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Remakes, Genre, and Affect: The Thriller-Chiller-Comedy as Case Study

In this paper, I make two related claims: first, I argue that genre is a matter of feeling rather than form, for audiences refuse to categorize films under particular generic rubrics when the feeling the film conveys “isn’t right”. Second, I argue that genre itself is a *feeling shape*, and rely on the theory of affects and affective scripts developed by psychologist Silvan Tomkins from the 1940s to the 1990s to demonstrate that genre development is a matter of affective development. Tomkins’ theory of affects claims that as individuals we must experience particular affective scenarios over and over again to develop affective scripts, and that these scripts in turn, over time, become “known” bodily and psychologically as feeling, and ultimately as emotion. A similar process, I suggest, is true of genre. Since the theory of affective scripts allows for repetition with a difference over and against scenarios, one can conjoin a very personalistic and individual psychology to the negotiations between form, genre, and historical context. I make these claims through examining the repeatedly remade *The Cat and the Canary*, especially its two most famous versions, from 1927 and 1939, for its aesthetic and narrative centrality to a particular sub-genre: the thriller-chiller-comedy.

Originally a wildly popular stage melodrama, replete with trapdoors and an escapee from a nearby lunatic asylum, *The Cat and the Canary* was adapted to film by German expressionist Paul Leni in 1927. Leni’s visually stunning film influenced a raft of other films including Roland West’s *The Bat Whispers* (1930) and James Whale’s *The Old Dark House* (1932). Yet his film also created an interesting tentativeness among critics and film reviewers, who could not quite

decide if the film was an “arty” take on an American chestnut, or if it was a stylistic breakthrough that had engendered a new genre. By the time *The Cat and the Canary* was remade for the fourth time in 1939, however, starring Bob Hope, critics and audiences were attuned to the dominant features, and particularly the emotional common denominators at work in these films. The so-called “thriller-chiller-comedy” evolved as a result of its makers, re-makers, and audiences coming to grips with the range of feelings this narrative hybrid is capable of evoking. That is, not only did Paul Leni’s *The Cat and the Canary* and the films it influenced—including its own remakes—create a visual and aural iconography still essential to film and televisual narratives in this genre, in doing so it also lent shape to multiple strands of feeling.

Today the thriller-chiller-comedy is considered old-fashioned and clichéd; its iconic images of single lights glowing in the windows of abandoned houses, long shadows cast by unsuspecting victims as they walk through corridors, and bookcases sliding backwards to reveal grasping claw-like hands are perhaps most often encountered now in cartoons or parodies. Yet the thriller-chiller-comedy is intriguing, emotionally and historically, for it attempts to create *thrills*—sudden appearances and disappearances known to mystery or detective stories that evoke the startle response; *chills*—the subtle unexpected shudders, “creepy feelings,” and uncanniness of horror; and *comedy*—both in terms of gags and in terms of *domestic melodrama*, in which the tensions evoked throughout the film are resolved, released, or relieved. This is a rather complex emotional cocktail for such a lowbrow form.

The Problem of Remakes

Before focusing on the way in which versions of *The Cat and the Canary* achieve their emotional acrobatics, it might be helpful to recall the specific complexity of remakes, especially

in terms of affect. Remakes are an interesting problem because while they help create recognizable genres (especially if one thinks broadly of repetition of plots as well as specific remakes of given properties), remakes also can diminish a genre's affective capacities over time.

In the afterword of Stuart McDougal and Andrew Horton's *Play It Again, Sam: Retakes on Remakes*, Leo Braudy writes,

[T]he remake resides at the intersection of the genetic and the generic codes. In even the most debased version, it is a meditation on the continuing historical relevance (economic, cultural, psychological) of a particular narrative. A remake is thus always concerned with what its makers and (they hope) its audiences consider to be unfinished cultural business, unrefinable and perhaps finally unassimilable material that remains part of the cultural dialogue—not until it is finally given definitive form, but until it is no longer compelling or interesting. (331)

This pattern of gradual loss of effectiveness, though focused on cultural relevance, also follows the physiological and psychological pattern of “redundancy of affect based on memory and thought” outlined by Silvan Tomkins in his theory of affects—a pattern that is concerned with how *new* emotional experience lives up to *previous* experience:

No one laughs twice at the same joke or is equally afraid of the same threat the second time. One is either more afraid or less afraid depending on the relationship between the memory of past and the present construction, which either results in habituation or sensitization and generalization. ...*The vividness of past affective experience constrains and pushes the imagination in ways which reduce its degrees of freedom...* (*Shame and Its Sisters* 65, emphasis added)

This seems precisely the condition that makes a genre, and probably a specifically remade narrative, feel played-out: a genre that has become outmoded by being “done to death” is one that no longer evokes vivid affect; it fails because its viewers' feeling-memories of previous constructions are stronger than what the present construction of the genre can provide.

The process by which an imagination loses “degrees of freedom” happens on the scale of the individual; however, given Tomkins' own speculations about affective scripts as potentially

cultural, I suspect that this process also occurs between entities: the audience, the film-in-production, the industry itself (including the institution of criticism). To demonstrate this demands an historical and formal account of how certain films can be said to add up to a genre, why those films might excite an audience enough for it to recognize a genre, and finally an explanation of the process by which an audience becomes habituated to a point beyond which the genre no longer stimulates interest.

Paul Leni and *The Cat and the Canary* (1927)

The Cat and the Canary: A Melodrama in Three Acts was written by John Willard in 1921, premiering in New York the following year. In it, heroine Annabelle West and her relatives are forced to gather at the house of their long-dead Uncle Cyrus West to attend the reading of his will. Cyrus West has named Annabelle as the heir to his fortune, but because he fears that insanity runs in the family, Annabelle's inheritance is conditional: a doctor must examine her that night and find her sane, otherwise the fortune will go to another family member. Any one of her relatives could stand to gain should Annabelle go mad before the night is over. Annabelle thus becomes the victim of a series of bizarre incidents intended to make her doubt her own mind. For instance, the family lawyer disappears from the library through a sliding bookcase while talking to Annabelle, and none of her relatives will believe her story; strange hairy claws emerge from behind walls to grab at her throat; and eventually, the lawyer turns up dead in a secret cabinet, which Annabelle accidentally opens. Meanwhile, a guard from the local insane asylum drops in to tell everyone that a murderous escapee is on the loose. (It turns out that the guard is in cahoots with one of Annabelle's unscrupulous cousins).

The play was adapted to film by Paul Leni, who had been brought to the United States from Berlin in 1925 by Carl Laemmle, Jr., head of production at Universal Studios. Leni's work as a set designer for Max Reinhardt and his direction of the film *Waxworks* (1924) indicated that, like many of his compatriots, Leni was adept at using the tools of cinema to create a haunting, horrific mood. This is precisely what Laemmle, Jr. wanted to develop as the house style at Universal; thus he gambled that Leni could bring to Hollywood the "German" skill of exploiting the audience's emotional rhythms.

Leni's film version of *The Cat and the Canary* was, like the stage play, very popular. Film critics and reviewers, however, were confused by the film's combination of familiar melodramatic plot and innovative, almost experimental (to American eyes) visual techniques. Colonel Jason Joy, head of the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers & Directors Association), wrote to Will Hays

I think *The Cat and the Canary* is too much a mixture of Hollywood and Berlin. If [Paul Leni] had stuck to his German training, he would have turned out a much better picture. However, it's a good job and held my interest all the way through, in spite of the fact that I had seen the stage play two or three times and still maintain that it is the best thriller I have ever seen on the stage. (Herrick Library PCA Collection)

Mixed opinions leaning toward a positive view tended to prevail. For instance, *The New York Times* hailed *The Cat and the Canary* as "the first time that a mystery melodrama has been lifted into the realms of art"; and while *Photoplay* magazine's critic was skeptical about the "artiness" of the film, noting that "Leni uses trick angles galore," he also thought that the artfulness of the film "helps the atmosphere of mystery and murder," resulting in "corking melodrama."

