



Through a Pumpkin's Eye

The Reflexive
Nature of
Horror

*This life's five windows of the soul
Distorts the Heavens from pole to pole,
And leads you to believe a lie
When you see with, not thro' the eye.*

—William Blake

Thoreau, meditating upon Walden Pond, once described his private lake as the surrounding landscape's most "expressive feature," a sort of giant "eye, looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature."¹ Today technological culture seems to have made such solitary retreats a rarity, though it has, after a fashion, continued to acknowledge their necessity by furnishing an alternate version of this reflective experience which we enjoy in the movie theater. Within that dark world the viewer privately encounters familiar images of reality with which he is encouraged to identify and relate, often even in a more moving or meaningful fashion than occurs outside the theater's confines. More importantly, though, the movies also bring him face to face with a kind of intelligence, alive even as Thoreau's woods were and similarly challenging him to a level of introspection. As Bruce Kawin has shown, movies all, in their own way, "imitate mindedness"; that is, they confront us with images which are "the result, and the indicator, of directed attention," of another, narrating intelligence directing its perceptions to us.² Of course, that intelligence is essentially our own, that narration emanating from our own involvement in those projected images we so raptly follow. One consequence of this singular encounter, though, is the generation of a new manner of seeing, one in which we see not simply *with*, but "thro' the eye," thereby glimpsing not only the world we inhabit but also our own place in that context. What the best films can offer us, then, is a type of "eye contact" which, like the experience of Thoreau's pond, might prod us into seeing beneath the surfaces, even into ourselves as we are mirrored in their shimmering image patterns.

This perspective seems a particularly appropriate one to take to the horror film, for it is a genre especially concerned with conjuring up for our consideration images whose existence we might previously have hardly suspected or perhaps sought to suppress from consciousness. Through its frightening scenes,

R.H.W. Dillard contends, the horror film functions in a decidedly "instructive" fashion, much like a medieval morality play, teaching us to accept "the natural order of things and . . . to cope with and even prevail over the evil of life."³ Sharing this basic understanding of the genre, Robin Wood suggests that horror films represent "our collective nightmares," and that their visual embodiment on the movie screen empowers us to cope with our subconscious fears "in more radical ways than our consciousness can countenance."⁴ Most critics agree, therefore, that the terrors confronting us in these films are neither gratuitous nor designed merely to effect a catharsis; they also drive home lessons regarding our resolution of those personal and cultural problems which we are often reluctant to face outside the theater.

The specific manner in which those lessons are thrust home, however, has largely been neglected because of our more immediate concern with those nightmares which the horror film brings to light. Clearly, the horror film—perhaps more than any other genre—is designed to evoke a specific response from its audience, whether it be a shiver of fear, a vague uneasiness, or a sense of relief at the dispelling of some great threat. The manner in which the viewer is drawn into the film narrative therefore becomes a key to properly understanding any example of the genre. And when viewed in this light, every horror film becomes something of a reflexive text, referring back not only to its own generic workings, but also to its audience which, through its visual participation in the events unfolded, contributes to their impact and affirms man's capacity to bear with such traumatic encounters.

That almost personal confrontation between the generic formula and the audience is at the heart of most horror films, but is especially evident in John Carpenter's first foray into the form, *Halloween*. Drawing heavily upon the conventions established by many classics of the genre, Carpenter has created what seems, despite its dark, threatening surface, to be one of the most limpid, pond-like of horror films, a tale whose most telling effects derive not so much from our forced encounter with its disturbing images or from our mindfulness of those half-forgotten, mythic fears associated with Halloween night, but precisely from the ways in which we are asked to see those often denied visions. The film requires that we look through the eye of a glaring pumpkin—the symbol of both our fears and deep urge to cloak them under a mythic form; but it thereby enables us to see those human depths which Thoreau similarly discovered in his more bucolic surroundings.

