

FOLK HORROR, GORE AND SPECIAL EFFECTS WHEN EVIL LURKS

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INTRODUCTION

The film *When Evil Lurks* (Demián Rugna, 2023) had its world premiere at the 48th Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), and was subsequently screened at other events such as the Fantastic Fest in Austin (Texas) or the Cannes Film Festival. This film, which merge several subgenres, has attracted the attention of both audiences and critics, and is currently the highest-grossing horror film produced in Argentina, with a gross that currently exceeds 1.5 million dollars (Box Office Mojo, 2024). The film's director, Rugna, began in the feature film world with *The Last Gateway* (2007), but it was with his psychological thriller *Terrified* (2017) with which he enjoyed a greater repercussion around the world, managing to attract the attention of filmmakers such as Guillermo del Toro (Fleming Jr., 2018).

In the case of *When Evil Lurks*, Rugna's fifth feature film, it has also gone down in History for becoming the first Latin American film to win the best film award (the top award) at the Sitges Film Festival, the world's most important

fantastic genre event (Sitges Film Festival, 2023). This milestone has elevated Latin American fantastic genre cinema worldwide; and the film has achieved an astonishing 97% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes (2024), the demanding film review portal. *When Evil Lurks*, which is influenced by Argentinean writers such as Mariana Enríquez or Samanta Schweblin, is located in the context of the new Argentinean horror cinema, where we find other films such as *Los olvidados* (Luciano Onetti and Nicolás Onetti, 2017) or *Metete miedo* (Néstor Sánchez Sotelo, 2022), offering to the audience high doses of blood, gore and special effects. All this, through a very particular folk horror.

WHEN FOLK HORROR LURKS

One of the subgenres available in *When Evil Lurks* is folk horror. This is a special type of horror and storytelling that reflects the terrifying side of folklore (Jones, 2021, p. 16). Furthermore, although folk horror often uses tropes, ideas and figures from folklore, it always does so in a complex way (Keetley and Heholt, 2023, p. 16). This subgenre was born in the United Kingdom and takes as its basis the so-called *unholy trinity*, consisting of the foundational films *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves, 1968), *Blood on Satan's Claw* (Piers Haggard, 1971) and *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973); however, although this triumvirate is often cited as milestones where the defining elements of folk horror first coalesced, it was originated in the late nineteenth century as a dark response to modernity, although its roots go back even further (Edgar and Johnson, 2024, p. 1); and today it has reached all parts of the world (Janisse, 2021).

To specify those elements that make up folk horror, we can apply the *Folk Horror Chain* by Adam Scovell (2017), one of the most useful metrics for a subgenre that is not easy to define (Ingham, 2018, p. 10). The first element that is part of this chain, and that differentiates folk horror from other subgenres such as satanism or witchcraft, is the presence of natural spaces or landscapes, where topography can have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of the characters. The landscape represents an inhospitable place as it is different from society as a whole. The second element is isolation. The landscape must isolate a community of characters to some extent, where the power

of nature creates a sense of isolation compounded by the exclusion of the individual from those communities (Marshall, 2023, p. 189). This isolation can also happen when characters are alienated from some social progress, which can create biased beliefs and moralities, which would be another ingredient of folk horror. Thus, the isolation is not only physical, but also psychic. The last element is the result of this distorted social consciousness along with its consequences: the event, usually through supernatural, demonic or violent methods (Scovell, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18).

The film *When Evil Lurks* fulfils all the conditions of the *Folk Horror Chain*, as it is a story with characters who spend most of their time in a rural space, with an oppressive and increasingly violent and uncomfortable atmosphere. The characters are isolated people in a practically isolated area, and are influenced by a set of beliefs, where the conflict is born within the community; and the final event will be the birth of evil personified. In terms of atmosphere, although there are also moments of night and darkness, *When Evil Lurks* is a daylight horror film. This is not a novel aspect, as it has been done in the past in films such as *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963), *Duel* (Stephen Spielberg, 1971), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), *Long Weekend* (Colin Eggleston, 1978), *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* (Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, 1976), *Christine* (John Carpenter, 1983), *Cujo* (Lewis Teague, 1983), *Midsommar* (Ari Aster, 2019) or *Pearl* (Ti West, 2022), among others. This atmospheric aspect allows the audience to witness the harshness of the images and the gore due to the greater visual detail available to them. In allusion to gore, or splatter cinema, in aesthetic terms is a type of subgenre focused on visceral and extreme graphic violence, thanks to advances in special effects (Kendrick, 2017, p. 466).