Though Leni's film is now widely considered the first "comedy-mystery" film, contemporary film critics had not yet invented a label for Leni's innovations, which is understandable since he was working with a narrative formula that was already very familiar.

Predecessors in this vein include Harold Lloyd's *Haunted Spooks* (1920) and D. W. Griffith's *One Exciting Night* (1922), as well as a raft of "old spooky house" two-reelers.¹ Nonetheless, Leni's film stands out for its clever execution of otherwise tired genre elements. A reviewer from *Film Daily*, for example, thought the film employed considerable mechanical plot twists, but wrote "they are so cleverly executed that under Leni's direction they become new. The introduction of shadows, flickering lights, and above all, the array of new and interesting camera angles are of unusual interest."² The specific formal elements this reviewer alludes to—lighting, visual design, framing, and mobile camera—indicate Leni's facility with German Expressionist cinematic techniques, which he modified to suit Hollywood purposes.

Leni's "German" style is notable from the start of the film, which opens with a shot of a blank white card. A leather-gloved hand reaches up to sweep away dust and cobwebs, revealing the title of the film, the cast, and the identity of the director. The first shot of the mansion—actually a small model set against a matte painting—is effectively grotesque, partly because of the mansion's impossibly tall, pointy spires, and partly because of the eerie green-tinted light that seems to emanate from behind the mansion. The spires dissolve into images of giant empty bottles, while the lower right corner of the screen brightens, as if with a spotlight, to reveal the huddled figure of Cyrus West, doomed because "medicine could do no more for [him]." A title-card informs us that Cyrus West is convinced that his greedy relatives have been trying to drive him crazy, and has long felt like a canary surrounded by cats. On cue, superimposed images of cats appear behind the bottles that encircle West, huddled on his easy chair, indicating the man's mental state and the avariciousness of his family. The old man springs to his feet in defiance

¹ Titles that indicate the ubiquity of the "haunted house" story line include *The Ghost House* (1917), *The Ghost in the Garret* (1921), *The House of the Tolling Bell* (1920), and *The House of Whispers* (1920). Earlier pictures, like *The Haunted Hat* (1909, Lubin), *The Haunted Kitchen* (1907, Pathé Frères), and *The Haunted Castle* (1909, Lumière) were essentially exercises in stop-motion and trick photography, like many Méliès productions.

² *Film Daily*, May 15, 1927.

against the imaginary cats, then slumps into torpor. This composition is alluded to later in the film after Annabelle West is named heiress of the West fortune. High-backed slat-work dining chairs throw shadows across the walls and Annabelle, forming the illusion of bars. The family lawyer, Mr. Crosby, warns her that “You are just like your uncle—in a cage, surrounded by cats.”

Light and shadow are played for strong effect throughout the film.³ Though Expressionist lighting is typically used to imply character motivations, story causality, and to impart to objects or people a special luminosity and quality of “ineffability,” all part of what Thomas Elsaesser identifies as the “surplus value of lighting style” (*Weimar Cinema and After* 44), Paul Leni wields light to effect both chills and comedy—for instance, to create deliberately overlarge and grotesque shadows that shrink to nothing as the narrative’s comic characters, Cousin Cicily and Aunt Susan, walk through the main hallway, followed by Mammy Pleasant, dragging the ladies’ copious luggage. *The Cat and the Canary* does not sport the crazy set designs and shadow-patterns of *Waxworks*, but the cavelike secret passages in the bowels of the West mansion convey the idea of something decrepit and clammy at the core of the family house.

Most innovative, perhaps, was Leni’s use of mobile framing. Near the beginning of the film, a title card informs us that since Cyrus West’s death his ghost has wandered unhappily through the mansion. In the following shot, the camera slowly tracks through a long corridor, while richly draped curtains billow in the wind as the camera passes. The camera lingers over the curtains, pans right, and floats along the corridor—a subjective expression of Cyrus West’s ghost

³ Lighting is used to especially powerful effect to characterize Mammy Pleasant and convey her relationship to the Wests and the house. The light on Mammy Pleasant also indicates (better than the actress’s makeup) that she is a mulatta, and quite possibly in closer communication with whatever spirits inhabit the house. The racial shorthand employed in Willard’s play and Leni’s film is not commented on in contemporary reviews or even very self-evident, but Mammy Pleasant’s racial difference is strongly marked in the 1939 Paramount remake—and made even more obvious by the remake’s setting: an old plantation house in the Louisiana bayou.

that effectively suggests that the house is, indeed, haunted. Film historian Lotte Eisner remarked specifically on the “inexpressible feeling of horror” Leni was able to provoke through this image, one that has since become iconographic, echoed in a plethora of horror films.

Indeed, the stylistic innovations Leni introduced in *The Cat and the Canary* had a remarkable and almost immediate impact on other horror films and horror-comedies. Roland West’s murder-melodrama *The Bat Whispers* (1930), for example, echoes Leni’s style in its pacing, mobile camera, and particularly in its lighting schemes, which are often as baroque as the plot.⁴ For instance, when ingenue Dale van Gorder secretly rings up a bank president’s nephew to tell him half a million in stolen bank money may be hidden in the house, the screen is split on a diagonal, for the hero Detective Anderson has opened a door behind Dale just enough to hear her conversation. Harsh light in the upper left corner of the frame casts deep shadows across the detective’s face, while Dale remains in dark shadow in the lower right of the screen, except for a faint light around her mouth and the telephone receiver. Though lavishly photographed, a more critically and popularly successful film than *The Bat Whispers* was James Whale’s *The Old, Dark House* from 1932, released by Universal under Carl Laemmle Jr.’s imprimatur. Contemporary reviews lauded the film’s excellent characterization as well as its camera work. Clearly intended as a parody of *The Cat and the Canary*, the dialogue is punctuated with witty, silly lines that remark reflexively on the situation the characters find themselves in. During a violent rainstorm in the Welsh mountains, a group of travelers are forced to take refuge in the home of the eccentric Femm family. As the travelers approach the old dark house’s door, Penderel, played by Melvyn Douglas, remarks “What an idea, wouldn’t it be dramatic if everyone in the house were dead!” The door is then opened by a zombie-like Morgan Femm,

⁴ The film is a “talkie” remake of West’s 1926 silent mystery-melodrama *The Bat*.

played by Boris Karloff in his first post-*Frankenstein* role. To Morgan's groaning response to their request for shelter, Penderal quips, "Even Welsh ought not sound like that."

Film historians agree that Paul Leni successfully achieved what Carl Laemmle, Jr. wanted: a "look" created through film technique—mobile camera, composition, editing, cinematography, and careful direction of his actors—that also effectively shaped the audience's affective responses. In brief, Paul Leni's stylistic innovations provided a complex blend of unexpected chills along with a familiar cathartic release: the unmasking of the villain at the end of the film. However, this claim does not explain what the different angles, lighting, composition, or mobile camera *did* such that the film's stylistic elements would be remarked upon for their emotional effects as well as their novelty; nor does this claim explain why Leni's innovations were so powerful as conveyors of meaning as to become a new set of conventions. What we want to unravel is how technically innovative twists on a familiar form should invite a different kind and degree of affective investment; to do so requires a theory of human emotions which recognizes aesthetic input and shifts in affective investment as part of a dynamic unity. Silvan Tomkins' theory of affects is such a tool.