From its opening shot, a slow track-in to a hollow, gleaming jack-o'-lantern's eye, *Halloween* clearly announces that its primary concern will be with the way in which we see ourselves and others, and the consequences which often attend our usual manner of perception. That pumpkin, set in relief against a field of black, looms in the darkness like a glowing mask, inside of which burns a destructive fire, as the close-up view through its triangular eye then affirms. Gaston Bachelard's description of man's visual relationship to his surroundings, that "everything that makes us see, sees,"⁵ seems particularly appropriate here, for Carpenter uses that opening image to suggest an inanimate yet threatening world, one which is clearly staring back at us, making us all the more conscious of the quite different way in which we normally view the world we inhabit. From this initial confrontation of points of view, what follows is an investigation of the nature of our conventional manner of seeing and a stripping away of those masks behind which we so often tend to cloak the more disturbing visions which our world ever holds in store.

After this initial, disturbing "eye contact," *Halloween*, following the pattern of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, places its audience in a voyeuristic

position to begin that task of exploring and revealing their relationship to the events here depicted.⁶ While *Psycho* opens with the camera slowly tracking in through a window to intrude on two lovers in a seedy hotel room, *Halloween* goes a step further with its introductory tracking shot, lodging its audience's perspective firmly in the subjective, voyeuristic view of six-year-old Michael Myers, who watches from outside his house as his sister and her boyfriend "make out." As a result of this shift in perspective from a disembodied, narrative camera to an actual character's eye, though, we are forced into a deeper sense of participation in the ensuing action. The scene is Haddonfield, Illinois on Halloween night 1963 as we walk around the outside of this two-story house, seeing entirely through Michael's eyes as he peers into the windows of his home. With the advantage of his viewpoint, we see without being seen, titillated by the adolescent sexual encounter we witness. However, as is often the case with the voyeur, we then experience frustration, being prevented from viewing the consummation of this encounter when Judy and her boyfriend leave our field of vision and go to an upstairs bedroom. A further benefit of our identification immediately presents itself, though, for Michael can enter the house and thus overcome this initial physical barrier. Donning a mask previously worn by his sister's boyfriend, he goes upstairs to her room, though too late to view the rest of their lovemaking. In any case, Michael still faces two more imposing and significant barriers—the one psychological and the other phenomenological; and it is by their agency that Carpenter then drives home the consequences of this voyeuristic identification which, up to now, has seemed such a pleasant, if slightly mischievous activity.

On the one hand, this child with whom we have been forced to identify can hardly be expected to understand the complexities of adult sexuality, much less the fumbling uncertainties and experimentation of adolescents like his sister. Hence, whatever he does see must remain something of a harsh mystery to him, one in which one person pleurably assaults an apparently willing victim. A corollary consequence, and perhaps a better explanation for the violence which ensues, is the fact that through this voyeuristic perspective, Judy Myers has already been reduced to something far less than human, an object of visual interest and immature sexual titillation. These factors, seen in the context of a Halloween night when "evil" is already afoot, and through what we come to recognize as a deranged mind, result in a horrifying travesty of the sexual encounter which the child has only partially witnessed and completely misunderstood.⁷ As Michael approaches, his sister sits naked, staring at her reflection in a vanity mirror, this narcissistic fascination with her own image apparently preventing her from noticing her brother, who then slashes her repeatedly with a long, phallic knife. As the voyeur, the outsider who is cut off from a proper understanding of that which he has seen, finally confronts his opposite number, the insider or initiate into the mysteries of adulthood, tragedy follows.⁸

These opposite modes of seeing and the consequences which attend each are two of *Halloween's* central concerns, just as they are implicitly major concerns in many realistic horror films. Throughout the film we see that narcissistic vision in the form of those people who refuse to see or believe anything outside of that known world which they feel revolves totally about them; and this perspective is especially embodied in the teenagers Annie and Lynda, friends of the heroine Laurie. For them Halloween simply signals the start of a weekend of partying and provides an opportunity for them to sneak off from their parents and meet their boyfriends for a night of sex play, even though it means, in Annie's case, shunting off her responsibility for babysitting on Laurie. The voyeur's vision, that which sees man as little better

than an object of curiosity or pleasure, hardly able to lay claim to any human concern or sympathy, belongs preeminently to Michael, now grown into a veritable monster and escaped from the mental asylum at Smith's Grove where he has been incarcerated for the past fifteen years. It is a failure of vision on both sides, in fact, an ongoing human perceptual limitation, whose consequences *Halloween* then proceeds to lay bare for us.

