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James Wan: Insidious vs. The Conjuring

One may imagine the home of James Wan, the “Master of Horror” or otherwise known as “creepypuppet” on twitter, to be covered with twisted vines and complete with dark, eerie rooms filled with his collection of possessed dolls as seen in his films. According to Wan, the personal life he lives is the complete opposite of the situations portrayed in his numerous box office victors. Wan started out in Australia, he and his writing partner Leigh Wannell made their first big impression in the United States with the indie debut of *Saw*, which was taken over by a franchise that eventually fell through. His reputation as the “saw guy” stuck with him for years, even though he had nothing to do with the directing of any of the films in the series besides the first one. Wan never meant for saw to turn out the way it did, the first movie was meant to be more psychological yet people remember it for the franchise as a whole. Wan went on to produce other films with efforts to break free of the “king of gore” reputation.

He made a slight comeback with his studio production of *Dead Silence* in 2007. He introduced one of his many signatures and established the fear of ventriloquist dolls through this film, even with its controversial ratings. Yet since then, he has turned away from studios and gone back to producing independently, due to his claim that “Their idea of scary doesn't mesh with mine.” (Smith & Wan, personal communication, March 31, 2011). Although majority of Wans work shares a similar theme, he wanted to exhibit his diverse talent. Through his independent release of Insidious in 2010 as well as The Conjuring in 2013 he was finally able to prove to viewers and himself that his creativity goes far beyond blood and guts or tacky studio horrors.

Set in the modern twentieth century, *Insidious* begins by introducing us to Josh an Renee Lambert. They have just moved into their dream home after the recent birth of their daughter Cali, in addition to their two young sons, Dalton and Foster. The film opens with an aerial shot which sweeps across the bedroom of the sleeping boys, establishing the scene. The shadowy room is lit by a nightlight which creating an early atmosphere of terror and fear for viewers. The camera then goes on to explore Wans choice of a vintage home complete with “an imposing grandfather clock, dark woodwork, and overstuffed paisley couches.” (Wessels, 2015). Wan doesn’t fail to include an introduction to the mysterious silhouette of a woman lurking in the shadows as well as the reflection of a demonic creature in the mirror. Wan has claimed that horror lies within the sound rather than the image, his use of intense violin instrumentals begins the film with a building tension.

The family has only begun with the process of settling into their brand new home. Josh works as a teacher while Renee stays at home as a mother trying juggle her carrier in music therapy and compose music while keeping the baby monitor close by. Technology is an underlying film that is present throughout the entire film, and serves as an attunement between Renee and the hauntings to come. Dalton falls from a ladder after exploring the attic which leads him into a mysterious coma as well as an ensuing possession. The camera then leads us to a box of Renee’s compositions which mysteriously appear in the attic. The sheets of music, “indicating Renee's connection to audio recording technology, materializes at the site of trauma to reveal Renee's sensitivity to the supernatural.” (Wessel, 2015). After Dalton is arrives home from the hospital, things begin to take a turn for the worst around the house. Renee is the first to be overwhelmed with an uncomfortable feeling dread, and she begins to hear voices over the baby monitor. A bloody handprint appears on Daltons bed, Foster claims to see Dalton up and about sleepwalking through the night. Multiple ghostly figures begin to appear around the house whom eventually attack Renee, causing the Lamberts to abandon their new home.

But the hauntings follow them everywhere they go, the evil force enters the new home with vicious anger rather than anxiety. After Josh’s mother comes forward with her dreams about the figure that continues to appear claiming its desire for Dalton, a red-faced demon appears and despoils Daltons room leaving him faced down in his coma on the floor. The family then seeks out the help of a team of paranormal investigators, as well as a local medium named Elise. After examining the house, Elise explains to the Lamberts that Dalton is not actually in a coma. He is stuck inside of another realm which she calls “The Further”, and that he was born with the ability to mentally explore other astral planes. Daltons body is at risk of becoming possessed, after discovering Dalton inherited his abilities, Josh is sent into “The Further” and eventually brings him back.

James Wan takes another approach at the haunted house story through his release of *The Conjuring*, considered as a global box office phenomenon, was said to have been successful in presenting “a blueprint for managing dread that succeeds where *Insidious* failed.” (Wessel, 2015). With the production of this film, James Wan was able to take on a horror film with a reality based background for the first time. The film is “a haunted farmhouse tale said to be "based on the true story" of ghost hunters Ed and Lorraine Warren.”(Alexander, 2013). Lorraine Warren remains a paranormal investigator to this day, claiming that out of the 4,000 cases she and her husband have investigated, “nothing in their creepy careers scared the stuffing out of them quite like what they encountered in 1971 at an old farmhouse in Rhode Island.” ( Nashawaty, 2013).