Rather than mapping points of plot onto audience response, or for that matter points of a film's score, which might constitute a behaviorist approach, Tomkins' affect theory allows us to speculate that affects are created in the course of scenes coming before the audience, triggering affects "in motion". For Silvan Tomkins, the human affect system is a system of motivation separate from the drives: the affects provide the primary motives of human beings. Fully aware that there is little consensus on what the primary affects are, for the sake of standardization Tomkins identified nine primary, innate affects, including interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust (or dissmell),

and anger-rage (Sedgwick 74). Tomkins' theory of affects rests on his hypothesis that, whether an affect is provoked by an idea, a thought, physical motion, or perceptual sensation, that affect is activated by a single principle: the density of neural firing, meaning the frequency of neural firing per unit of time.⁵ For instance, according to Tomkins, any stimulus with a relatively sudden onset and a steep increase in the rate of neural firing will innately activate a startle response. This could happen in "real life," as when a prankster jumps out at us from behind a tree, or it could happen in the movie theatre, as when a bus suddenly screeches to a stop under a streetlamp in *Cat People* (1942), startling both the character and us viewers. He continues,

If the rate of neural firing increases less rapidly, fear is activated, and if still less rapidly, then interest is innately activated. In contrast, any sustained increase in the level of neural firing, as with a continuing loud noise, would innately activate the cry of distress. If it were sustained and still louder, it would innately activate the anger response. Finally, any sudden decrease in stimulation that reduced the rate of neural firing, as in the sudden reduction of excessive noise, would innately activate the rewarding smile of enjoyment. (*Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, 46-47)

In terms of the thriller-chiller-comedy in general and *The Cat and the Canary* in particular, affects connected to thrills, chills, and laughter, namely startle, distress, and relief or joy, are all activated at the most basic level by different intensities and durations of neural firing.

By definition, a spooky old house movie provides thrills which, if effectively executed, will jolt the audience and make viewers jump in their seats, triggering the startle response. For Tomkins, the startle response has the specific function of "clearing the affect assembly...of the immediately preceding information and initiates...tracking reflexes in order to present new information to the central assembly" (*Exploring Affect*, 106). Startle works rather like a radio special announcement: it interrupts the current program. We are startled or surprised when our

⁵ Density of neural firing varies according to three discrete classes of activators of affect, which Tomkins terms stimulation increase, stimulation level, and stimulation decrease. Each of these affect activators further amplifies the sources which activate them, resulting in a range of affective responses.

attention to one thing is interrupted suddenly and forcefully. At the moment when the villain's hand sliding out from behind a wall suddenly grips the heroine's shoulder; or when the portrait of Cyrus West, ominously shifting on the wall, suddenly falls to the floor; or when the family lawyer's corpse appears behind a secret panel and topples to the ground; the affect we experience prior to that moment—excitement, dread, curiosity, agitation—is swept clear of our system to make us aware of the *one* moment: the fall, the grab, the topple, and so on. Those specific moments, using Tomkins' terms, cause “massive, dense feedback” to the physical system and give way “to the rising, dense neural firing of the messages which activated the startle” (108). That dense neural firing causes the thrill we feel following the startle response.

While the thrill of the thriller-chiller-comedy clears one's system of feeling, the chill is different; it is an exciting element of filmgoing, but it can also cause discomfort and concern. Chills are, I suggest, a result of distress—a longer-lasting affect than the momentary startle or surprise response. Chills are not, however, a matter of fear—at least not real fear. Paul Leni's *The Cat and the Canary* (and German Expressionism, for that matter) traffics especially in this experience. Tomkins emphasizes a distinction between the affects distress and fear, finding, for one thing, that the “wide-open eyes of fear...the frozen immobility and lack of tonus in the facial and leg muscles” are not present in distress (*Shame and Its Sisters*, 120). Real fear is not felt by the film viewer because the viewer is never in a position of needing to preserve his or her own life. Distress, however, is an innate response to high level of density of neural firing, such that too much of just about any internal or external source—hunger, cold, noise, heat, loud speech, very bright lights, overly intense or enduring affect—can cause distress. Indeed, too much distress can cause distress. Furthermore, “[n]ot only does the interruption of excitement or enjoyment produce distress, but we may be taught to be distressed at the activation of any

positive or negative affect” (116). If we experience affects we’ve never felt before and cannot name, we can experience distress—from the situation of not knowing how, exactly, to identify what we are experiencing.

For the film viewer, the experience of watching something whose outcome the viewer can predict but the character-in-peril cannot is particularly likely to cause distress because the viewer can do nothing, and, according to Tomkins, “[a]ny action which is contemplated or intended but which is inhibited for any reason can [also] produce sufficient increase in peripheral muscle tonus to activate distress” (114). Empathic distress—distress felt for a fellow human in distress—is particularly applicable to the situation of the film-viewer watching a chilling situation unfold. All is not well when a character is about to confront a ghostly apparition, or is stuck in a spooky house overnight and knows one’s compeers might be trying to do one in; distress descends like a chill on the film-viewer watching a character in these situations.

Finally, if we consider the phrase “comedy relief” in conjunction with Tomkins’ explanation of why one experiences the smile of joy (the rapid decrease in stimulus that reduces neural firing), then we might imagine the “pay off” we feel at the end of a thriller-chiller-comedy, or intermittently throughout the film, as a version of the experience of joy and relief from distress we felt during the film. Essentially, this is Aristotle’s concept of catharsis, understood through a physio-psychological lens.

Considering the ways we come to know any object or idea, and the critical role of the affect system in coming to know anything, Silvan Tomkins writes,

...[W]ith any object one must vary one’s perceptual perspective,...remembering what it was like in the past, what changes seem to have occurred, handling it and seeing what happens to it when one does different things to it... At the very least one must maintain the affect of interest in all of these varying transactions with what is in an important sense the ‘same’ object. Without such continuing support

from the affect system it is not possible to deepen one's acquaintance with any object. (*Shame and Its Sisters*, 55-56)

Tomkins' concept of the "central assembly" that disassembles and reassembles sensory input, memory support, and other elements of the individual's physio-psychological system may seem too biological and mechanistic for a cultural history of film-and-emotion and not cognitive or formal enough to resemble other theories of audience engagement, genre, or emotion. Yet it makes sense if we imagine interest and the other affects as sensations we experience when we encounter objects, stories, ideas and so on that offer an element of difference from what came before, even if what came before was "the same" (also a western, also a thriller-chiller-comedy, also a remake of the same story). Tomkins' affect system gives us a model for imagining the cultural sphere in which feeling-shapes like genres are expressed and absorbed, if not yet named.

Not all film viewers experience thriller-chiller-comedies in the same way, certainly, but by positing some of the ways that the affects triggered by these films might work in terms of rhythms, densities, and intensities, we are better equipped to demonstrate that knowledge of a genre is knowledge of a way of feeling.

Besides the specific effects created through stylistic choices like lighting and mobile framing or moving camera described above, whole sequences from *The Cat and the Canary* demonstrate the shaping of affective rhythms, with an emphasis on distress: the low-level affect of discomfort and dread that often produces chills.

