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Film and Media Theory

09 December 2022

Evaluating *Smile* as a Genre and Mirror

This paper will explore the systems of horror and thriller genres as a whole, varied iconographies and signifiers, and evaluate the imaginary relationship between the characters, audience, and the filmic world. Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* (2017) chronicles the constructions of genres as a direct result from socially formalized rules, arguing that these rules come from common knowledge and cultural agreement. Jacques Lacan's *Ecrits*' *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function* focuses on the mirror stage as an identification, stimulating the neurosis to establish a relationship between the real-world and oneself. *Smile* (2022) directed by Parker Finn evaluates themes of mental illness, trauma, and finding one's identity against their expectations. Contributing to the horror and thriller genre, by examining *Smile* through the metaphors of film as a genre and film as a mirror, we can see how the thematic and stylistic choices of Parker Finn presents this as a psychological horror film that conflicts reality and one's perception. Based on these texts, *Smile* exemplifies an unnerving double-meaning through hallucinations and smiles which contributes to the genre of horror and thriller.

Thomas Schatz, the author of *Hollywood Genres*, specializes in critical film theory, specifically communication as a professor at University of Texas, Austin. The chapter titled "Film Genre and Genre Films" expands upon his expertise, in which he deciphers the common themes of formalized signs, fundamental structural components, and cultural attitudes that

comprise a genre. Because of the “changes in cultural attitudes” and “economies of the industry,” he argues that the genre in film is continually evolving and non-static (564). Jacques Lacan Ecrits’ paper *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function* organizes three stages of identification: the real, imaginary, and symbolic or specular identification. With an interest in psychoanalysis and structuralism, he focuses on interpreting the human organism to its reality.

Originally inspired by Parker Finn’s short film *Laura Hasn’t Slept, Smile* (2022) examines themes of transmittable mental illnesses, demons, and conflict between reality and imaginary following the protagonist Rose Cotter (played by Sosie Bacon), a workaholic psychiatrist who must confront her past traumas after witnessing her patient’s suicide – through the genre of psychological horror and psychological thrill. Through varied mythologies, conventions of recurring symbols and motifs regarding demons and supernatural mental illnesses, eerie visual and auditory iconography, and high noir stylistic elements throughout the film, Parker Finn presents *Smile* as a genre of horror noir and psychological thriller that attracts upon the changing popular culture and self-discoveries present day.

In *Smile*, Parker Finn presents vivid portraits of juxtaposing images and meanings to emphasize the horror noir and psychological thriller genre the film exhibits. During the 1960s, religion and believing in a holy, godly creator -- predominantly present in protestant or catholicism -- remained as a quintessential part of modern, American culture and past generations. However, by reintroducing unorthodox ideologies of a transferable curse, through a particular pattern of the individual going insane, smiling eerily, and ultimately self-inflicting death, Finn creates an uncanny atmosphere and plot that reaches the innermost fears of modern society – death and losing a loved one. At the beginning of the film, Dr. Rose Cotter is presented

as a professional, intelligent, goal-oriented, and strong-minded individual. She deals with critical patients who face trauma, PTSD, and mental illnesses in the Emergency Psychiatric Unit. Apart from her work, she is in a stable relationship with her fiancé Trevor and has a complicated relationship with her family. After witnessing her mother's suicide in her childhood, she strives to become someone who helps mentally ill patients, to compensate her guilt for not helping her mother in the past. However, once she gets involved with a patient who self-inflicts to death, she progressively loses her sanity, relationships, and ability to work as the demon/curse is transferred to her after witnessing the patient's smile.

The notion that hidden demons and curses could secretly exist in modern America not only provoked imaginations and chaos to the character and audience, it also possibly foreshadows future conflicts and panics regarding demons, mentality, and maintaining relationships with loved ones. Furthermore, losing important, prideful things to a woman – her career, sanity, and her relationship with her fiancé and sister – are all generic myths that portray horrifying, countercultural occurrences that society, particularly women, would agree is tragic, highlighting the horror aspect of the genre. Throughout the film, spontaneous hallucinations and eerie smiles around Rose serves as a myth and repeated warning of supernatural or curse-like activity. It also serves as a double meaning of how a smile may portray happiness externally but also a defense mechanism to hide one's pain internally, ultimately foreshadowing Rose becoming the prisoner of her own mind and death. The fear of the unknown and death brings a sense of uneasiness and panic as these hallucinations are deliberately tampered under sudden repeated images through terrifying jumpscare, illustrating the psychological thriller aspect of the genre.

