



# REMEMBERING WES CRAVEN: A MASTER OF HORROR

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The birth of Wes Craven on August 2, 1939, ushered in a considerable new influence on the history of horror cinema. His legacy still pervades productions like *Scream* (MTV, VH1, 2015-2019) and *Fear Street Trilogy* (Netflix, 2021). This article will review of some of the themes that are key to understanding Craven's horror filmography.

Two of the main elements that impregnate Craven's works are religious repression and fear. Craven grew up in a devout single-parent family. The family's Baptist faith meant that salvation was predicated on continuous vigilance against the influence of Satan (Wooley 2011, 17). Apart from this strict education, he cites two traumatic events as influences on his filmography. These are his father's death when Craven was 5 years old, and the memory of looking through the window at a man staring at him from the street (Craven 2011; filmSCHOOLarchive 2020). Consequently, the feeling of insecurity is a recurrent theme in all his movies. Insecurity in Craven's films may take the form of mutants (*The Hills Have Eyes*, 1977), a demon-like sleep killer (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984) or sadist psychopathic neighbors obsessed with security (*The People Under the Stairs*, 1991).

Indeed, his debut, *The Last House on the Left* (1972) reflected both themes. Fear and death are explored through a group rape and murder of two teenage girls by a gang of offenders who escape from prison. Craven's adaptation of *Jungfrukällan* (Ingmar Bergman, 1960) transformed a medieval religious drama into a violent critique of America's turbulent 1960s and 1970s due to the Vietnam war and the social confrontations between the countercultural and the conservative America (Lowenstein 2005, 143). In Wes Craven's work, Mari Collingwood (Sandra Peabody) and Phyllis Stone (Lucy Grantham) represent the naïve hippy American, in favor of the Civil Rights Movement and feminism, and against the violent war in Vietnam. Indeed, trauma before violence is highlighted when the sweet young girls are killed



and raped by the antagonists (Krug Stillo -David Hess-, Sadie -Jeramie Rain-, Fred "Weasel" Podowski -Fred J. Lincoln- and Junior -Marc Sheffler). From a film perspective, Craven decided to change his distant description to a subjective and horrible depiction of brutal torture and killings (Wood 1986, 127).

Another theme that Craven explored in his films is hypocrisy (Muir 2004, 56). While *A Nightmare on Elm Street* attributes Freddy Krueger's killings to the revenge after his death due to having been murdered by his victims' parents, *Scream* (1996) and *Scream 4* (2011) present serial killers as a product of the celebrity culture linked to successful popularity. Both films question the idea of popularity as inherently good, instead addressing the negative consequences of this culture.

Finally, not only was Wes Craven able to address social issues from a critical perspective, but he would also invigorate the genre, adapting his works to new audiences and demand. Indeed, *Scream* updated the old-fashioned slasher and created a new postmodernist gory horror tale that connected with a new generation.

Wes Craven was a master of horror and it will be impossible to forget him. He was able to use horror critically and stamp his mark on all his works. Likewise, he demonstrated that the link between social criticism and horror can work perfectly, and it is necessary to face horror and fight against inhuman acts. Surely, his films will leave no one indifferent.

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