The scene of the relatives gathered around the dining table, waiting to hear the will, begins on a note of catty humor. Aunt Susan looks at the clock, stuck at twelve midnight, and chastises Annabelle for her tardiness (she's the last to arrive). Crosby says the clock hasn't struck since Cyrus West died twenty years ago. A close-up of the clockface dissolves to reveal the clock's innards, which slowly begin to move and strike the hour. The relatives are rattled but

remain focused on the envelopes in front of Mr. Crosby, superimposed images of which begin to appear over the image of the dusty clockworks. Tension rises as the relatives listen to Mr. Crosby intone Cyrus West's final wishes. After much suspense, Annabelle West is named the heir. Her inheritance is conditional, however: a physician must examine her and positively establish her sanity. West added this condition to his will because he knew his relatives thought him crazy. At this accusation from beyond the grave Aunt Susan punches the dining room table and declares, "Now I *know* he was crazy!" As if in response, the portrait of Cyrus West overlooking the room falls from the wall and out of its frame. The family, viewed from overhead, jumps up, and Aunt Susan is shocked into (comic) hysterics. Although the sequence begins and ends comically, the humor does not entirely alleviate the distress of waiting to know the contents of West's will, nor does the startle triggered by West's portrait falling entirely erase that distress, because the aerial view of the family that follows seems motivated by something, or someone—certainly it does to the family below.

Perhaps more distressing for the audience, because the audience's sympathy is more surely sutured to Annabelle, is Mr. Crosby's disappearance behind the library walls and Annabelle's frustrated requests for help. While attempting to tell Annabelle who Cyrus West chose as his second heir should the first be proven mad, Mr. Crosby is grabbed from behind a secret panel in the library and dragged into the bowels of the house. Annabelle is oblivious to the moving panels behind her—her gaze is directed elsewhere—until she notes Mr. Crosby's absence. The thrill of a hairy claw-like hand grabbing Crosby morphs, for the audience, into empathetic despair when Annabelle tries to convince her relatives that Mr. Crosby has disappeared. Flanked in medium shot by her suspicious cousins, Harry and Charlie, Annabelle

again becomes a canary surrounded by cats, her distress heightened by her relatives' disbelief (while we in the audience sit helpless to help *her*).

About halfway through the film, the family has gone to bed. Annabelle, who has discovered a hidden diamond necklace, also part of her inheritance, puts it on and goes to bed herself. A few moments later, shadows cross over her. The camera cuts to the wall just above Annabelle's head. Gradually, the curtains on her canopy bed part, and a hairy claw with long, tapering fingers emerges, circling slowly over Annabelle as if it were searching for something. At one moment the claw stops, and approaches Annabelle's neck slowly, but then—pulls back, fingers clenched upward as if in fear. Then the claw relaxes, gropes about Annabelle's neck and chest, and rips the necklace from Annabelle's throat. She sits up instantly, screaming.

Of course, the audience knew this would happen, whether they were familiar with Willard's original play or with the many conventions of mystery melodrama. However, because of the mobility of the camera and the capacity to animate title cards, at the moment Annabelle is molested by the hand, Leni is able to zoom in on Annabelle's face and make her silent scream particularly memorable. A series of intertitles with the word "Help!" issue, it seems, from Annabelle's wide-open mouth toward the audience. The word is at first small: "HELP!" but grows to enormous proportions: "HELP!"

In response to her scream, Annabelle's relatives come running, but are skeptical, even dismissive, of her story. Aunt Susan looks to be on the verge of panic, whispering behind her hand, "She's gone stark raving mad." In reverse shot, Annabelle's helplessness is visually sealed: she stands between her two rapacious cousins Charlie Wilder and Harry Blythe, a canary surrounded by cats. The scene drags on, placing the viewer in a position of shared distress. Frustrated by her relatives' lack of imagination, and fearful of her own sanity, Annabelle breaks

loose from her cousins to show them the panel on the wall where the claw came from, and pounds along the wall next to the bed, suddenly finding a loose board. A cut reveals a mechanism hidden within the wall, dusty with time, beginning to creak, a pulley beginning to move. Another cut, and the panel shifts away.

Mr. Crosby's corpse is discovered standing upright in a closet; the shot is held for a long moment, which creates a chilling effect after all that buildup of distress; the silence on the soundtrack further intimates dread. When his body falls, the distress and chill give way to relief—which I would argue is more effective than the film's attempts at comedy. Moments later, Annabelle faints.

Annabelle's ongoing ordeal with her relatives offers some moments of comedy, but overall this sequence evokes distress (because she can't prove her case to anyone), which builds to the point where we desire, unconsciously but definitely physically, some sort of release. In fact, not only in this scene but throughout the film Leni makes particular use of distress to keep us on edge.

One could say that what Leni brought to the genre of the mystery melodrama was a facility for creating negative scenarios and amplifying negative affect. That this was historically the case is arguable based on the many copy-cat films made after Leni's film, and the many times *The Cat and the Canary* itself was remade. Two no longer extant versions include a 1930 sound version directed by Rupert Julian, titled *The Cat Creeps*, and his simultaneously directed Spanish version, *La voluntad del muerto*. The most famous and successful remake, however, is Paramount's 1939 version. The reasons for its popularity and longevity have quite a bit to do with the later success of its star, Bob Hope, but also suggest changes in audience familiarity with the feeling shape of "thriller-chiller-comedies". The film's wisecracking hero and self-

reflexivity about its own genre indicate that the film's makers anticipated a sophisticated audience with a sophisticated sense of the Hollywood film industry.⁶ The suggestion of a *change in audience*, or a “more knowing” audience, also affords an interesting lens for understanding how “new” affects provoked by Leni's 1927 film could later be evoked by others, but with a difference.

Script Theory

The suggestion that audiences were familiar with the feeling-shape of the thriller-chiller-comedy seems reasonable, but how does that work, especially in terms of affect? Audiences for stage melodramas knew that, in a murder mystery, there would be a crime, a character who must become a detective (or perhaps an actual detective), and a heroine at the mercy of a possibly-preternatural villain. According to reviews of *The Bat*, *The Old Dark House*, and other films in the genre, audiences could also expect secret panels, ghosts or ghostly apparitions, spooky shadows, and assorted implications of unnatural behavior (incest, fratricide, patricide, matricide, and so on). In addition to narrative patterns and props, audiences could expect—or at least hope to expect—to be thrilled, chilled, and made to laugh. Yet, how do these conventions become *learned* by audiences, filmmakers, and critics, and still remain affectively *effective*? How do audiences who know what they're getting not get bored? Or in Tomkins' terminology, how does a film with so much in common with other films trigger a sustained rate of neural firing (that is, interest)?

⁶ The film is quite popular among Bob Hope fans and fans of the thriller-chiller-comedy, but rather strangely, it is only available on VHS or DVD in the UK, not in the US: the film has not been released for domestic markets from the Paramount vault. It is possible, however, to get hold of the film through Amazon UK and through specialty film-tracker services in Hollywood that look up films one remembers from the past but can't find for sale.

Film audiences must learn the conventions, moves, and feelings of a genre—indeed, so must filmmakers, critics, and screenwriters—through repeated viewings or creations, which can only happen over time and with the help of memory, both cognitive and embodied. More specifically, we learn to be interested when shadows form, when people crawl along corridors, when music slows or rises in crescendo, and so forth, because we know something will happen: that is, we are capable of linking together or organizing past affective experiences into sequences, and we connect one affect-laden scene with another. Tomkins explains this capacity to respond to and interpret sets of experiences through *script theory*.

In Tomkin's theory of affect, human emotional experience is organized into *scripts*, which in turn consist of individual *scenes*. A scene is a happening with a perceived beginning and end, "the basic element of life as it is lived" (*Shame and Its Sisters*, 179). When a scene is experienced repeatedly with sufficient similarity, its content will elicit a similar response pattern each time it is activated. As Tomkins explains, "The whole connected set of scenes lived in sequence is called the *plot* of a life. The script, in contrast, does not deal with all the scenes or the plot of a life, but rather with the individual's rules for predicting, interpreting, responding to, and controlling a magnified set of scenes" (181). Cognition is necessarily involved here, but Tomkins imagines cognition as being in partnership with or indeed entwined with the affect system: it is the repetition of scenes that trigger innate affects that eventually "teach" the mind and body how to become excited, afraid, or distressed, or recognize those affects when they occur. Tomkins' script theory explains how it is that we can have "feeling memories," or anticipate particular feelings, or begin to respond emotionally to a situation as if we "know" the scene even if we've never been in that specific situation before.

