director remove the sexual aspects of the crime (they returned in full force only in the 2010 remake of the first part) and transform Krueger into a murderer of children. Thus Freddy became the terror of an idyllic fictitious town, symbolically named Springwood, Ohio (years later the satirical series *The Simpsons* [1989–2011] would take place in a similar location – Springfield), kidnapping and torturing children. Caught and brought to court, he managed to avoid punishment thanks to the cleverness of his lawyers, who cited procedural irregularities. Then the parents of the murdered children decided to lynch Freddy, killing him and burning his body in a stove.

However, Krueger came back, because he achieved another status of his being and began to exist as a protagonist of nightmares, powerful and able to kill people in their sleep. He became a unique type of monster, which, at least initially, did not leave the dreamland, but appropriated it, changing his victims' nights into the most terrible nightmares, usually ending in real death. Craven was inspired by cases, observed by psychiatrists, of death among immigrants from Saigon and among Vietnam War veterans, who died in their sleep, when – as is conjectured – nightmares stemming from their experiences as soldiers were so horrible that they caused heart attacks. In the Elm Street series the victims of nightmares were children or, to be more precise, teenagers, selected and indicated by Krueger – thus sharing a common experience but, at the same time (as in King's *It*) doomed to lonely fight without any parental support.

It is not difficult to spot metaphorical potential in such a script material. The nightmare motif, blurred boundary between dreams and the real world, the motif of going through the looking-glass, with the well-known reality acquiring grotesquely distorted and horrifying forms – all these elements determined the conventions of

⁴ In fact, Wes Craven only wrote and directed the first part of the series. Then he sold the rights to the film and the character of Freddy Krueger to New Line Cinema and returned to direct the *Nightmare* only once, in its seventh, self-referential part (in which he also played himself).

many horror films. Phantasmagoria was based on horror and oneiric dislocations of meanings, on exaggerations and sublimations, on illogical relations between things transferred straight from the real world. This was to be the same in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and the transfers stemmed from a critical reception of the seemingly familiar world around.

The origin of Freddy's surname is anecdotal and slightly less important. It grew partly from Craven's childhood experiences (young Wes was bullied by a boy with a similar name), partly referred to Gustav Krupp, the Nazi industrialist, whose distorted name (Krug) had already appeared in Craven's previous film, *The Last House on the Left* (1972)⁵. Freddy's outfit is a mixture of comic-book motifs (the checked sweater comes from DC Comics Plastic Man, while his behaviour resembles Joker's), and his bladed hand is a fairy-tale motif with a Romantic tradition (close to Heinrich Hoffmann's poem quoted earlier or to Grimm Brothers' *The Girl Without Hands*).

The deepest mark on the series imagery was left by associations with paedophilia, suppressed by the producers, but visible even to an untrained eye. A child afraid of the night and the bed, haunted by a man who loves to inflict pain, living in a family in which the mother unnaturally prefers not to notice her daughters' anxiety – these signals testified to the potential of a specific interpretation. It is no accident that towards the end of the third part of the *Nightmare* Freddy assumes the form of Nancy's father, thus coming closer to the daughter; it is no accident either that in part four of the series one of the protagonists says that she loves dreaming but hates dreaming about her father. The director himself recalled that, as a child, he had wanted to invite his own mother to his dreams so that she would take part (protect him) in his dream fantasies.

Craven portrays perfect families, envisaged by conservative ideologists, but at the same time imbued with hypocrisy and intergenerational distrust. He does that by means of a motif typical of horror films, but – as he stresses – deriving, in fact, from the tradition of the Old Testament⁶. Thus teenagers in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* constantly pay for the sins of their parents. It is the teenagers, instead of their fathers and mothers, that confront Krueger, unaware of the causes of such a manifestation of evil. Often the battle field is in the bedroom – a symbolic place, in Craven's film suspended between childhood (the bed is the place in which children enjoy their childhood fantasies) and adulthood (in which the bed is a place of sexual encounters). The director portrays this particular stage in life, in which childhood imagination is abandoned and replaced by erotic disappointments and suffering. The conclusion is clear: Craven's teenage protagonists are not able to enter adulthood (the sexual act often ends in death), for their unawareness is determined by a

⁵ J. Wooley, *Wes Craven: The Man and His Nightmares*, Hoboken 2011, pp. 101-102.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

childhood event destructive to their psychosexual development – in this case Freddy’s paedophile acts.

The lynching of Krueger by the parents not only achieved nothing, but even had the opposite effect. Repressed childhood experiences are manifested in typical (auto)therapy procedures: dreams or hypnosis, while the entire series of films (primarily its third part) reconstructs the process of becoming aware of forgotten experiences (which is why in successive instalments we find out more and more about Freddy, his victims and killers). Thus the basic task of therapy is to define evil, get to know its origins and – most importantly – bring it to the level of consciousness, for this is how the series protagonists act, moving to the dreamland to catch Freddy, bring him to reality and finally destroying him there.

