



## The Chaos on Screen and Within

A Review of

*Carrie* (2013)

by Kimberly Peirce (Director)

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Reviewed by

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The best horror movies go well beyond providing chills and thrills or even subtly exploring real repressed fears and anxiety. Although typically marketed for a teenage or young adult audience who are mostly likely to enjoy the experience of being scared and shocked by often over-the-top violent fantasy, the genre has been used to convey strong messages regarding social and/or political events or the human condition. Whether intentionally or unconsciously embedded in the work, horror movies can be the vehicle for expression of views ranging from the politically correct to subversive. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Wanger & Siegel, 1956) is often considered the prototype of the politically oriented horror film; on the surface, an innocuous tale of terror, but the subtext was a severe criticism and warning regarding McCarthyism. At the same time, many feel that the 1978 remake (Solo & Kaufman, 1978) took the same issues in a notably different direction, reflecting the contemporaneous sociopolitical landscape, quite different from the milieu of the 1950s.

More recently, it has been irreverently written that there is “the notion that vampire movies are successful when Republicans are in office because conservatives are afraid of . . . sex and foreigners and zombies are popular when Democrats are in power . . . because liberals fear mindlessness and conformity” (Davis, 2011, para. 1; sec. 3; sec. 6), and a review of *The Purge* described “a bloody horror movie [having] as much to say about income inequality in 21st-century America as it does about triumphantly swinging an ax into the spine of an amoral, wealthy college kid who’s trying to kill your family” (Suebsaeng, 2013, para. 1).

Similar to the 1978 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Carrie* is a remake, presented as a “reimagining” of the earlier and iconic 1976 Brian De Palma movie (Monash & De Palma, 1976). As Holly Derr has written,

*Carrie* represents the fifth reboot of a successful horror franchise in the last 10 years. The teen-angst-turned-supernatural-revenge tragedy joins *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Halloween* (2007), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), and *Evil Dead* (2013) in recycling stories and characters first introduced in the late’70s and early ’80s. (Derr, 2013, para. 1)

Peirce's film is neither a shot-by-shot remake nor a totally different point of view and remains superficially oriented toward a teenage audience. The messages regarding adolescent bullying and the plight of those youths who are socially awkward or on the margins of the social scene remain strong—and obvious. Little or no effort or psychological sophistication is necessary to appreciate the elaboration of those themes throughout the film. In fact, the 2013 *Carrie* has received rather negative reviews as being fairly derivative and uninspiring in comparison with the more shocking earlier version. In that regard, I also agree with Derr:

Reboots adapt existing stories to frighten in new contexts . . . of contemporary significance . . . horror movies provide a window into our culture's deepest fears, drawing from a well of shared anxieties created by both domestic and geopolitical threats . . . [usually] focused on the vulnerability of the victims. . . . The reboots, on the other hand, put the killers themselves—and their violence—front and center. (Derr, 2013, para. 4).

Superficially, my personal impression was initially similar to those criticisms in that there did not seem to be particularly coherent deeper messages or themes in the contemporary *Carrie*. If anything, I perceived a somewhat disjointed feeling to the emotional context of the movie. Taken of itself, *Carrie* (2013) perhaps does not offer much to analyze or discuss beyond issues that are quite obviously portrayed.

However, when I reflect on the process that led to *Carrie* (2013), the movie becomes much more interesting. Being a remake, the film is different from a collaboration between a writer and a director, or even a director's impression of a writer's work. *Carrie* (2013) can be seen as a somewhat chaotic group-therapy type interaction between three very strong and powerful creative personalities. The book *Carrie* was written by Stephen King (1975), the master of the horror genre. The 1976 *Carrie* film was directed by Brian De Palma, who has never shied away from controversy. *Carrie* (2013) was reimagined by Peirce, who brings to the work the perspective of a proudly gay woman. Both directors have left their mark on the finished movie, with results that are intriguing, if perhaps not particularly well integrated.