WHEN GORE AND SPECIAL EFFECTS LURK

When Evil Lurks is a film that offers the audience high doses of gore images, but in an undefined time and space in a remote village in Argentina. After hearing several gunshots during the night near a country house, brothers Pedro and Jimi, played by Ezequiel Rodríguez and Demián Salomón, decide to explore the landscape the next day, in the sunlight, to find out what has happened. Both

find the corpse of a person cut in half. This person had planned to arrive at a nearby house to end the life of the dying Uriel, a *rotten* who lives there with his mother and little brother. *Rottens* are people who are incubating evil within themselves (demon-infected people). When a *rotten* appears, something that has happened before in the folklore invented for the film, negative events start to unfold around him or her until the *rotten* finally brings out the evil from inside. This inner evil element is complemented and personified through the grotesque and horrible exterior aspect of the *rotten*. Thus, the opening shots showing the *rotten* Uriel are particularly unpleasant to watch, thanks to the special effects work developed by the Marcos Berta Studio team. In addition, the interior of the house has an atmosphere of putrefaction and rottenness in keeping with its gore aesthetics.



Figure 1: The *rotten* Uriel at the beginning of the film.

Source: Rugna (2023).

On the other hand, the character of Ruiz, played by Luis Ziemkowski, is the landowner of the area where the *rotten* is located. When Ruiz is informed of this presence, he wants the *rotten* to be removed as far as possible from his domain. Despite his initial intentions, Ruiz cannot kill the *rotten* because when dealing with one of them, seven rules must be followed: 1) don't use electric light, as this attracts evil; 2) stay away from animals, as they are the first to become infected and react with aggressive behavior; 3) don't use firearms, as evil will cause them to be used against you (this is why there are *cleaners*, people who are experts in dealing with the *rottens*); 4) don't

hurt *rottens*, as evil can never die; 5) don't come into physical contact with them, as this would be a way of becoming infected; 6) don't mention evil by name, as it may feel invoked; and 7) don't be afraid of dying, as evil feeds on people's fear. These rules, introduced as part of the folklore of the story, will be broken little by little.

When Pedro, Jimi and Ruiz drive the *rotten* away in a van, they lose him from the back when they try to avoid a child on the road. From this situation onwards, the evil that has already contaminated the characters will accompany them for the rest of the story. Consequently, the character of Pedro, who is the protagonist, will have to experience how evil spreads around him, materializing in one misfortune after another. These first scenes of the film are warning the audience that later situations will be more unpleasant and disturbing. To this end, an uncompromising script is used with the characters, as ethically it doesn't protect anyone (rich, poor, pregnant women, children, etc.), not even the protagonist. Among the subsequent unpleasant situations, the closest is a scene where a goat appears (along with its satanic symbolism). At that moment, Ruiz kills one of his goats that has been possessed by evil and is behaving strangely. To end the goat's life, Ruiz uses a rifle, that is a firearm, in violation of the third rule. This breach makes everything worse, causing his pregnant wife to murder him with an axe, and immediately kill herself with this sharp object, repeatedly stabbing it into her head, resulting in a completely gore scene in daylight, with masterful special effects that show the audience all the details of the situation.



Figure 2: The consequences of breaking the rules of evil.

Source: Rugna (2023).

Another of the most memorable scenes of the film takes place when Pedro arrives at the house of his ex-wife, Sabrina, played by Virginia Garófalo, to warn of danger and protect his children. In this house, Sabrina lives with Leo, her new husband, with the daughter she has had from this new marriage, called Vicky, and with the two sons she had with Pedro. The eldest of them, called Jair, has an autistic spectrum disorder, which is a key aspect in the development of the story. The house is also inhabited by a pug of Bordeaux; and this dog has been infected by evil for having licked the clothes that Pedro took off (to burn) when he arrived at this house. Suddenly, the dog attacks Vicky, who was close to him. From a gore aesthetic, the scene is not overly explicit because it is the content of the shots that creates an effect in the rhythm of the edition that is particularly violent. Likewise, it is an event that happens suddenly, although the audience suspects it from the detailed shots of the dog licking Pedro's clothes. What the audience understands is that the dog has smashed Vicky's head, but several moments later, the girl reappears without any injuries, as if nothing had happened. This is all part of the game of evil. With this memorable scene, Rugna defies Hitchcock's advice not to film with animals and children. In this case, both share a same scene and shots. Finally, Sabrina's new husband will end the dog's life with a gun, making the situation even worse.