Scripts are individual, but develop commonly enough among us such that we are capable, for the most part, of knowing similar emotions, and thus of collectively understanding emotion and experiencing similar affective triggers. Indeed, as Tomkins puts it,

[W]hat sociologists have called the definition of the situation and what I am defining as the script is to some extent the same phenomenon viewed from two different but related theoretical perspectives—the scene as defined by the society or as defined by the individual. These definitions are neither necessarily nor always identical, but they must necessarily be related to each other, rather than completely orthogonal to each other, if either the society or the individual is to remain viable. (180)

Tomkins continues, “If the society is ever to change, there must be some tension sustained between the society’s definition of the situation and the individual’s script. If the society is to endure as a coherent entity, its definition of situations must in some measure be constructed as an integral part of the shared scripts of its individuals” (ibid); this interrelation between individual psychological development and social development leads Tomkins to theorize that ideology itself has and caters to affective postures—that is, sets of ideas about feelings.

The scenes of script theory, viewed either as social artifacts or the dream scenes of an individual psyche, are very like sequences in a film, which are themselves sets of scenes that develop toward a particular payoff. Indeed films often play the role of affective scenes for the individual. Though I discussed Leni’s film chiefly in terms of its affective patterns of tension and release, one can also view the film as the generator or even repository of a set of stylistic and narrative maneuvers that could be re-employed to re-create particular feelings. Paul Leni’s *The Cat and the Canary* acts, in a broad sense, as the collection of scenarios that activate affective scripts that later films in the genre must evoke again.

By changing the way stage mystery-melodramas were adapted to film, giving greater weight to gloomy atmosphere over comedy, for instance, Leni’s film conveyed “new”

experiences to audiences and reviewers that were difficult for some critics and audiences to understand or place. Historically, the adaptation of a popular stage property to a popular film put another nail in the coffin of stage melodrama and, for that matter, vaudeville and popular theatre. More central to the affects of the film itself, Leni's stylistic innovations, including his sense of mood as part of the action of the film, demanded from future filmmakers a greater skill, or at least a talent for copying (preferably better than Roland West). *The Cat and the Canary* is a film that remains a bit ambiguous in its affective intents ("it has the strange ability to make you laugh and scare you at the same time"), but is looked at pleurably with the passage of *time* for having been able to create certain effects—especially for its skill at maintaining "spookiness," which I have identified as connected to the negative affects of distress and startle (which lead to dread, surprise, fear, and other sensations).

1939 Paramount version

In the 1939 Paramount studios remake of *The Cat and the Canary* starring Bob Hope and Paulette Goddard, however, the affective balance shifts from negative scenarios and negative affects to positive affects. The *Motion Picture Daily* October 30, 1939 proclaimed that the film "accomplish[ed] a wedding of laugh and thrill so neatly contrived as to equal, virtually, a new film formula"; *Hollywood Reporter* called the film "a comedy-thriller par excellence".⁷ No longer a story in search of a genre, or a film that tweaks the conventions of the stage and film in unexpected ways, the 1939 version of *The Cat and the Canary* fulfilled its audience's desires and expectations, rewarding them with positive affect. But in doing so the film becomes something paradoxical and interesting: the 1939 version allows its viewers, especially through Bob Hope's self-consciousness about the genre, to be scared or startled yet defend themselves from the

⁷ October 30, 1939; November 1939.

distress, dread, and horror that Leni and other German directors “specialized” in and made palpable in Hollywood films to begin with.

Rather than emphasizing chilling moments that lead to collapse or relief, the strongest “beat” in the affective rhythm of this film is comedy, the positive affective charge that releases us from distress. Reviews of this film confidently use the label “thriller-chiller-comedy” for the first time (that I have been able to discover), and in that phrase explain not only the kind of film it is but the sensations the viewer will feel. Indeed, that label notes the *order* in which those sensations will be felt, indicating that this genre’s *feeling shape* has been achieved.

Simultaneously, though, in this film the genre gives way even at its moment of apotheosis: as a remake of a film that is also the originator of the genre, this film, by emphasizing laughs, fails to adequately connect narrative turn to negative affect, which is the hallmark of the subgenre. The film is faithful to the 1927 version in narrative content, but in its differences reveals a great deal about what the filmmakers assumed of their audience, and suggests something about the way the world had changed between 1927 and 1939.

For example, just as in Leni’s version, the heroine (now named Joyce Norman) is molested in her sleep by a hairy claw emerging from the paneling above her bed. The thrilling moments of the grab and her scream are, as in Leni’s version, drawn out into empathetic distress for Joyce when her relatives doubt her sanity. In Leni’s version, our empathetic distress for Annabelle West builds while she proves that there *are* secret panels behind her bed; that distress relaxes when she discovers Mr. Crosby’s corpse behind the wall, then faints. In Elliott Nugent’s 1939 version the heroine faints after she is awakened by the claw and cries for help. She is brought to by her relatives. When Joyce’s relatives opine that her report is crazy, Joyce becomes not only increasingly frustrated with them, but obdurate, growing angry rather than distressed.

Also, in this version the heroine has a witness on her side: spineless hero Wally Campbell (Bob Hope) helped Joyce find the family diamond necklace, and saw her with it before she went to bed. Wally even accuses the relatives of having it in for Joyce: “You’d all like to prove that Joyce is crazy, wouldn’t you, because that would give you another chance at old Norman’s dough!” Wally thus confirms for us that we already know the plot. Oddly enough, so does Wally: chastised for believing Joyce’s story about a claw coming out of the wall, Wally replies, “Haven’t you clucks ever heard of secret passageways and panels?” Instead of being anxious for Joyce, the audience sympathizes with her. Wally’s outburst on Joyce’s behalf spurs our relief for two reasons: it is a self-reflexive joke (this is, indeed, a story we already know), and clearly Wally is no threat to Joyce. (Leni does not give his heroine Annabelle an ally in her milquetoast cousin Paul Jones until later in the film, allowing our sensation of distress on Annabelle’s behalf to build steadily.)

Thus a pattern is set: the chill of the claw’s approach, the thrill of the claw’s attack, the chill of distress, and the release of “joy” or relief when Wally proclaims himself on Joyce’s side. In other words, chill-thrill-chill-release. The meter of the phrase “thriller-chiller-comedy” echoes the way this film uses comedy, rather than chills, to create the biggest punch or beat. Bob Hope as Wally provides a greater degree of surety or safety for the heroine and for the viewer vis-à-vis the affects being aroused in the whole complex. In Leni’s film we had no such clear stand-in for our emotional experience within the film as there is in the 1939 version, which may help explain why Leni’s film is higher on the chill/thrill than the comedy. And of course, Bob Hope has a larger role in the 1939 version than either Creighton Hale or Laura Laplante had in the 1927 version. Giving Hope a larger role than the original milquetoast hero allows him more

opportunities to make intertextual in-jokes about the genre. Indeed, Hope so dominates this film that Paulette Goddard is rendered rather bland.