As Schatz defines genre as something that can be studied by identifying “the circuit of exchange involving box-office feedback, the studios and the mass audience holding a virtual conversation” in which they “gradually refine the grammar of the cinematic discourse.” *Smile* – a film well-received by the box-office – can be studied as a “formalized sign system” which follows and adds to the rules of a typical horror genre film. By following the protagonist who undergoes emotional distress due to her traumas, inability to maintain her turmoil to her loved ones, and unexplainable hallucinations, it provides repeated signals of fear and evil to the audience. Recurring symbols and myths of individuals' smiles correlating to death presents the audience with several “formalized signs” and ominous moments, adding to the “shared knowledge” of what defines a horror film (565-566).

Throughout the film, the myths of evils are represented through scenes of unexplainable instances and hallucinations which Rose later discovers are a result of a historically spreading curse. The frequent and natural hallucinations acts as a recurring motif; Rose learns that these hallucinations are not real but occurring within her mind, and ultimately kill the victims internally. Because internal agony and death of characters or animals – is a universal myth of horror films, by including scenes of where their cat is found dead in a box or her hallucinating killing her co-worker to break from the curse, the director induces terror towards audiences as society fears extremely sudden deaths of loved ones and their pets. Finn presents the power of knowledge and the unknown against the audience in order to heighten fears through imagination rather than traditional scenes of blood, gore, and violence. By deliberately controlling the amount of knowledge that Rose and the audience obtains about the curse, it adds a combination of intensified anticipation, suspense, and psychological grief that modern society fears, justifying

the genre as a psychological thriller and horror. Through its narrative system, “in terms of its fundamental structural components such as plot, character, setting, thematics, and style,” Finn presents *Smile* through the metaphors of genre by adding to the identifiers, signals, and themes of horror-thriller genres.

The film presents the stages of mirror to add to the horror genre by disturbing what is reality and imaginary. According to Ecritis, the first mirror stage includes the “real” or the “state of nature,” in which one searches and craves satisfaction. This is presented in *Smile* initially when Rose is constantly desiring more patients, work, and feels the need to make her life perfect to her high standards and expectations. However, as the film moves forwards to the second stage or the “imaginary (mirror stage)” she begins to question her reality after encountering hallucinations that interfere with her passion and relationships. The imaginary stage marks the moment where the individual realizes their “fragmented image of the body” (78). The fragmented body refers to the “manifestations of dreams” and images that conflict with their previous beliefs, which makes the individual feel varied emotions ranging from confusion, anger, discomfort, etc. In the case of Rose, she feels a sense of confusion and self-diagnoses herself. Her initial confidence and confusion that her illness is simply caused by the traumatic incident she witnessed soon develops to frustration due to its persistence. She is negatively impacted through the loss of sleep, frustration, and becomes agitated towards herself, loved ones, and co-workers. As she loses her sanity, she grows distant from her loved ones but her usual self as well. The second stage transfers the old Rose to one riddled with fear, anxiety, and panic. Despite her experiences with traumatizing images/iconographies, she continually researches to

understand and investigate the root of her illness, ultimately moving on to the third and final mirror stage – the symbolic order and acceptance.

While “the sufferings of neurosis and psychosis” provides a better understanding of “the soul,” the third stage illustrates the acceptance of the “language and rules and dictates of society and ability to deal with others” (80). This is certainly the case within Rose who opens up to her fiancée Trevor, explaining the demons and hallucinations she is experiencing. However, she ultimately feels betrayed when he does not believe her and suggests that she should revisit her therapist. She attempts to seek an alternative approach by asking her detective friend, Joel, to investigate the past deaths of those who have encountered this curse. Upon investigation, they discover that the curse is transferred by the pattern of individuals smiling and killing oneself, which initiates the transfer to the individual who witnesses the act. She begins to understand the rules and system of the curse as she interviews someone who has previously broken from the curse by killing an individual to pass the curse. By discovering new information and rules of the curse, she grows acceptance to her fate and begins to gain confidence that she could potentially break the pattern of the curse by isolating herself.

Works such as *Hollywood Genres* and *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function* evaluates topics of the relationship between the real-world and itself, genres of films, and the varied iconographies, myths, and signifiers that presents films such as *Smile* as a horror genre. While Schatz’s perspective of genre is defined by the society gradual over repeated images, characters, and other narrative systems, it is quintessential to understand that these themes and tropes derived from what was well-received by the audience and universally successful, rather than what is necessarily the most accurate representation. Lacanian orders of film as a mirror

depicts (1) real as the initial state of nature and discovery, (2) the imaginary (mirror stage) the realization and conflict, and (3) the symbolic where the character understands the rules and language of the problem. Because *Smile* presents the protagonist undergoing varied eerie mythologies, varied auditory (suspenseful sound design), and visual iconographies (hallucinations) it defines itself as a psychological horror film that is riddled with mirrors in which the protagonist attempts to overcome her external and internal fears.

Works Cited

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