Wes Craven's Scream 4: How badly did we need another one?

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Wes Craven, screenplay by Kevin Williamson

Wes Craven is one of the horror genre's best-known and most innovative directors. His career has spanned some 40 years, beginning with his 1970s' cult hits *The Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes*. His popular reputation was established with *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and the rest of that series in the 1980s, and enjoyed another surge in the 1990s with the *Scream* trilogy, a cycle in which a frightening phone call and the character Ghostface became iconic.

Assessing Craven's work is complicated because it is located in the margins of a generally retrograde genre. The slasher-serial killer movies of the past several decades have been more often than not either repugnant or tedious, or both. As a form, the "art" of dicing and stabbing has perhaps more in common with pornography than genuinely artistic moviemaking. Storylines and character development tend to be mere scaffolding, with the inevitably repetitive acts lending to the genre an almost inbred and incestuous quality.

Craven, however, has demonstrated flair and imagination—and a sardonic touch—in his work, which is considerably more substantial—and watchable—than average "splatter" films.

As the longevity of his career attests, for better or worse, Craven is not a flash in the pan. His movies, with occasionally bold and audacious images, are sympathetic to their characters in a genre that usually demonstrates its disorientation or commercial opportunism (or simple laziness) in the face of a changing world by resorting to misanthropy and boundless violence. Craven's feeling for his fictional creations offers an aesthetic distinct from the ugliness and crudity ingrained in much of current horror cinema. Unlike some of his colleagues, Craven is not an ignoramus or an intellectual arsonist.

Coming more than a decade after the previous installment, *Scream 4*, unfortunately, reveals that the director is stagnating in his particular niche.

The work is not without its amusements. Sprinkled with clever jokes about social networking and blogging ("Ghostface is not an app"), the movie is something of a self-critical enterprise—within its own limited orbit.

The newest *Scream* features a character with a camera affixed to his head for 24/7 recording and a teenage duo that sponsor a 'Stab-a-thon' film festival. Skewering the slasher genre ("*Saw* has no character development"), *Scream 4* begins with a farcical movie-within-a-movie-within-a-movie segment, lampooning the industry's 'sequel-itis.' It then settles, however, into the rather routine format.

The *Scream* characters are updated: Sydney (Neve Campbell) comes home to the town of Woodsboro, the scene of all the crimes, on the last stop of a tour promoting a book on self-help for victims—not only those of Ghostface. The franchise also returns Dewey (David Arquette) and Gale (Courteney Cox), now married. While the former has moved on from bumbling detective to sheriff, his wife is frustrated by her uninspired efforts to make the transition from reporter to fiction writer. Murder mayhem provides Gale with an opportunity to get her creative and investigative juices flowing again.

A new crop of young people—Emma Roberts, Hayden Panettiere and Rory Culkin—step into the roles of victims and perpetrators. After an auspicious start, the goings-on in *Scream 4* become relatively tired and predictable.

Had Craven followed the logic of his own satirical attack on remakes, retreads and reboots, *Scream 4* would not have made it to the theaters, at least not in its present form. If there is anything to the film, it is its implication that the larger media entertainment world is self-involved, self-contained and cut off from life. Craven has not, however, sufficiently distanced his film from that problem.

In this sense, Craven's 2010 movie *My Soul To Take* is somewhat more of a departure. With a gritty, well-constructed look, the movie centers on a group of teenagers in a small town cursed by the reincarnation of a serial killer. That film proves more intriguing because the characters are somewhat developed and connected to their locale and social situation. Max Thieriot as Bug

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is particularly effective as the rather somber lead figure.

Like so much of America, the town in *My Soul to Take* has a claustrophobic environment that conveys a sense of ever dwindling social and moral prospects. Although the place is beset by a serial killer, other, more earthly (and more compelling) problems loom too. The neophyte actors are refreshing and there is feeling and thought in their characterizations. The film's best attributes, however, are at odds with its fatalistic, mystical bent. Also unfortunate is the fact that it remains essentially a slasher movie.