Appropriately, eyes become a central focus of the film, starting from the blazing eye of the jack-o'-lantern and culminating in Laurie's attempt to put out the eye of the monster as he tries to kill her. That opening close-up of the pumpkin's flaming eye introduces the subjective murder sequence taken from Michael's point of view, thus thematically linking the two scenes and warning of the type of vision which we then see demonstrated—it is a burning, destructive view, seeing not fellow human beings but objects of curiosity, looking not into a mirror of common humanity but at a total enigma, and seeking not to participate in the mutual human drama but to parody and devastate its concerns. After Michael has killed his sister and been discovered by his parents, we are finally divorced from his perspective, yanked away to a reverse angle view of his staring, uncomprehending eyes, as the camera rapidly tracks back and up. The complete lack of comprehension which we note in his face—that which Dr. Loomis later describes as a “blind, pale, emotionless face”—suggests a mode of vision quite alien to us, as is emphasized by the sudden shift to an extreme long shot. With this shock of recognition comes almost a revulsion, accentuated by the camera's rapid acceleration away from the action, as if the viewers had just realized what they had been, if not party, at least an interested witness to. A sense of guilt, however slight, has been imparted and will linger throughout the film, even though Dr. Loomis seems to offer some measure of absolution. He makes repeated references to the boy's “evil” eyes, describing them as “the blackest eyes, the devil's eyes,” and stating his belief that what lurked “behind that boy's eyes was purely and simply evil.” Apparently we are to understand that vision involves a kind of morality, a right manner of seeing entailing right action, a wrong bringing chaos.

An indication of the sort of perspective which the grown Michael brings back to Haddonfield is seen in the fact that he goes about masked, as on that earlier *Halloween* in 1963. The almost luminous white mask which he wears through the rest of the film is neither grotesquely distorted nor natural, but more resembling the face of a dead man. It therefore not only functions to cloak his human features, but also effectively divorces him from the world of the living, his victims. Besides the mask stolen from the local hardware store, he at one point even dons a sheet to cover his entire body, over it wearing a pair of glasses taken from his latest victim, Lynda's boyfriend Bob. When he appears before Lynda in this garb, she is hardly disturbed; in fact, she laughs rather than screams, believing that Bob is simply playing a joke on her. Little suspecting that great disparity between appearances and reality which Carpenter has already primed his audience to expect, she describes the figure as “cute, real cute.” That image—the glasses atop a full white sheet—however, provides a grotesquely ironic commentary on the way in which people see in the film. For one thing, the monster *looks* comical, but it is that very disparity between seeming and being which is so disturbing. If, after all, such a frightening reality is able to masquerade as a harmless fiction, then how safe can we ever be; on what perceptions can we really rely? At the same time, those glasses suggest a corrective for vision, a proper way of seeing reality, although on closer inspection we notice that they cover no human eyes, only a facade of whiteness, a blankness impenetrable and incapable of responding to humanity. In the course of 15 years, that child's vacant stare

has become a malevolently blank vision—akin to the “white mask” of evil which Ahab saw in *Moby Dick*—so Laurie’s defense against this monster at the close of the film, attempting to poke out his eye, to blind him and thereby at least momentarily end his threat, seems only natural, not simply a gratuitous shock.