For instance, in this version, it is not Joyce, the heroine, but Wally (Hope) who finds the loose secret panel and somehow opens the passage behind which Mr. Crosby's body has been stuffed. Throughout the movie, Wally remarks on events that remind him of the plots of stage melodramas, irritating his relatives but amusing the film audience, who know exactly what Wally means. Even at chilling moments, as when Wally and Joyce realize how much danger they are in (Wally has just come to from being cold-cocked, after realizing that the solution to who killed Mr. Crosby is in the envelope in Crosby's breast pocket), Wally finds parallels in musty melodrama:

Wally: I remember a situation almost like this in an old play called 'The Fatal Hour, or She Should Have Known Better.' At the end of the second act, the leading man takes the heroine in his arms and kisses her. (Wally kisses Joyce). Then filled with new courage, he starts out after the villain.

Joyce: And of course he comes back in the third act?

Wally: Oh sure. No! In the third act he's found dead in the bathtub! Oh well. That was just a play.

Here, Wally not only references the plot of this story but others, as well, summoning courage and making a play for Joyce at once. As the audience's stand-in in the film, Wally's active wooing of the heroine in the guise of allaying her fears keeps a thread of humor running through one of the more unsettling sequences of the film. Strangely enough, Wally does not seem to know how the plot he is currently in will end. Thus, the film still manages to provoke distress when Wally finds a secret passageway into the house and gets stuck there, and when Wally and Joyce find themselves confronting The Cat (the villain in werewolf-like make-up) in a shed behind the main

house. Rather than lingering chills, however, this film's affective rhythms unfailingly shift the audience's anticipation from the next thrill or chill to the next joke.⁸

The plot of the 1939 version remains the same as that of Leni's 1927 film, such that even though Wally's self-referential comments erase the difference between Life and Art, they simultaneously confirm the development of plot points to the audience, providing for interest and excitement, and therefore a positive affective outcome.⁹ A further element that the 1939 version repeats, with a difference, is the "psychological angle", but in a way that makes rewarding what was previously chilling or distressing. In Leni's 1927 film, chills and psychological terror were conveyed in part through a tonal ambiguity about the sanity, insanity, guilt or innocence of Annabelle West's relatives, and in part through the way the film retained a certain plausibility about the possibility of Cyrus West's ghostly presence. In the 1939 version, the "psychological" interests of the 1927 version have been sanitized, scientized, and evacuated of psychological terror: the extent of the danger our heroine is in never rises above the worldly.

While Joyce Norman half-listens to Mr. Crosby's warnings that she be careful of her relatives (before he disappears behind the bookcases), Joyce reads from a volume titled *The Psychology of Fear*. A close-up of part of the book reads,

What happens when a cat is allowed to come close to a canary in a cage? The bird, seeing the terrible eyes of its enemy so close, is often frightened to death. Numerous experiments conducted by leading psychologists both in this country

⁸ That rhythm is even more pronounced in Paramount's follow-up thriller-chiller-comedy, *The Ghost Breakers* (1940). Once again, Paulette Goddard stars as a young woman who inherits a dilapidated mansion, this time in Cuba. The house, apparently, is haunted by her ancestor, Señor Santiago, yet a number of shady characters, including twin brothers (played by Anthony Quinn), would like her to sign the house over to them. Bob Hope plays Lawrence Lawrence, a radio host who spills too much information on air about the local criminal racket and escapes to Cuba, unintentionally, in Goddard's luggage. Ultimately, he helps her learn why so many people want Castillo Maldito for themselves, discovering too that voodoo is alive and well in Cuba. The title shot of the film, in the titles' typography and in the image of a large, dilapidated house in the background, is reminiscent of nothing so much as the title sequence from older "Scooby-Doo" cartoons.

⁹ Interestingly, neither Wally nor his relatives mention *movies* in the murder mystery/thriller-chiller vein, which would call too *much* attention to this version's predecessors. The only media invoked are radio and the stage.

and abroad have proven this to be true in the majority of cases. The size or sex of either the animal or the bird, in no way changed the result.

The passage is ridiculous, but achieves a tone of certainty that “cleanses” fear of any obscure taints (like the unconscious or irrationality, or disgust/dismissal). A “modern” heroine, Joyce is fearless, and apparently devoid of uncanny sensibilities, not to mention completely lacking Wally’s self-consciousness. In John Willard’s original play, Annabelle West must be examined by a physician who will determine her sanity; that physician, Doctor Patterson, is a tall man in black clothes, wearing a black hat, who glides into the room without making any noise, and before whom Annabelle shrinks in terror. The doctor who examines Annabelle West (Laura Laplante) in Leni’s film is hunchbacked, has long straggly hair, wears glasses, and bears a striking resemblance to Dr. Caligari, iconically recalling “German” concerns with ambiguity, the uncanny, and interior states of mind, as well as the threat of a maniacal authority figure. In the 1939 version, however, though the conditions of the patriarch’s will remain the same, no doctor comes to examine Joyce Norman to determine her sanity. Instead, the original play’s concern for mental hygiene is displaced onto the rational science of psychology. Authority over Joyce’s sanity falls not to a doctor, but to Joyce herself and, interestingly, to Wally Campbell, who knows the formula of murder mysteries and backs up Joyce by demonstrating his knowledge of things like the likely placement of secret panels and passageways—a kind of knowledge of the house’s unconscious.

Both the playfulness about genre and the detachment of interiority or ambiguity from the “psychological angle” evidence the extent to which the “art” brought to Hollywood by German émigrés in the 1920s had, by 1939, been naturalized as “Hollywood” style. This evolution is reflected in reviews of the remade *The Cat and the Canary*, which fail to mention either “German film style” as an influence, or Paul Leni’s film, at least directly. The lack of a serious

psychological angle along with the film's aggressive pursuit of comedy over thrills also suggest the context of the times: the Second World War was on the horizon. America had not yet chosen sides, but Germany was clearly already a threat, and America was still in the grip of the Depression. Psychological thrills and chills were not what Hollywood wished to foist on a worried domestic market, and certainly not on even more worried foreign markets. Furthermore, in popular culture psychoanalysis remained a "German"—more specifically, Jewish—field of research, somewhat suspect for its racial provenance as well as its fundamental claim of the unconscious, and hence of a self divided against itself. The 1939 film version instead reflects an Americanized version of psychology that has already moved toward behaviorism and ego-psychology, and been absorbed into mainstream discourse purged of its "European" (occultish, irrational, even uncanny) elements. The threat to Joyce, in this version, is never interior (her mind working against herself), but always exterior. Indeed, her name itself is "modern," not the old-fashioned—or moneyed—"Annabelle".¹⁰

In "Twice-Told Tales: Disavowal and the Rhetoric of the Remake," Thomas Leitch writes that a remake's intertextual stance, the "general attitude it adopts toward its original, helps define the way the audience makes sense of their experience of the film as a whole" (*Play It Again, Sam* 43-44). The term "disavowal" is "apt in...specific ways to the remake's model of intertextuality," Leitch argues, "since remakes by definition establish their value by invoking earlier texts whose potency they simultaneously valorize and deny through a series of rhetorical maneuvers designed at once to reflect their intimacy with these earlier texts and to distance themselves from their flaws" (53).

¹⁰ "Modernness" is part of the persona Paulette Goddard brings to her character in *The Ghost-Breakers* as well: Mary Carter, "a poor working girl—honest but tough."

