Nathalie Melikian's Intertext

The film fades in; the sound comes up. There are black letters on a white background. They fade out to black, or perhaps the black saturates the screen. It fades in again; this repeats a hundred and twenty, maybe a hundred and thirty times. The presentation may be strange but there seems nevertheless a natural reaction to this. We do not simply see or view each framed text as it appears. We read it, consider it in relation to the sounds we are hearing too, and then we try to relate one piece of text to another, to have them tell us something.

Text invites such an approach, and these film pieces by Nathalie Melikian encourage us further in their use of familiar convention. After the title screen, giving the title as Horror, or Action, there is a brief and pointed introduction to the subject. The third frame, ‘Actual Sound’ in Horror, might surprise us, perhaps because we expected to finally see some moving images, but we can adjust to that too and see the piece instead as a kind of annotated film without the visuals. The elements named, the ‘Brawll Scene’, ‘Blurring’, ‘Blood Bath’, ‘Body Count’, all remain familiar to us, and, following one from the other, the sense remains that we need only accelerate the passage of these slow-appearing images, to twenty-four frames per second perhaps, for a story to move before our eyes. Alternatively, if we could just read aloud this dispersed text, feel its natural rhythm, then its meaning would come to us.

It is a question then of speed because, as Gérard Genette points out, we have ‘long considered writing, … in the West, as a simple means for the notation of speech’ (Frank, 1981: 242) and as a derivative of the spoken word, the written word must surely partake of the nature of the spoken, that is, it must be temporal, sequential, linear. Gotthold Lessing, too, has told us that language consists of ‘articulated sounds in time’ (1984: 78), and that these sequential signs can tell us only of objects whose parts also follow each other in time, namely actions. It is for the plastic arts, using figures and colours in space, to present us with objects in space. Considering also Roland Barthes comment that ‘narrative institutes a confusion between consecution and consequence’ (1977b: 98), meaning ‘that which follows next is at the same time the result’ (Barthes, 1971: 10), the logic of our reading seems complete. Text is a representation of speech, which consists of distinct sounds ordered in time. Speech tells of actions which occur one after the other, and if we relate these actions as part of a narrative, the tendency is to see each one as not simply following from but actually resulting from what has gone before.

Nevertheless, it becomes increasingly difficult to account for how the discrete elements of Melikian’s work relate to those which precede them. We are used to the rhetoric of anachronism in the ordering of a plot, to flashbacks and anticipation, but here there appears to be no system governing the relation between frames. Indeed, the only apparent logic is of the most basic and arbitrary kind, being the order of the alphabet. Immediately we recognise this our difficulties end, because we need no longer think in terms of narrative structure, instead we can see the
work simply as a list, an index. The text fragments are no longer related to each other but self-contained. Nor do they follow each other; in fact, the structure of the index implies that we may enter at any point, without regard for what goes before or after. The nature of Melikian's film index, however, means that we are still likely to view it in order, but we may now find ourselves visualising the movement of the text in a different way. Instead of placing each frame on the horizontal line of the story, projecting that line back to 'In the beginning' or ahead to 'The End', we stack the frames vertically and see ourselves as gradually working our way down the list, from A to Z.

The horizontal line of the story finds its reflection, of course, in the line of text across a page, in the movement of the hand, or cursor, which produces the text, and in the sweep of the eye which reads it. Michel Butor describes the Western tradition of writing from left to right as tending to privilege this horizontal line of writing over those lines which travel the length of the page or the depth of the book. Where he sees this privileged line stuttering is when it encounters a series of words each of which performs the same function in the sentence, as in a list of objects for example. At that point, says Butor, 'I perceive a kind of interruption in the line's movement; this enumeration is arranged, then, perpendicularly to the rest of the text' (1970: 45). The words in this list can be read, like Melikian's list, as if they raged along a line vertical to the text rather than along the usual horizontal, though it has become quite natural to imagine any word as being part of a virtual list of words existing on a vertical line of intersection. In the terms of Roman Jakobson's bipolar structure of language the vertical becomes the paradigmatic, the axis of positional similarity, of selection, substitution, and metaphor. The horizontal is now the syntagmatic, meaning combination, contiguity, and metonymy.