This emphasis on eyes and seeing is not an isolated image pattern in *Halloween*, however, for Carpenter has paired it with a distinctive manner of presenting and perceiving the events which transpire here. The opening track-in to the jack-o’-lantern’s eye again establishes a pattern to be followed by the ensuing introductory sequence, also a lengthy tracking shot in which the audience gradually approaches a victim and then visually participates in the unleashing of that destructive energy imaged forth in the blazing pumpkin eye. Having jolted his audience into such a disconcerting awareness about the way in which we see and the consequences which often attend a certain kind of irresponsible vision, Carpenter seldom repeats that subjective tracking shot, though every time the camera moves in a similar fashion, with that same slow, deliberate, exploratory motion, we are conditioned to expect the worst. In place of that subjective movement, he resorts to several almost equally disconcerting camera techniques designed to underscore the lesson contained in the opening murder scene. One such recurring device is a slow tracking back of the camera to suddenly discover another character whose presence we had not expected, most often to reveal Michael watching someone while remaining unseen. Such a technique forces us to acknowledge two complementary planes of action and assures that we remain aware of the limitations of any perspective which prevents us from seeing such a depth of field. Also, it functions as a visual warning, a correlative to Dr. Loomis’ injunctions to the police, affirming a need to remain on guard, ready for the unexpected to suddenly intrude into this seemingly peaceful little community.

An even more unsettling variation on that opening, voyeuristic tracking shot is frequently used when Michael, returned to Haddonfield to resume his murderous ways, stalks his victims. Instead of once again subjectively forcing us to identify with the murderer, Carpenter opts for an ambiguous camera placement, consistently locating it slightly behind or just to the side of his “boogiemán,” so that we view part of the killer in the frame, usually in the foreground, as a potential victim, unaware of any threat, occupies the background. Consequently, when the killer follows Laurie and her friends home from school in the doctor’s stolen car, we see what a passenger in the rear of the car might; instead of perceiving events as the murderer himself would, we look on as his *accomplices*, bearing our own special burden of guilt in these matters. A continuously effective ingredient of Carpenter’s horror formula, then, is this subtle build-up of a guilt anxiety in the audience, an anxiety which he eventually allows us to exchange only for an equally unsettling identification, that of a potential victim of these horrors.

That subjective tracking shot finally recurs as Laurie crosses from the safe enclave of the Doyle household where she is babysitting with Tommy to the Wallace house, where Lynda and Annie are and which is, as the audience already knows, a scene where she will encounter the most violent and unexpected of horrors. We cross the street with her, in the process leaping a boundary from a circumscribed adolescent world—one not far removed from childhood—where our horrors are all safely packaged and controlled through the television screen (Dr. Dementia’s six straight hours of horror movies), to a disturbing adult world where those nightmare horrors become reality itself, with ourselves as its possible victims. By so implicating his viewers in these terrors, therefore, by visually forcing them through a series of unsettling identifications, first as killer, then accomplice, and finally potential victim,

Carpenter emphasizes the common human responsibility for and involvement in those grisly aspects of life from which we usually like to think ourselves safely removed. Perhaps he hopes to demonstrate that, bearing our own burden of involvement in these actions, we are also the ones best placed to call a halt to the proceedings, provided, of course, that we choose to accept this very human responsibility.

This notion of responsibility, of a general complicity in the events which here unfold, is thus consistently linked with the modes of perception which these characters engage in. Dr. Loomis appears, at first, a decidedly ambiguous figure, for in his single-minded concern with having Michael locked away for the rest of his life, he seems almost maniacal himself. Obviously, his nurse has her doubts about his compulsiveness in this matter, despite Loomis' admonition that she "try to understand what we're dealing with here." As our surrogate, the voice of a calm and rational skepticism, the nurse has to receive "ocular proof" before she can understand the doctor's concern and his talk of the "evil" there. So to drive home the shocking nature of this threat, Carpenter places his audience in the car with the nurse as she waits outside the asylum where their subject is being held. Along with her, we are suddenly assaulted by what we are still thinking of as a boy, now a large, grown man, who first jumps to the car's roof, staying just out of our field of view, and then suddenly smashes his hand down on one of the windows to break into the car and violate our supposedly safe perspective. More than simply an introduction to the "grown" monster, this scene reasserts the sudden, disconcerting visual threats which abound in this world and transports us from its periphery—from our secure theater seats—to within that fragile human society at which these threats are directed. Thereafter, the doctor's watchfulness, his almost manic concern with standing guard on the old Myers house, comes to seem quite understandable to us, if not to the local police; in fact, it is clearly the only responsible action he could take in the circumstances.