This psychoanalytical aspect overlaps with the cultural-political context. Horror, as I have mentioned, is a negative of society idealised in other genres. And although the 1980s served to make horror film conform, it was difficult to avoid it even in such works as *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The most important issue for the authors of the series was again the payment for the sins of the parents. It was to apply to not only the psychosexual plane but also the socio-economic one. Craven linked this aspect of the film to what he called “rubber reality”⁷, seeing in the idealism of the 1980s a lethargy of conservatism, this dangerous feeling of self-satisfaction caused by an economic growth, weakening of counter-cultural criticism and the fall of the “empire of evil”, i.e. the Soviet Union. For Craven the optimism of Reagan’s era was deceptive; it led to a crisis (manifested in the Wall Street crash at the end of the decade and the rule of financiers of the likes of Warren Buffet or the film character Gordon Gekko). As Craven said, this lethargy of conservatism would be paid for by the children, just like the rebellious teenagers after the 1950s, hurt by the hypocrisy of their parents, distrustful of any ideas, looking for a release in a destructive distraction⁸. There was just one reaction on the part of the parents to children’s nightmares – foretaste of the real world: they blamed them on the teenage hysteria and imagination, and offered a sleeping pill, which was a death sentence in confrontation with Freddy⁹.

A Nightmare on Elm Street would not have become the most interesting horror film of the 1980s, if it had not been for the mastery of Wes Craven and his associates. They created an extraordinary, impressive film, ingenuous in its script and design, which produced several sequels, a television series, comic books and contributed to the development of a gadget market. Freddy Krueger, played by Robert Englund, became, alongside Michael Myers and Jason Voorhees, the best known

⁷ J.K. Muir, *Horror Films of the 1980s*, Jefferson 2007, p. 407.

⁸ Ibidem, pp. 11-13.

⁹ T. Williams, *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film*, Cranbury 1996, p. 232.

figure in teenage horror films. However, he was superior to them in many respects: ingenuity of the murders, variety of tools, cunning, intelligence and irony. This was most clearly seen in the eleventh part of the *Friday, the 13th* series, entitled *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003) by Ronny Yu, in which both monsters threaten people at the same time. But what can the hapless Voorhees offer – a silent figure wearing a mask, killing always in the same manner: with big knives or axes, usually in the same setting of woodland and countryside. Freddy Krueger has behind him the world of dreamland imagination, which makes it possible to play with the vast imagination of children and transfer the film action to every conceivable location (though still resembling either the industrial place of his death or the labyrinth of the lunatic asylum in which he was conceived, or the ruined house in which he lived most of his life).

Initially, Krueger would rarely appear, and when he did, it was only in the climactic dream sequences. As the series progressed, he became a leading character, only to lose all his charm (in the remake) and transform himself (like Heath Ledger's Joker) into an embittered, destructive figure, deprived of joy of causing evil (in the 2010 film Freddy was not played by Englund anymore, but by Jackie Earle Haley, known in the 1970s for his child roles and, after a long absence, for the role of a child molester in Todd Field's *Little Children* [2006]).

Before that change happened, the character of Freddy could not fail to enjoy some sympathy and great popularity, becoming an icon of the late 1980s. In a 1991 survey conducted by The National Coalition on Television Violence among ten-, thirteen-year-old school children in California, no fewer than 66% of the respondents were able to identify Freddy, while only 36% – Abraham Lincoln. At the same time, the mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, wanting to celebrate modern protagonists of horror films, proposed that 13 September 1991 be made officially Freddy Krueger Day – as the conservative film and culture scholar Michael Medved recalled, not amused, to his dismay¹⁰.

Have such films really moved the boundaries of tolerance for violence in the media, have they really promoted negative role models by showing violence against children and teenagers? It is difficult to say. What has remained of the Freddy Krueger series are, first of all, gadgets and icons of the 1980s – the video cassette, a Limahl poster on the wall, and gradually closed down but still operating midnight movie theatres. We also remember the magnificently staged scenes of confronting Freddy (the picture of hell from parts two and three, transformation of a child into a puppet controlled by veins pull out from the arms, Freddy being devoured by the child victims absorbed into his body etc.). However, what mattered most – like in Stephen King's *It* – was friendship, courage, devotion of the “little adults” and

¹⁰ M. Medved, *Hollywood vs. America. Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*, New York 1992, p. 211.

trusting one's imagination – for only this imagination made it possible to discern evil and defeat it. So that when it left nightmares, it would not take possession of the real adult world.

NIGHTMARES THAT FRIGHTEN IN REALITY. THE CHILD MOTIF IN AMERICAN HORROR FILMS OF THE 1980s

Summary

The essay describes child characters in 1980s horror films. It begins with a description of their social and political background, emphasizing both the conservative ideology and the evolution of film genre conventions as well as methods of film distribution. The central part of the essay is an analysis of a series of horror films, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and other teenage slashers, which focus on a description of the position of children in traditional families and their deconstruction by the influence of counterculture factors. The 1980s slashers are considered as a mild rebellion in the decade marked by a reconstruction of traditionalist values.

Summary translated by Rafał Syska