Considering Butor's original example, however, of the list which interrupts the line of the text, we can see that the vertical line lay initially on the horizontal. Indeed, Jakobson, too, famously allows the two axes to coincide when he says, 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence' (1960: 358). The contents of the list need not exist at the same point in the same sentence, but can be spread out along the line of the text. If before we said that the written word is temporal, sequential, linear, then we can also say that the written word is temporal, the written word is sequential, the written word is linear.

Isolated within the horizontal line of the text, these three adjectives remain linked by that virtual vertical line. They exist within a relational structure based not on sequence and syntax, but on spatial juxtaposition. The written word is temporal, sequential, and linear, but it is also spatial, simultaneous, and strangely dotted. Where Lessing confined poetry to a sequence in time, Jakobson defines the poetic function by the arrangement of language in space. It is this very spatiality which Melikian's work conveys to us, as it acts as an index to the verticalities of Horror. Frames name lines of related moments which cut obliquely through the story, the 'Endless Failed Escape Attempts', the 'Extreme Close-Up', tracing the network of connections and intersections formed through the interaction of vertical and horizontal.

It would be extremely difficult, however, for any story line to intersect with all of these verticalities, so that 'Everyone Dies Except The Hero And His Girl' and still 'Everyone Dies Except [The Virgin]'. Twisting back upon itself, the work fragments, so that, eventually, we see that no single story can tell us all these things. This is a work of many stories, is, in fact, an index to a genre, listing the thematic and stylistic conventions of a mode of filmmaking, and in the process seemingly laying bare the 'Formula Film Making'. Each horror story manoeuvres itself to connect with a number of these verticals; the formula requires the inclusion of particular generic elements, the 'Car Chasing, People Chasing', the 'Obligatory Breast Shot', and though the narrative strives for the illusion of a chronological progression of cause and effect, in reality it is the order of the genre which determines events. Barthes' observation that 'the narrative invariably chooses that from which it profits, i.e., that which assures its survival as narrative' (1971: 7) is as true when we say that the genre invariably chooses that from which it profits, i.e., that which assures its survival as genre.
imagination by the anonymity of the textual fragment. The text denies ‘The Virginal Brunette Heroine’ a visual identity, and though we might choose one, we know there are alternatives. Recognising the position of each frame in the intertextual space, we become aware of the array of different possible narrative contexts within which it could exist.

As an index to the genre, then, Melikian’s work delineates the overlap between generic texts. This process does not mean reducing the narratives to a common structure, or abstracting from them a formal system. The elements named are not labelled according to their function within the genre, nor is an attempt made to determine their relation to other in a schema of Horror. The elements of a horror film which we might describe as almost wholly the effect of the narrative’s linearity, the tension, the suspense, these go unmentioned, because these are a result of the temporal experience of an arrangement or disarrangement of elements. Melikian’s method is one of accumulative refinement as she places text upon text, noting those points of coincidence and allowing the remainder to fall away. Horror, then, deals not with text as such but with the intertext.

Intertextuality itself, however, is rarely consistently defined. Generally seen as the relation between one text and others, the degree of intertextuality can vary. One text may appear physically in another in the form of a quotation, or a text may be related to others simply by its generic classification. Genette tries to distinguish between the various forms of relationships, christening intertextuality in its grandest sense as transtextuality. This, he says, is ‘all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts’ (1997: 1). The more common term intertextuality he reserves for ‘the actual presence of one text within another’ (Genette, 1997: 2), but it is what he calls ‘architectextuality’ which most concerns us here. Architectextuality, for Genette, is ‘the entire set of general or transcendent categories—types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres—from which emerges each singular text’ (1997: 1). The text’, says Genette, ‘spins its web only by hooking it here and there onto that network of architectexture’ (1992: 83), and it is here, too, that Melikian’s Horror carves out its space.

Seeing Horror in this way, the form of the work becomes even more suggestive. Barthes describes the intertextual as that ‘in which every text is held, it is itself being the text-between of another’ (1977a: 160), but this work, mapping the point of contact between texts, seems to need to record the form of the text without aligning itself to the

text. Instead it plays at the edge of textuality, subverting its own identity as work, or even text. The discontinuous fragments, linking a multitude of stories, seem like an index, but there is no real reason to think their alphabetic order has meaning. They appear to follow each other but this is only how we encounter them, for the map they trace has no proper order. The space of architectextuality is without volume or place, for it is dependent on the non-physical connection between texts, though produced by their materiality. It exists simultaneously, interwoven, and vast, and this work can show us only selected sections, briefly illuminated. These accumulated segments, then, cannot form a complete and coherent whole, but are, in fact, striving towards some diffuse abstraction.

