A Brief Study on the Dark Pleasures of Screen Artifice

THEATRICALITY
IN THE
HORROR FILM

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the artifice of the original. As Linda Badley writes: "Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), with Winona Ryder, Gary Oldman, and Anthony Hopkins, was both a 'monster show' and an 'art' film: it was shot on a sound stage, with effects and costumes that heightened the artifice, plunging the spectator into the 'cinematic realm of fairy tales, dreams, and myth'" (Badley 1995, 155). Similarly, Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984) draws "attention to the artificiality of the medium of cinema itself; the deliberate staging, studio-bound sets, otherworldly atmospheres and purposeful theatricality," writes James Gracey "resist any interpretation of realism" (Gracey 2017, 29).

In the past decade, filmmakers like Catherine Hardwicke with *Red Riding Hood* (2011) and James Watkins with *Woman in Black* (2012) have successfully adopted stylistic artifice as a means to create atmospheric horror. And of course, Guillermo Del Torro relies heavily on stylization to create the weird atmosphere of his films. But his *oeuvre* may or may not qualify as "horror." Among contemporary filmmakers, Dante Tomaselli stands out as Corman's most direct heir, as his cheaply made cinematic tales of terror consistently rely on stylized set pieces to produce creepy atmosphere. "A characteristic trait that occupies the work of Dante Tomaselli," writes Matthew Edwards, "is his artistic visuals and use of atmosphere […] Both *Desecration* [1999] and *Horror* [2003] contain numerous visually stylized set-pieces that reinforce the notion that horror cinema is at its most effective when combining these elements cohesively" (Edwards 2014, 116). His 2013 *Torture Chamber* opens on a foggy tapestry of primary colors that is immediately reminiscent of the credit opening of *House of Usher*. The film revolves around a possessed boy, Jimmy (Carmen LoPorto), who disappears before he was to be exorcised by his brother Marc (Richard D. Busser), a priest. Enlisting a number of deranged children from the mental institution whence he escaped, Jimmy commits a number of gruesome tortures against those he hates. Although a number of scenes are shot on location in a realist style, the "moments of horror" in Jimmy's "torture chamber" are highly theatricalized generating a thrilling tension between the artifice of the scene and the extreme violence that it illustrates.

Edwards argues that "Tomaselli's aesthetic approach differs greatly from his contemporaries," because of his preference for "stylizing sequences that are both visually arresting and heavy on atmosphere," rather than using clichéd shock effects to exhibit "half-naked women being stalked and butchered" (116). Indeed, rather than seeking to foster slow-burning atmospheric dread, many contemporary scary movies rely on the facile gimmick of extremely quick editing and disturbingly sudden sounds, known as the "jump scare," to jolt their audience into a screaming frenzy. But in spite of being rather formulaic, the jump scare remains an intriguing example of how an aggressive break

Figure 5.5 The theatricality of torture in *Torture Chamber* (2013).

with realism can incarnate the monster's threatening assault on normality. There are endless examples of scary movies, especially slashers, that rely exclusively on jump scares to excite their audience. As Peter Hutchings writes in the *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema* (2017):

> The jump scare or startle effect is probably the crudest sensation that horror can invoke inasmuch as it involves an automatic physiological response from the spectator. However, this has not stopped horror filmmakers from resorting to it with increased frequency as the genre has developed […] It was the slasher film of the late 1970s and early 1980s that turned the jump scare into a key horror convention. Repeatedly, characters wandered into dark and dangerous places where, inevitably, someone or something leapt out at them, with this moment often accompanied by a deafening crash of music. The extent to which this kind of overuse has diminished the effectiveness of the jump scare is not clear. (183–84)

Although the jump scare is generally the stuff of B movies, many respectable horror films have also used the combination of quick editing and bursts of sounds to make their audience jump. The sudden appearance of a demon behind Josh's (Patrick Wilson) shoulder in *Insidious* (2010, James Wan); Danny's (Danny Lloyd) sudden vision of the creepy twins axed to pieces in *The Shining*; the severed head of a fisherman sticking out of a hole in a boat in *Jaws* (1975, Steven Spielberg); the alien bursting out of Kane's (John Hurt) stomach in *Alien*; or Carrie's (Sissy Spacek) hand reaching out from the grave to grab the arm of her friend Sue (Amy Irving) in the final dream sequence of *Carrie* (1976, Brian De Palma); all these are instances of jump scares that succeed remarkably in