In a recent interview, Craven offered an explanation, or justification, for the proliferation of stab films. He stated that "I think in some ways the entertainment follows the reality. Those two films [*Saw* and *Hostel*] about torture came out in the middle of revelations about the extent of torture that was being done by our country, at least our leaders, in trying to cope with 9/11. It was horrific, and there were some very devastating images that come from the [Iraqi] prison; people standing with hoods over their head and electrodes coming out of their fingers. My God, that couldn't have come out of a horror movie any more than possible. Those are startling images, and I think it deeply affected the subconscious of a lot of filmmakers, so it really didn't not surprise me that torture became the subject of consideration." (bryanreesman.com)

Unfortunately, "consideration" hardly comes into play in such films. Unhappily, there is far less consideration and much more prostration, or exploitation. Slashers are not a form of criticism, by and large, but another way of adapting to and going with the flow. In that sense, they are part of the regressive social landscape and have the added byproduct of helping inure young people in particular to brutality.

Craven made a revealing comment to Bill Krohn in an interview published in *Cahiers du Cinema* (April 2011): "I heard [documentarian D.A.] Leacock or [Richard] Pennebaker say, 'If someone is being murdered on the sidewalk in front of me, I'm not going to put down the camera and help them. I'm just going to keep on shooting.' That means you don't look away. You don't cut. With so much of the violence in American film, the camera either pans up or cuts. The deal you have with yourself and the world is that you're the one who doesn't look away."

In the first place, the slasher film is not a documentary, it is a fictional creation. Furthermore, Craven is not apparently concerned with tracing violence to its roots in social structures. He appears to refer to an abstract violence he sees as springing from people's vilest thoughts and behavior. On this basis, there is not much hope of making sense of the phenomenon. This is rendered doubly difficult by a lack of critical detachment and mediation on the part of the artist. The method is far too reactive, unthinking, and amounts to an artistic passing of the buck. Murkily or not, Craven is talking about not "looking away" from the evil in humankind.

If there is one chronic artistic flaw in Craven's body of work, and this is bound up with cloudy ideas about the world, it is that his dramatic premises, daring as they may sometimes be, are insufficiently worked through and therefore susceptible to hijacking by stronger, unsavory tendencies or simply left high and dry, unsatisfactorily resolved.

The late Robin Wood, British-born film critic and commentator, wrote once that the "traditional [classic] horror film invited, however ambiguously, an identification with the return of the repressed [i.e., outcasts such as the Frankenstein monster], the contemporary horror film invites an identification (either sadistic or masochistic or both simultaneously) with punishment." In short, the world is a terrible place whose inhabitants deserve the goriest or most painful of fates.

Although Craven is a serious filmmaker and not just one of the best of a bad lot, he has not escaped the degeneration of the horror genre. Craven's recent works are a step backward from such works as his 1991 film *The People Under the Stairs*.

That movie features a ghetto rebellion against inhuman landlords—grotesque clones of Ronald and Nancy Reagan—who are exploiting the poor and torturing and cannibalizing young people. All this as respected members of an upper middle-class community. The film is one of Craven's most cohesive—and angry—works.

In fact, an inadequate spirit of protest may in part account for the half-baked conceptions that mar too much of his filmmaking. It should also be pointed out that any texture and substance in his films have little to do with their 'slasher' aspect, a type of hack work that too often fills dead spaces with empty ideas.

In a period when artists had a deeper historical and social understanding, legendary horror producer Val Lewton (1904-1951), the creator of beautiful, haunting works able to disturb on a profound level, once said, "We tossed away the horror formula right from the beginning. No grisly stuff for us. No masklike faces, hardly human, with gnashing teeth and hair standing on end. No creaking physical manifestations. No horror piled upon horror." And of course, no stabbing and slashing.

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