

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Adapting to the Dark

Reflections of Local Culture in Recent New Zealand Horror Cinema.

A Thesis in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Media Studies
at Massey University

Paolo Ryan

Massey University
2011

Abstract

The use of Hollywood genres to package our films for overseas consumption has been an historic feature of the New Zealand film industry. The horror genre has been an important platform for many local film directors, equipping them with sufficient technical skills to create a 'calling card' for entry into Hollywood. But in working with the genre locally, these directors have introduced variations that are culturally specific to New Zealand, a process of assimilation known as 'indigenisation.' This relies upon a shared understanding of ethnic and cultural identity, and in some cases has given rise to a perceptible New Zealand film brand. While government policy may assist to promote certain features in the interest of creating and sustaining a commercially viable 'National Cinema,' real and sometimes problematic aspects of our contemporary society, such as the increasing influence of Pacific Island culture or the position of Maori in respect of the mainstream may be downplayed or omitted altogether.

This thesis examines the extent to which indigenisation has occurred in some recent examples of New Zealand horror films. It considers the theory of National Cinema and the influence of government policy on cinema practice, and examines the image of the nation that has been constructed thus far. It also outlines the theory of genres and how they are interpreted and transformed over time, and identifies the distinguishing characteristics of the horror genre. The analysis of the case studies, which include recent examples of mainstream and Pacific Island-influenced films, addresses the question of how the horror genre is culturally inflected and what images of the nation prevail. It concludes that our films may not even admit alternative local constructs of the nation, and that as we become more inundated in the streams of foreign influence and capital, there is an increasing amount of attention being given to how identity and culture is formed rather than to describing the specific cultural features of a given nation. This is reflected in the rise of generic hybridity and multi-vocalic texts, whose voices may simply express a desire to navigate the cross-currents of global consumer culture.

Acknowledgement

My thanks are due to Dr Ian Huffer for the completion of this thesis. His judicious and enthusiastic reading of drafts helped to revitalise my concentration at critical times. I am also greatly indebted to my wife, Nada, and daughters, Victoria and Olivia, who for a period of two years or so have had to endure more grumpiness than usual.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
1. Introduction	4
2. Genre and generic transformation.....	13
Definition and uses of genre	13
Genre lifecycles.....	18
3. The Attraction of the Horror Genre.....	21
4. Introduction to Case Studies	26
5. Case Study – Black Sheep	28
Background.....	28
Cultural context	32
The taint of Otherness.....	33
NZ Gothic.....	36
The traditional family and motherhood	39
The spirit of insurrection	41
6. Case Study – The Tattooist.....	44
Background.....	44
The representation of culture and ethnicity	47
Generic and international borders	52
Generic structure.....	54
Local absences	56
7. Case Study – Perfect Creature	57
Background.....	57
The decay of place and values.....	59
The moral thread.....	61
The importance of memory.....	63
The generic place of women	66
8. Conclusion.....	70
Bibliography.....	75
Appendix 1 – Extract from New Zealand Film Commission Act 1978	81
Appendix 2 – List of Recent New Zealand Thriller/Horror Films	82