On the whole, however, human nature as Carpenter here depicts it seems to be plagued, in some cases perhaps mercifully so, with a limitation on its visual capacities, a limitation which at least might serve to excuse the shortcomings of some characters. The very fact that almost the entire film occurs at night—on a Halloween in 1963 and another 15 years later—naturally evokes a sense of mystery, of the unknown lurking just beyond the reach of artificial illumination, and also beyond that "light" of reason which we normally use to render the mysterious harmless. The darkness into which we are thrust, therefore, not only offers an obstacle to seeing things clearly, but it also spurs us to question whether what we do perceive is real or only a phantasm, conjured up jointly from the imagination and the collective myths surrounding Halloween.

Naturally, if we cannot be certain about our own perceptions, then we shall most probably be skeptical toward what others report seeing, hence the numerous cases of disbelief in which one character's sightings or beliefs are given no credence at all, simply because they are his views alone. If Loomis' nurse is skeptical of his views on Michael, even a bit cynical about his motives, the Haddonfield police are even more so, far less ready to accept his contention that the town's quiet family dwellings full of women and children are simply "lined up for the slaughter." Laurie offers a more pointed example, though. She believes that she is being followed, for out of the corner of her eye she repeatedly sees a mysterious stranger, trailing her in a car, hiding beside a hedge, or staring into her room from a neighbor's yard. Her friends, however, convince her that she is simply fantasizing, projecting into the real world her image of the dream boyfriend she has been too shy to pursue. Even

the local sheriff who accidentally startles her dismisses Laurie's jumpiness as due quite naturally to Halloween, a time when "everyone's entitled to one good scare." Since her impressions do not coincide with the reality perceived by the majority, then, she convinces herself that she has simply been working too hard at her studies and is seeing things which are not really there. Besides, she assures herself, such fears of ghosts and monsters are "kid stuff," and she "outgrew superstition" long ago. Later, Laurie applies this same approach to Tommy Doyle as she babysits with him, in this case using her age and "experience" to explain away his fears of the "boogieman" with which his classmates have taunted him. Several times he reports seeing this creature he has been warned about, only to be assured by his sitter that there is no such thing. Of course, events finally prove the truth of his own and Laurie's original estimations, but by then we have already seen just how limited and unreliable that commomplace vision of reality ultimately is.

This sense that there exists a great disparity, particularly between what we actually see and what is potentially visible to us, pervades *Halloween*. What Carpenter seems intent on demonstrating is how consistently our perceptions and our understandings of the world around us fall short of their potential, most often because we are conditioned by our experience and culture to see less and less, to dismiss from our image contents those visions for which we might not be able to account, or those which might simply distract from our more important personal concerns. It is only natural, then, that the children in *Halloween*—Lindsey and Tommy especially—see more than do their adolescent babysitters, who in turn have a slightly more encompassing view than do their adult counterparts. If children seem to be scared more easily by the mysteries of the night, it may be because they have good reason, being more alert to the very real dangers which ever lie waiting "out there," and which they alone perceive. From the film's beginning, though, the audience has been initiated into this wider view, as we confront a discrepancy between our own understanding of that adolescent sexual encounter and six year-old Michael's view of it. In keeping with that disconcerting opening, our perspective thereafter is frequently manipulated so as to reveal an ongoing discrepancy between our view and that of a particular character. Privileged with the information that the killer is driving a stolen stationwagon bearing the insignia of the state mental institution, we repeatedly identify that vehicle—and thus the killer's threatening, but unseen, presence—in the background or extreme foreground of numerous shots. For example, when Annie picks up Laurie to go babysitting, we recognize that the car which pulls out behind them is the one occupied by the fugitive, stopping when they stop and maintaining a discrete but threatening watch over their actions. And when Loomis makes his report to the local police, who are investigating the hardware store burglary, this discrepancy between audience and character perceptions takes on a particularly ironic note. In medium shot, we see the doctor looking worried, straining for some glimpse of his stolen car and its insane occupant; he turns to the right as the car, which we immediately identify, enters the frame from the left rear, and as he turns back, it passes behind him to the opposite side of the frame, by chance eluding his persistent gaze, and at the same time, mocking the police in their search for the burglar—the very occupant of that car. This broader view with which we are gifted reinforces our sense of anxiety by imparting a feeling of inevitability to all that we witness; it is as if a force which we see but which remains beyond the comprehension of these characters is bearing down on them, a force as inexorable as that "fate" which Laurie learns about in class that very day.