The film begins with the introduction of the Warrens, “Lorraine as a “gifted clairvoyant,” and Ed as a demonologist tied to the Catholic Church.”(Wessel, 2015). The couple collaborates with their abilities to solve the unknown and assist those who inhabit haunted homes. Soon after we are introduced to Roger and Carolyn Perron, who have recently moved into an old isolated farm house with their five daughters. The families dog dies almost immediately after moving in leaving the family devastated. The daughters report other strange occurrences such as pictures falling from the walls, temperature changes, and strange orders. The entity is most active at night, rotting food, and leaving unexplained bruises on Carolyn. Eventually the entire family becomes disturbed and unable to sleep, they desperately contact the Warrens searching for answers.

With their different abilities Ed and Lorraine sense different things when arriving at the farm. Ed hypothesizes the events that have led to this haunting through his knowledge of Catholicism and exorcisms, while Lorraine is instantly overwhelmed with a sense of pain, “Something awful happened here,” she muses in a shaky voice, clutching a rosary.” (Wessel, 2015). After a combination searching through case files and old photographs, as well as the help of Lorraine’s terrifying flash backs to the evil that occurred years before, the Warrens discover that two children were murdered at the house. Lorraine discusses with Carolyn what to expect and what they need to prepare for. Lorrain explains that “The monster is apparently now “latched and feeding” off of everyone's fear, and subsequently drawing from this energy to threaten the children.”(Wessel, 2015). Wan gives off the perfect combination of accelerating moments of fear and breathers stuffed with information that still leaves viewers on the edge of their seats. Technology is significant throughout the film; the Warrens use of video and radio evidence to capture the recordings of the supernatural. The evil spirit living in the home teams up with the possessed Annabelle doll from the Warren’s previous case, and attacks one of the Perrons daughters. Dolls are one of James Wan’s specialties and he leaves the audience in fear after the scenes involving the Annabelle doll. The spirit eventually possesses Carolyn, leading to the terrifying events that occur through her exorcism which still haunt Lorraine Warren today. Through *The Conjuring*, Wan combines the ideals of a classic haunted house film, human possession as seen in *The Exorcism*, and the fear of possessed dolls as seen in his previous production of *Dead Silence* to create his highest rated film so far.

Both *The Conjuring* and *Insidious* share a similar plotline; a family moving in the the home of their dreams only to experience the horrors of a lifetime. Yet the films leave the audience satisfied by telling two completely different stories. Each film features a medium, both Lorraine and Elise have unique abilities and serve as a major role in each stories outcome. Emanuel Wessel claimed in his work that “In both Insidious and The Conjuring, unseen, malevolent forces become readable, intelligible, and solvable through the female medium's psychic labor.” Both films were created after the economic crash 2008. With the fall of the housing market, the rise of films based around home crises began to rise. The homes in each film are similar although set in different time periods, “dark woodwork, a dusty piano, and antique furniture fill cavernous rooms—unusual and disturbing events disturb the domestic operations.” (Wessels, 2015). Each family is disturbed by a supernatural entity, specifically sensed by the mother and the children. This leads to the distress on all of the family members that they eventually can not handle on their own. In *The Conjuring*, Roger stops reporting for work with the rise of the paranormal activity, and Renee’s currier as a music producer and a mother is strained in *Insidious*. Each has an underlying them of technology, both digital and mental. The digital technology in both homes seems to constantly fail, the baby monitor is taken over by the spirits in *Insidious* and the paranormal equipment brought into the homes does not do enough justice in either film. It is the “fantasy of the female medium as a superior piece of technology” (Wessels, 2015), Lorraine and Elise who eventually saves both families from their misery. In contrast, the spirits actions featured in *The Conjuring*  involve pollution and affronts to the body and senses as opposed to the consumptive and sexualized excesses in *Insidious*. *Insidious* is based around the passing down of spiritual abilities and the dangers it may lead to while *The Conjuring* features a home itself that is haunted with angry spirits due to a devastation that occurred there in the past.

Each film although different, established the diversity of talent James Wan is capable of. He uses silence to build tension as well as quick edits and high production effects to give the film a crisp style and leave the audience in shock. Both films “succeeded in producing protracted feelings of dread and anticipation, where the entire theatre was holding its breath, waiting for something awful to happen” (Wessels, 2015). With the growing success of James Wan, his signature prolonged single camera tracking shots, dark colored energy, and use of terrifying looking demons and disturbing antiques dolls, succeeded in changing is reputation from the “King of Gore” to the “King of Horror”.

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