

THIRTEEN THOUGHTS ON SCARES

BY SETH M SHERWOOD

THE BASICS ALWAYS WORK. FEAR OF THE DARK, ENDANGERMENT OF A PET OR CHILD, LONELINESS/SOLITUDE, LOSING OUR MIND/IDENTITY/OR SENSE OF SELF. THESE ARE HARD-WIRED IN US DOWN TO THE CORE OF OUR LIZARD BRAINS. THESE SCARES WORK WHEN PRESENTED EFFECTIVELY.

VIOLATE THE SACRED. MOST PEOPLE HAVE AN EMOTIONAL SAFETY NET TIED TO A STRUCTURE THEY REVERE AND RELY ON: THE HUMAN BODY, THE FAMILY UNIT, A HOME, A RELATIONSHIP, AN INSTITUTION, A FAITH. IF YOUR CHARACTER HAS AN ANCHOR, SEPARATE OR BETRAY THEM FROM IT.

REMOVE STABILITY. IT IS ALSO IMPORTANT TO CREATE PRACTICAL, REAL-WORLD SEPARATIONS TOO. AUTHORITY FIGURES NEVER BELIEVE THE MAIN CHARACTER. PHONES NEVER WORK. JERK MEN TELL WOMEN THEY WERE JUST SLEEPWALKING. PARENTS JUST DON'T UNDERSTAND.

VIOLENCE. OBVIOUSLY A KEYSTONE TO THE GENRE-- BUT DEPENDING ON THE TYPE OF HORROR FILM YOU ARE MAKING, VIOLENCE CAN BE TERRIFYING... ESPECIALLY IF IT IS WELL-TIMED, GRUESOME, FUN, UNEXPECTED, AND MOST OF ALL-- EARNED.

JUMP SCARES. CHEAP, YES. HATED BY MANY, YES. ESSENTIAL TO KEEPING AN AUDIENCE ON EDGE, 100%. THEY NEED TO BE WELL-PLACED, AND NOT OVER-USED... UNLESS YOUR MOVIE IS ABOUT LITERAL JUMP SCARES AND IS CALLED *HELL FEST*. IN THAT CASE, GO NUTS.

MAKE THE MUNDANE A SITE OF HORROR. IF YOU BUILD A SCARE AROUND AN EVERYDAY MOMENT/EVENT/PLACE IT IS UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE, AND YOU HAVE GOOD ODDS OF IT BECOMING MEMORABLE. EXAMPLE: *PSYCHO* AND TAKING A SHOWER, OR *FINAL DESTINATION 2* AND LOGGING TRUCKS.

THEMATIC-BASED SCARES. WANNA BE ALL A24 ABOUT IT? MAKING MOVIES ABOUT PTSD, TRAUMA, ABUSE, OR OTHER REAL-WORLD TERRORS AND THEN HIDING THEM INSIDE THE SUPERNATURAL GIVES YOU A LOT TO PLAY WITH. EXAMPLE: *HAUNTING OF HILL HOUSE* USES GHOSTS AS AN ALLEGORY FOR TRAUMA.

ATMOSPHERE AND VIBE. AN EXTENSION OF "AFRAID OF THE DARK," ALWAYS ESTABLISH A FOREBODING LOOK AND FEEL. REMEMBER THAT MOST PEOPLE LIKE SUNSHINE. AT LEAST A COUPLE TIMES PER ACT, REALLY LEAN INTO THE SETTING DESCRIPTION.

HAVE RULES, ESPECIALLY IF YOUR ANTAGONIST IS SUPERNATURAL. RULES KEEP THINGS IN LINE. IF/WHEN YOU REVEAL THEM TO THE AUDIENCE DEPENDS ON THE STORY, BUT YOU NEED TO KNOW THEM AND NOT BREAK THEM. IF YOU DO, EVEN AN AUDIENCE THAT DOESN'T KNOW THEM WILL FEEL SOMETHING IS OFF.

LET SCARES BREATHE. YOU WANT SOME LEVEL OF CREEPY/SCARY EVERY 10-15 MINUTES IN THE FIRST TWO ACTS. BUT IT IS IMPORTANT TO LET SCARES SETTLE. LIKE A ROLLERCOASTER. SCARE, BUT THEN GET THE VIEWER CALM AND DISTRACTED TO RESET. HUMOR/LEVITY WORKS GREAT.

SCALE THE SCARES. THE SIZE AND AFTERMATH HAS TO MATCH WHERE THE STORY IS. ESCALATE TOO MUCH EARLY ON, YOU HAVE LESS ROOM TO BE SCARY LATER. SCARES START SMALL, GET BIG. A USEFUL AND POPULAR CHEAT: ACT 1 DREAM SEQUENCES, ANYTHING GOES, NO CONSEQUENCES.

A RELATABLE LEAD. FOR SCARES TO BE EFFECTIVE, YOUR AUDIENCE HAS TO LOVE YOUR LEAD. THEY NEED TO FEEL THE LEAD'S JEOPARDY AS THEIR OWN. YOUR LEAD HAS TO BE LIKABLE SO PEOPLE CARE, AND SMART, BECAUSE THEY GET ONE, MAYBE TWO, BAD CHOICE BEFORE THE AUDIENCE TURNS ON THEM.

A GIMMICK. THE SHORT-CUT TO A FRANCHISE, OR EVEN JUST A MEMORABLE KILLER: A GIMMICK. IT COULD BE SUBTLE, LIKE A RITUAL THEY HAVE. IT COULD BE IMPORTANT, MAYBE A VERY SPECIFIC M.O. OR WEAPON. OR IT COULD BE VERY OVERT, LIKE A HOCKEY MASK AND THE INABILITY TO DIE.

CHARACTER NOTES: WHEN YOUR LEAD GETS SCARED, THEY'RE JUST CAPABLE ENOUGH TO SURVIVE, BUT NOT SO MUCH THAT WE WON'T WORRY ABOUT THEM. WITHOUT GETTING INTO THE WEEDS OF CHARACTER ARCS, THEIR CAPABILITY LEVEL SHOULD INCREASE WITH THEIR EMOTIONAL STATE, AND WHAT THEY'VE LEARNED... OR CONVERSELY, MAKE A CHARACTER A COMPLETE TOOL SO THE AUDIENCE IS THRILLED WHEN THEY DIE.