Having established the threatening aspect of the background and

periphery of his compositions, Carpenter uses that disparity between his characters' restricted viewpoints and his audience's inevitably more encompassing field of view to sustain the general atmosphere of tension and expectation. In the case of Laurie's friend Annie who is babysitting Lindsey Wallace, he shows the murderer threatening to attack three times, as Annie remains totally oblivious to the terror lurking nearby. While she is in the kitchen fixing popcorn for Lindsey—ironically, "Jollytime" popcorn—the killer appears looking through the glass door in the rear. Carpenter then teases us into expecting an immediate confrontation between victim and killer when Annie spills butter on her clothes and exits through that same rear door in search of the washing machine to clean the stains out. Instead of a sudden climax, though, Annie reaches the laundry room and accidentally locks herself in. Again the killer hovers in the background, apparently ready to strike, as he peers in first through the glass panel of the door and then through a rear window; and in her bumbling way, Annie seems intent on making it easy for him, for she tries to use that window as an exit from the washroom. What makes the tension all the more excruciating is that Carpenter forces us to laugh at her situation, despite our anxiety and expectations, by having Annie get stuck in the window while remaining unconscious of that impending threat. That humor is apparently designed to have a slightly disarming effect, for when Annie emerges unscathed from this predicament, safely returns to the house, and closes the kitchen door, there is a sense that she may have managed to avoid what had previously seemed like certain disaster, that perhaps a providence is watching over those who completely fail to see the nature of the world in which they live. No sooner do we breathe easier, though, than that deathly white face looms out of the darkness once more, promising to finally fulfill our worst fears when Annie goes out again, this time to pick up her boyfriend, after she sends Lindsey across the street to the Doyle house. When she finally gets into her car—visually recalling for us the earlier attack on Dr. Loomis' nurse—Annie notices something wrong, frost on the inside rather than the outside of the window, but by then it is too late. Carpenter then concludes the scene with a close-up of her dead, staring eyes, open as before, but no longer able to perceive that world around her. It is a fitting image: vision taken from one who had used it so heedlessly, life violently snatched away from a person who could not see clearly enough to sustain it.

The challenge ultimately facing Laurie, then, is to overcome this visual limitation, to see beyond her immediate concerns and thereby save her life. She is introduced as being brighter, more imaginative than her friends, and probably more responsible, for her father has entrusted her with dropping off the key to the Myers house, now a rental property which his company, Strode Realty, is handling. Laurie also has her limitations, though, as she demonstrates in discounting Tommy's fears of ghosts and goblins, and later dismissing his claim to having seen the boogiemer from his living room window. When he asks her to look at this apparition, she responds like a skeptical adult, looking too late and expecting to see nothing anyway. Halloween, she assures him, is nothing more than a time "when people play tricks on each other," and when our eyes, in turn, apparently deceive us as well. As this particular Halloween night progresses, however, Laurie undergoes a visual awakening. This initiation begins with her repeated sightings of that mysterious figure, which she finds both threatening and alluring, lurking around her neighborhood. Later, along with Tommy and Lindsey, she watches two of Dr. Dementia's horror films on television, *The Thing* and *Forbidden Planet*, two movies which sound the same basic warning, that "there are more things in heaven and earth. . . than are dreamt of" in our

philosophies. And finally, moved by curiosity and a real concern for her friends who do not answer her phone call, Laurie leaves the safe confines of the Doyle house to go to the Wallace residence and try to find out just what is going on there. What she finds, of course, is an education in that constant disparity between what appears to be and what actually is, between our commonplace expectations and those complexities of reality which we too often overlook.