Peirce has been quoted,

When I looked at the book I actually saw that it was a super hero origin story. I saw that she was a misfit and as a misfit, she didn't really have access to adjustment and social happiness. She was made fun of by the kids at school; she had a hard time at home, so life was not good. All of a sudden she discovers these super powers and it's like, "Holy shit, I've got these powers. Maybe life will be endurable for me." That was very much like Superman or Spiderman or any of the great superhero origin stories. (Jagernauth, 2014, para. 6)

However, as evidenced by his other work, De Palma's themes can be interpreted very differently. De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (Litto & De Palma, 1980) is a film fraught with sexual predation. The predators, however, are not "the other," but rather, the victims of violence. Their sexual freedom is their greatest sin, as "the other" is sexual insecurity. In one scene, a young prostitute, Liz (Nancy Allen), tries to seduce a psychiatrist, Dr. Elliot (Michael Caine), so that she may discover the name of the murderous patient he is surprisingly protecting. Although Liz's protector and the son of one of the victims, Peter (Keith Gordon),

is spying on this scene, Peter is not close enough to truly protect Liz. What ensues is a game of sexual politics that quickly creates an uneasy atmosphere for the viewers.

This dynamic is reminiscent of a theme portrayed in *Rosemary's Baby* (Castle & Polanski, 1968), a representation of the way in which social norms were changing, from women having a position secondary to men, to women being strong individuals, often kept from reaching full potential by men. The feminist influence on horror and the portrayal of normality for women as being independent individuals is also exemplified in DePalma's *Sisters* (Pressman & De Palma, 1973). Although the first half of the film suggests that the threatening other is the by-product of a "freak" (the disturbed separated sister of a former Siamese twin), the film reveals that the true other is once again a man, who represents past patriarchal society.

Turning to the author behind the *Carrie* story, Stephen King was born in 1947 in Portland, Maine, where he was abandoned by his family when he was very young. King has explained, "I don't think there's anything that I'm not afraid of, on some level. But if you mean, 'What are we afraid of, as humans?' Chaos. The outsider. We're afraid of change. We're afraid of disruption, and that is what I'm interested in" (Lehmann-Haupt & Rich, 2006, para. 15). Regarding *Carrie*, King has said,

If you go back over the books from *Carrie* on up, what you see is an observation of ordinary middle-class American life as it's lived at the time that particular book was written. In every life, you get to a point where you have to deal with something that's inexplicable to you, whether it's the doctor saying you have cancer or a prank phone call. So whether you talk about ghosts or vampires or Nazi war criminals living down the block, we're still talking about the same thing, which is an intrusion of the extraordinary into ordinary life and how we deal with it. What that shows about our character and our interactions with others and the society we live in interests me a lot more than monsters and vampires and ghouls and ghosts. (Lehmann-Haupt & Rich, 2006, para. 19).

Although these divergent personalities (and underlying psychodynamics) clash and clang within *Carrie* (2013), in my opinion, at its heart, the film goes back to King's terror of chaos. The social themes that are obviously portrayed bear consideration. I believe that particularly with regard to Carrie's supernatural powers of telekinesis, a rather simple interpretation of the film is that of an exploration of rage—rage at abusive or abandoning parents, the narcissistic rage of teenage angst, the rage of the bully, and the rage of the bully's victim. However, I perceive the issue of rage as almost a screen memory, the elaboration of an unconscious theme that actually serves to obscure and protect the self from an even more feared and terrifying conflict (Smith, 2000).

Both despite and because of *Carrie* (2013) being a complicated and chaotic interweaving of ideas introduced by a writer and two separate directors, each with different conscious and unconscious interpretations of the material, I believe that the deepest and most powerful theme that infuses the film goes back to King's fear of chaos itself. I believe that the film can be viewed as a reflection of powerfully repressed fear of psychosis. This comes to the surface in the portrayal of Carrie's mother as a religiously preoccupied, overtly psychotic woman, but from an interpretive point of view, all of the characters are struggling with containing essentially psychotic-like fears, images, impulses—and magical powers.

From a film critic's point of view, this latest *Carrie* may be perceived as a flawed and rather disjointed attempt to remake an iconic film. From a psychological point of view, this *Carrie* depicts the important issue of the terror of psychotic disintegration of personality that occurs even in "normal"—dare I say, "neurotic"—individuals; a terror that is often denied and repressed (even by implicit mutual consent) within clinical therapeutic evaluation and treatment milieus (Anxiety Care UK, n.d.; Birchwood, 2003; Davidsen & Rosenbaum, 2012).

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