If the 1939 film disavows the original's powerful claims of psychoanalysis in plot and in style, and disavows the importance of the American moneyed class by making the heroine a healthy all-American working girl, those disavowals seem to be displaced geographically onto the setting. Whereas Willard's play and Leni's film are set at Cyrus West's "crazy" mansion on the Hudson River, the 1939 version situates the Norman family home in a Louisiana bayou. The 1939 film also "retemporalizes" the setting to ten rather than twenty years after the patriarch's death—perhaps figuring that the Depression would have wrought less havoc on a Southern plantation already gone to seed than to estates closer to Wall Street. As in the original play, the housekeeper Mammy Pleasant is a mulatta woman who apparently had a romantic relationship with the former man of the house, which has apparently carried into a relationship with the man's ghost. The casting and makeup in the 1939 version render the housekeeper's racial make-up much clearer than in Leni's 1927 film. Presumably both haunted houses and colored housekeepers with a finger on the pulse of the spirit world seemed more likely to exist, in modern times, in the decrepit Deep South than the industrious Yankee north. These shifts in place and time, and the film's general emphasis on *comedy*, seem to assume an audience that likes to crack wise, sees itself as urbane, and shares a general sense of where one can find the exotic, the supernatural, and the backward in America—and, like the filmmakers, conflates all three with the South and racial difference.

These and other elements of the 1939 version bear out Thomas Leitch's description of a particular type of remake: the update. Remakes, Leitch writes, "seek to mediate between the contradictory claims of being just like their originals only better in several different ways" (45).

Updates, specifically,

are characterized by their overtly revisionary stance toward an original text they treat as classic, even though they transform it in some obvious way, usually by

transposing it to a new setting, inverting its system of values, or adopting standards of realism that implicitly criticize the original as dated, outmoded, or irrelevant... [U]pdates in general are not content to occupy a subordinate position to the...classics they adapt but compete directly with those classics by accommodating them to what are assumed to be the audience's changed desires. (47)¹¹

In addition to the displacements and changes mentioned above, reviews of this film suggest a considerable update in terms of the film's narrative *speed*. The *Hollywood Reporter*, for example, described the film as "A superbly staged remake, briskly paced, perfectly cast and lusciously photographed" (October 1939). The *New York Times* also commented on the film's pacing ("The objective is carried out briskly and to our complete satisfaction"), while the *Motion Picture Herald* applauded Paramount for having "solved neatly for itself the heretofore perplexing problem of what to do with Bob Hope" (October 28, 1939). *Variety* noted that, while "[r]etaining the basic spooky atmosphere and chiller situations of John Willard's original play, Paramount injects plenty of legitimate comedy," foreseeing that the film "will hit a consistent stride down the line in the subsequents [second-run houses]" (November 1939).

The references these critics make to the film's *briskness* and probably *stride* in the box office indicates a more rapid oscillation through the tension/release rhythm in this film than in Leni's version, which lingered over tension to create distress. Hope's "parodic" approach, his vehiculation of an extreme self-consciousness about the genre, effects a more perfect surrogation of the viewer, in his/her own ambiguous relation to the genre: like Wally, we know the conventions, and both use them defensively and allow ourselves to still be spooked and startled. There is a less effective surrogation in the Leni film—no particular character is as clearly a reflection of or stand-in for the audience, and no one character acts effectively to protect the

¹¹ Leitch bases his arguments about remakes – the four things they do—on literature and literary classics, but applies those arguments to film.

heroine from danger, which may explain why that version tends to be higher on the chill/thrill and lower on the comedy.

In the 1939 version, the genre is giving way even in its moment of apotheosis, failing to adequately connect scenario to script: the briskness of the pace and snappiness of the dialogue do not match up to the original's primary affective script of slow increasing density of neural firing resulting in distress, which is where chills lie. That the critics found the pace "satisfying" also suggests that the negative script of distress has, over repetition and over time, given way to a more positive script: the audience has a greater grip on what the thriller-chiller-comedy entails affectively, and our surrogate, Wally/Hope, confirms this: hence, when negative affects are triggered, the film still delivers what it promises.

One can see how Bob Hope's jokes both demonstrate an intimacy with earlier thriller-chiller-comedy texts (specifically *plays* and thus the original property at the base of *The Cat and the Canary* films) and, by being funnier than the original play's "comedy bits" and lampooning the predictability of those old murder mysteries, how Hope's humor conveys a sense of those predecessors' inadequacies. In the 1939 version, the joke is not on the original film, but on the subgenre itself: the film arouses the audience's consciousness of the feelings it is expected to feel, and in what order, and through what mechanisms. The joke is the process and status of the story remade so often as to suggest that perhaps its "purpose" as a genre has been fulfilled.

The most recent remake of *The Cat and the Canary* (1979) demonstrates its knowingness of the genre to an even further degree. Though less successful than either Leni's film or Nugent's remake, Radley Metzger's remake is interesting for further exacerbating what the audience already knows to expect from the medium of film as a vehicle for this genre. Leni's mobile camera and cinematography demonstrate what film can do that the stage cannot (and he knew

both media well); Elliot Nugent's script and the casting of Bob Hope as, essentially, himself (radio comedian and actor) demonstrated what a talkie could do with the property that a silent film could not. The 1927 and 1939 versions of *The Cat and the Canary* demonstrate that the thriller-chiller-comedy, perhaps even the feeling-shape of this very hybrid form, negotiates participation and separation, involvement and distance with its audience. In the 1979 version, Metzger allows Cryus West to speak to his relatives himself, through the medium of home movies, deliberately pushing the film's self-consciousness to the point of *mise-en-abyme*: Metzger's remake is so unspooky and hyper-aware of itself *as* a film that, in a way, this remake declares that film is no longer the right medium for an effectively spooky—or funny—thriller-chiller-comedy.

The Cat and the Canary (1979)

More famous for his art-film influenced soft-core porn features than “legitimate” dramas, Radley Metzger brings some of his erotic sensibility to this film, creating a lesbian relationship between cousins Cicily Young (Olivia Hussey) and sportswoman Susan Sillsby (Honor Blackman), and putting the heroine Annabelle West (Carol Lynley) in the sadomasochistic position of being tied up and nearly tortured by her deranged cousin Charlie Wilder (Peter McEnery) and his accomplice, the so-called asylum guard Hendricks (Edward Fox). Despite a strong cast (which also included Wendy Hiller and Wilfrid Hyde-White), the film lacks Paul Leni's cinematic style and Elliott Nugent's directorial briskness. The film's bright interior lighting nullifies the Gothic atmosphere of thriller-chillers, and a relocation of the story from the United States to England modulates the sharpness of greedy Yankee relatives into upper-middle-class British drawing room tones.

Reviews of Metzger's *The Cat and the Canary* bear out an idea of a remake, and a genre, "out of time." A DVD review of the film states, "... [Metzger] ... nicely [captures] the clipped delivery and witty repartee of the drawing-room comedy at the expense of the thrills and chills that make Leni's original so memorable" (Sean Axmaker, Amazon.com). Gilbert Adair wrote, in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, that the film was "[a]n overpoweringly cast but half-heartedly scripted remake...which after a spirited beginning bores more than it thrills... So mechanically are characters put through the indistinguishable rooms and corridors that one is surprised not to see the parquet marked off in neat little squares, as on a checker board" (qtd. in *Halliwell's*, 176). An extended review from [dvdtimes.co.uk](http://www.dvdtimes.co.uk) cuts to the heart of the film's inability to evoke the right "feeling shape":

This version doesn't stray much from the template laid down by the 1927 and 1939 versions but unlike Hope and Goddard's still-funny film, neither the horror nor the comedy ever really gels... [P]art of the problem is the innocence of the film, which makes it seem out of touch with the films that were its contemporaries. Whilst no one would have been expecting the horror in the film to match *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, it even seems mild in comparison to a film like *Asylum*, which predated *The Cat And The Canary* by six years but which is both more horrific and handles its rare moments of comedy better. [A]t its end, the major fault with the film is simply in not being very frightening. ...[T]here really is too little of the killer and too few of the occupants picked off from the judicious placement of secret passages for this to offer nervous laughter between the murders. Not quite funny enough and not quite frightening enough—hardly a glowing recommendation for a comedy-horror. (<http://www.dvdtimes.co.uk/content>)

In their *Cinema Sequels and Remakes*, Nowlan and Nowlan write, "The 1979 remake couldn't find the magic even though it had an impressive cast. Despite a spirited beginning, rather than add to the production values the performers get in the way of each other, resulting in a weary film" (133).