Laurie expects to find her friends waiting in that dark house to surprise her, ready to jump out from their hiding places and have a laugh at her anxieties; in short, she thinks—or hopes—that a harmless joke lies behind the spooky appearance of the Wallace house. Thus when she enters, Laurie calls out into the darkness that “the joke’s over,” but her words immediately take on an ironic flavor when her friends literally begin to “pop out” from their hiding places—dead. After Bob’s body falls from a closet and she discovers the corpses of Annie and Lynda, Laurie is faced with a corroboration of those “childish” fears she has previously repudiated with Tommy. These new and disconcerting discoveries force her to see more than she had ever anticipated, obviously more horrors than she thought could be harbored in her calm, mid-western community; and they soon loom all the more ominously as the killer turns his attention to her, for they become a mirror of her own potential fate. To underscore this sudden, radical transformation of her perception of reality, then, Carpenter once more returns to the subjective shot as the murderer makes his first attempt on Laurie’s life. Again evoking Hitchcock, this time *Vertigo*, Carpenter has Laurie escape from her assailant by accidentally plunging head-first down a flight of stairs. The dizzying subjective shot which results suggests both her near-fatal immersion in this horrific scene and the drastic upset of her understanding which this sudden shock has precipitated. Like Alice falling through the looking glass, Laurie’s vision of reality has been radically transformed and, given her survival, she will clearly never be able to view her world in quite the same way again.

Simply knowing that horrors do, in fact, exist “out there” is insufficient, however; the full consequences of this knowledge also have to be thrust home. Laurie barely gets back to Tommy’s house ahead of the killer and locks the door behind her. She then breathes a momentary sigh of relief, as if she might have effectively drawn back into another world, one which is proof against such terrors. As in Annie’s case, Carpenter employs a series of three incidents to demonstrate that, once given this special vision, having been initiated into this frightening knowledge, one can never again find such easy security. Throughout these final scenes he returns to those in-depth compositions to confront us with two planes of action simultaneously, thereby forcing us to wonder all the while when their separate actions will collide and to what effect. Within the Doyle house, Laurie cringes on the sofa in the foreground, knowing that the killer is somewhere about, but not noticing him as he rises up from the background to attack her. Despite being taken by surprise, she successfully defends herself, stabbing him with her knitting needle and apparently ending the threat. As she again turns away from the killer to see about Tommy and Lindsey whom she had hidden upstairs, he once more rises in the background to resume his stalking, making his appearance just as Laurie assures the children that the danger is over. Pursued into a second-floor bedroom, Laurie hides in a closet and when discovered jabs a makeshift lance into the monster’s eye and then stabs him with his own knife. Once more she turns her back on this finally vanquished horror and sends the kids off for assistance as she sinks down on the floor, exhausted from her ordeal. As she gathers her strength and rises, though, we see in the background just beyond her shoulder the thing rising as well to renew its attack. This time Dr.

Loomis, whose vigilance has finally paid off, intervenes to kill Laurie's attacker, emptying his gun into the killer and forcing him to fall from the second story window. At this point they both turn away from the presumably dead killer, and even the audience is made to breathe a bit easier since Carpenter here abandons the dual planes of action, that visual formula he has hammered into our consciousness to represent the incessant nature of this threat, in favor of close-ups of the two principals, both shaken but alive. That feeling of security is short-lived, however, for we then cut to a high-angle shot, as Loomis looks down from the window to the yard where the murder's body had been lying. For a final time we see the consequence of that momentary relaxation of our vigilance: it has risen and vanished into the darkness, probably to kill again. We are left then with the sound of the killer's labored breathing and a dark screen, a threat still about, even if we cannot see it.

The warning which *Halloween* so simply yet effectively posts, then, is preeminently a visual one, calling us to a new level of alertness. By the film's end, we are almost afraid *not* to see, for to avert our eyes even momentarily, it has been drummed home, might allow this terror which has several times seemed vanquished the chance it needs to reassert itself, to once again threaten what has now been revealed as a precariously stable world at best. As in *The Thing* to which *Halloween* offers homage, we have been stridently warned to "keep watching" if we value our human environment.