The form is further eroded when the work compromises what Genette calls the paratext, the relation between the text and those productions which make the text a book, such as the title, preface, or dust jacket. When Horror cites its own title within the body of its work, drawing its outer edge inside, it erases its own source, so that we have what Jacques Derrida describes as ‘the crumbling of an upper boundary or of the initial edge’ (1980: 217). Horror is naming not itself, but the genre, revealing its orientation towards that which lies tangential to it, not contained within the assumed line of the movement of the work. Yet, then, if Horror never begins, how can it ever take place, at what point does it reveal itself? It reveals itself in naming the genre for whenever we conceive of genre a limit is drawn (Derrida, 1980: 203), and it is in the delineation of this border that Horror finds itself. Each frame of Horror remarks on the genre it is defining, and so each frame works, as its title does, as citation, summoning from the text as evidence those marks which the genre itself has already re-marked upon, those marks which the text itself cites in order to limit itself as genre.

Horror must, by necessity, always play at the edge of textuality because the law of genre requires what Derrida describes as a ‘taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set’ (1980: 206). Here, then, is the tension in Horror, defining a line which is forever stretched and divided. Drawn in, it is placed at the service of the text: drawn out, it places limits on the text. It plays along the edges which generate it, slipping back and forth in the gap between texts it simultaneously unites and divides.

‘The re-mark of belonging does not belong’, says Derrida (1980: 212), so Horror touches upon but cannot embrace the texts it demarcates. How fitting then is the medium of Horror, which has no substance but appears as a ‘silhouette

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that plays' (Derrida, 1980: 226), as a projection of light and dark placing limits on each other.

Plainly put, Horror is not horrific. Without a body of its own, only the architecture remains to support the work, so the work in turn charts the architecture, mapping the in-between. Horror has become a piece ‘all of whose visible space is but some border of itself without self, consisting of the framing edge without content’ (Derrida, 1980: 221). This framing edge, this bordering on, casts some light too on the nature of the architecture, on that network of intersecting verticals and horizontals (a frame surely onto which the text hooks itself. Derrida, however, would ask ‘Where does the frame take place? Does it take place? Where does it begin? Where does it end?’ (1987: 9)). We must ask then where the frame of the architecture takes place in the text, whether it is in the margin, in the borders of the text, or within the text itself. For Derrida, the frame as panegy is ‘neither work [œuvre] nor outside the work [fonds d’œuvre], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below; ... and it gives rise to the work. It is no longer merely around the work’ (1987: 9). This panegy which gives rise to the work seems a suitable description for the space of architecture, a space which is not so much a frame as a framework, the work that forms the frame. Neither belonging, nor not belonging, the frame is everywhere in the work, with no ‘between’ the frame and the framed. Here, then, is the suspense of Horror, for the network of the architecture within which the text is suspended is itself embodied, brought into the light, by those texts, and yet it is also that which would dissolve the text, threatening to unravel it, to spin it out to nothing. Melikian’s Horror reveals to us this framework of architecture but, seeking the frame at the visual limits of the work, where the white meets the edges of the screen, we see it instead within those edges, traced in the black line of the text which brings the frame to light.

Think of what this architectural topos can do with text. It can produce a copy without an original, the transtextual array projecting into a space which it surrounds and traverses. It can have Humphrey Bogart saying ‘Play it again, Sam’, while Jimmy Cagney forever mutters ‘You dirty rat’. For Genette, each text emerges from the architecture, but the architecture is also an effect of text, even as Horror, a projection of shades, is tied to its celluloid self. Nor can we say that Horror attains the abstraction it desires. Eventually, the law of the paratext reasserts itself: the closing credits roll, a border is drawn, and once again we can tell the beginning from the end. Yet, as we settle down now with familiar faces, with ‘Mood Music’, and the comfort of formula, we can think of those other faces with similar roles in tangential storylines. Revealing the well-trod paths of generic narrative, Nathalie Melikian shows us also the alternatives, the untold of every story.

NOTE

1 This includes profit in its monetary sense, for the component mastery of a generic formula is often a necessity if a particular kind of film must be produced to successfully target a desired audience.

WORKS CITED


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