The "spirited beginning" several critics refer to is actually rather ingenious, and suggests an homage to film technology itself. In this version, Cyrus West again calls his relatives together

twenty years after his death. The scene has shifted from America entirely to a manor house in Great Britain in 1934. Via home movies produced in 1914, with simultaneously recorded sound, the dead man (Wilfrid Hyde-White) speaks to his money-grubbing relatives from beyond the grave. As they watch his flickering image during dinner, the cantankerous old man taunts and insults them—calling his kin a bunch of bastards and leeches—finally bequeathing his fortune to lovely, wide-eyed Annabelle (Carol Lynley).

The scene is clever, and makes of Cyrus West a sort of spirit presence, not unlike the subjective camera roaming through the corridors of Paul Leni's film. By marrying the modernity of film cameras and projectors with the spookiness of seeing someone "live" from beyond the grave, the scene enacts the idea of photography, and of motion pictures in particular, as a sort of vampiric medium (even though it's the relatives who are the bloodsuckers). There's a good deal of well-timed humor in the scene, too, with Mrs. Pleasant, the housekeeper and devoted servant, showing up on screen to serve West some claret then emerging, off screen and from behind the real screen, in real time, with that same claret for West's hopeful heirs. Playing the gracious if cynical host, West advises his guests to pay particular attention to the cognac, which was good when he made the pictures and should be even better twenty years later.

One expects that, with so strong a beginning, the rest of the film might carry on in a similar logic. As Thomas Leitch further explains about remakes,

they cannot risk invoking memories of the earlier film too fervently even though they are limited in the kinds of novelty they can introduce, since they are telling the same story again rather than developing a familiar story in a new direction. Remakes most often address this problem by adding a twist to their exposition, teasing knowing audiences as they bring new audiences up to their level of background knowledge. ("Twice Told Tales" 41)

Unfortunately, the rest of the film fails to follow this scene; the home movies are, essentially, the film's one-trick pony, which is a shame since one could imagine a number of thrills emerging from the clever use of camera tricks. Chills are out of the question given the lighting and sets.

If there is an affective rhythm to be found in this picture, it is more like that of made-for-television Agatha Christie mysteries, which might be described as mild predictable thrill followed by mild release, mild thrill, mild release: overall, mild interest—and only for those who like the genre anyway. Even the villain in this picture is, we know, bound to be a relative, for there are no spirits wandering about to throw a red herring into the doings (how could they in such brassy lighting?). Anything smacking of the supernatural is done away with or displaced onto the perverse (Olivia Hussey's femme to Honor Blackman's dyke), which is itself carried off as a mild salacious joke rather than any sort of threat.

Although the DVD Times UK reviewer did not expect or want Metzger's The Cat and the Canary to be as violent as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, no one who has experienced Tobe Hooper's terrifying film can forget the extreme sensations of terror and startle the film launches at its audience. The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) and a few other horror films of its general period—Psycho (1960), Night of the Living Dead (1968), Peeping Tom (1960), and The Exorcist (1973)—in very real ways changed the affects we can expect horror films to evoke, as well as their rhythms, and in changing the things horror films can do, these films helped change “society's definition of the situation (the horror film) and the individual's script” (*Shame and Its Sisters* 180). However, even considering the much gentler affects that thriller-chiller-comedies had triggered since the days of stage mystery melodrama, Metzger's *The Cat and the Canary*, in failing to create terror, or tension, or interest, was unable to fulfill *either* the original scripts laid by Leni's film or the revisions to those scripts brought about by Nugent's remake, which are

essential to evoking the paradoxical blend of distress/startle/comedy that are the hallmark of this hybrid genre.

Conclusion

Trying to puzzle out the relationship between genre and remake in terms of affect and the thriller-chiller-comedy leads us to consider the relative weights of the scenario and the script. Remakes are typically not only interpretations of a particular story, but also of a genre. Genres of any kind are shaped by affective structures as much as they help shape them. What is interesting about the thriller-chiller-comedy is that *its* process of becoming a genre—in particular one that no longer lives up to its past manifestations—is also a process of the *affective* registers of thriller-chiller-comedies having been enculturated into *emotional sureties*. As Brian Massumi and Silvan Tomkins each remind us, affect and emotion are different. What Brian Massumi in *Parables of the Virtual* calls “emotional sureties” (experiences that culture and society have ready-made emotional labels for), Tomkins called “attenuated affect”: experiences of affect repeated so often as to no longer offer the difference necessary to an affective charge but available only to cognitive surety (“I know that I am feeling sadness”). For Tomkins, we cannot “know” an emotion until we have experienced a particular affective scenario repeatedly; as his student Nathan Davidson puts it, affect is somatic and instinctive, feeling comes from repeated affect in the shape of scripts, and emotion develops after feelings have been repeated numerous times. Silvan Tomkins theorizes that the scene must happen and be recalled before there can be a script: a script is formulated at the moment of the scenario, but the meaning of that script is unclear until a future time. In that future time, however, the script may need to adapt to variations on the original scene.

Earlier I stated that Leni's 1927 *The Cat and the Canary* is often considered the first "thriller-chiller-comedy," for it brought together the essential elements of this subgenre so well that any other thriller-chiller-comedy is bound to repeat its set pieces, atmosphere, plot points or characterizations. Thus the thriller-chiller-comedy is a genre built on a limited number of scenes: hands coming out from behind walls to grab unsuspecting characters; young women threatened by half-mad (or wholly mad) villains in costume who must be unmasked; houses with secret passageways, panels, or trapdoors into which characters will disappear; houses haunted, occasionally, by real ghosts but more often by impostors on the make; housekeepers of indeterminate ethnic or class identity who know more than they let on to the housefuls of guests dependent on her good graces. These scenes are themselves loaded with cultural residues of particular ideological weight: easily frightened heroines confirm over and over again that women can be driven mad more easily than men; criminals who take a short cut to wealth through imposture or theft disrupt the goals of old-money capitalism and are thus evil; to allow servants of indeterminate racial extraction into one's employ is to ask for trouble.

Any remake is limited in its choice of scenes, because it is trying to retell an already-told story. In the case of the thriller-chiller-comedy *genre*, however, any *film* is going to be limited *both* in the affective rhythms it can create, *and* in the scenes it can employ to develop those rhythms. And those scenes are already ideologically loaded in ways that greatly diminish their capacity to trigger the genre-appropriate affect, should society have changed enough to render certain affective scripts moot. Thus unlike a remade Western, for example, that could focus its energies on the inviolability of human freedom and turn *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* into *Thelma and Louise*, the very scenes and narrative situations that make the thriller-chiller-comedy recognizable also render it culturally out of date.

I have used Silvan Tomkins' theory of affects and his affect script theory to carve out a way of understanding how one strand of cognitive-affective psychology, which develops by means of scripts, can be conjoined to the negotiations between form and genre and historical context, which develop through situations or scenarios. I have done so in order to demonstrate how one genre, the thriller-chiller-comedy, evolved as a matter of affective development, and to make the suggestion that this may be true of all film genres, which exist as feeling shapes with loosely defined but generally repeatable affective rhythms.

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