As R.H.W. Dillard has further noted, those frightening images of the horror film serve a truly vital purpose, since "evil must be known to be combated."⁹ This premise holds true whether we identify that evil with a monster or catastrophe of some sort, or if it springs from within ourselves. *Halloween*, I believe, successfully reaches for a disturbing combination of these possibilities which it then seeks to make "known" to us. No satisfying explanation for Michael's actions are ever forthcoming; he is simply a monstrous "given"—"the evil," the boogiemán—placed down in the world of this film. He is simultaneously ourselves and a monster, terrifying in his total other-ness. Through his presence, though, Carpenter is able to rivet our attention on the manner in which we perceive and react to the conditions of the world we daily inhabit. He places us in a setting where dangerous lunatics are allowed to roam free in a storm and their keepers can plead, "I'm not responsible," where the sheriff is too busy to notice that his own daughter is smoking pot, and where neighbors turn off their lights and hide behind locked doors when a teenage girl comes screaming for help. It is not simply a world in which the adults are largely absent; more significantly, it is one in which that sense of human responsibility and complicity which we conventionally associate with adulthood is conspicuously missing. Here people either neglect to look about them or purposely avert their eyes for fear that they will be called upon—perhaps by some residual sense of fellow feeling—to act. *Halloween* conjures up a frightening vision of a culture largely deprived of this human concern; as a consequence its people are easily transformed into objects of voyeuristic attention, sexual pleasure, and finally homicidal mania. So how, Carpenter puts the question, should we respond to such a situation?

The challenge facing his characters is essentially the same one he poses for us: we must open our eyes more fully to our human surroundings, seeing more responsibly and staying aware of our role in the world in which we dwell. Following the example of Michael's startled parents at the opening of *Halloween*, we are called upon to rip off the masks which too often cloak our human nature and look into those complexities which lurk beneath. Only through this deeper, more encompassing perspective, through a constant

human vigilance such as that thrust home to Laurie, he suggests, can we continue to exorcize that boogiemán which we often, in uneasy defense, joke about, but which, individually, in our most irresponsible moments, we can evoke to threaten our world. It is into these depths of our nature and our culture which *Halloween*, after the fashion of its best predecessors in the genre, challenges us to steadily if fearfully gaze.

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NOTES

- 1 *Walden* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1948), p. 156.
- 2 *Mindscreen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 13. This intelligence, Kawin asserts, is the basic "principle of narrative coherence" in the film, in its most abstract form, evidence of the tale telling or revealing itself (p. 55). In a form which relies so heavily on audience manipulation, as the horror film does, this principle, I would suggest, is all the more clearly operative.
- 3 "The Pageantry of Death," in *Focus on the Horror Film*, eds. Roy Huss and T.J. Ross (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 37.
- 4 "Return of the Repressed," *Film Comment*, 14 (July-August 1978), 26.
- 5 *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, trans. Colette Gaudin (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p. 78.
- 6 Much of the structure of *Halloween* seems openly indebted to Hitchcock and *Psycho* in particular. Like *Psycho*, for instance, *Halloween* begins with printed titles which identify the specific place and time of the ensuing action; it consistently identifies its antagonist as a dangerous voyeur; and the male lead who saves the female from the killer is named Sam Loomis in both cases.
- 7 A possible model for this situation, indeed, a very close parallel, can be found in Michael Winner's film about children's misinterpretations of the adult world, *The Nightcomers*.
- 8 As D.L. White suggests in his essay, "The Poetics of Horror: More than Meets the Eye," in *Film Genre: Theory and Criticism*, ed. Barry K. Grant (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1977), p. 136, what Carpenter deals with here is probably "the most pervasive" fear found in the horror genre, "that of being cut off from others."
- 9 "The Pageantry of Death," p. 40. Dillard further notes that this "knowing" is no guarantee against the recurrence of evil, but it does give man the ability to cope "with events beyond human control."