Figure 3: Moments before the dog attack.

Source: Rugna (2023).

Subsequently, Pedro and his brother Jimi take refuge in the house of Mirtha, played by Silvina Sabater, as they try to flee from evil. Mirtha is a character who explains how evil works, as she had to confront it in the past; she also provides more information to the audience (mainly by explaining the seven rules). Mirtha also tells the brothers that evil feeds on people's fear. Therefore, it is Jimi who has to go and look for Pedro's son, and not Pedro, who is afraid of losing him. Mirtha also explains that evil can resurrect people it has already killed to turn them into enemies, as is the case with Sabrina, the ex-wife, evoking an unpleasant scene with Santino, the youngest son.

The last act of *When Evil Lurks* focuses on the search for Uriel, the original *rotten*. This character is in a rural school, under a kind of wooden trapdoor surrounded by corpses, and protected by children who are possessed by evil. It is Mirtha who deduces that he is there, as she tells Pedro that evil likes children, and children like evil. Mirtha also tells him that the original *rotten* must be killed respecting the rules. If this is not done, evil will continue to lurk and spread. The use of children as unsettling and mysterious elements is a classic trope in horror (Maguire, 2023, p. 162), and in the case of this film, the protective children of the third act are introduced into the plot as hostile characters. The use of children as terrifying elements is not a novelty in cinema because it is a trope "that never fails to inspire fear" (Natividad, 2024); and Rugna has at his disposal previous references from films such as *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976), *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979), *Village of the Damned* (John Carpenter, 1995), the previously mentioned *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?*, *Children of the Corn* (Fritz Kiersch, 1984), *Pet Sematary* (Mary Lambert, 1989), *The Children* (Tom Shankland, 2008) or *Eden Lake* (James Watkins, 2008), among others. In addition, there is a connection with the stories of the Argentinean writer Mariana Enríquez, mentioned above, who also often uses the resource of children as terrifying elements.

Then, the children protecting the *rotten* Uriel trick Pedro and lock him in one of the school's rooms; the children then kill Mirtha bloodthirstily, thus preventing her from killing the *rotten*. Finally, Pedro manages to get out of the room and kills the *rotten* by hitting him on the head with a piece of Mirtha's device (a special device used by the *cleaners*). After committing this murder in this bloodbath, evil is born from inside the *rotten*, which is represented by the

character of a child with a body covered in blood. This child begins to walk and goes outside the rural school. In the meantime, the protective children solemnly make way for him and follow him. But before they do so, the boy smears Pedro's forehead with his fingers covered in blood. Pedro will never be able to get rid of this bloodstain, and will be marked by evil forever. In this way, the character will remember that everything he lived through really happened; and everything he lost. These moments of violence through gore aesthetics allow the special effects work to reach its peak.



Figure 4: The birth of evil, represented by a child.

Source: Rugna (2023).

Minutes before the film ends, the *rotten* little brother reappears. The child tells Jimi that he killed the *cleaner* who appeared at the beginning of the story. He also declares him to have ended his mother's life and ate her because evil was ordering it from inside his mind. This event is related to Jair, Pedro's autistic son, who minutes before the audience had watched how he approached his grandmother (being able to speak to her thanks to evil), who has suffered the same fate. Thus, Jair is also possessed by evil. In this sense, this is an aspect that Mirtha suspected from the moment she saw the child. But she also explained that evil takes longer to decipher the mind of an autistic person. These last moments result in Pedro being forced to end his son's life by burning his body. Thus, the story will end with a desolate character stripped of almost all his loved ones. Evil will be the great triumphant of the plot, which will

begin to spread worldwide. In relation to this denouement and its dark connection with Pedro, the protagonist, it should be noted that we are faced with a story where the figure of the hero doesn't exist. In fact, Pedro's ex-wife tells him that he is a murderer. This fact connects with the idea that in the past, Pedro tried to end Jair's life because he was unable to accept his autistic state. It is also suggested that he may have attempted suicide with his two children because he could not stand his life with Sabrina. Thus, this attempted murder may be what attracted the evil around Pedro to finish what he was unable to do in the past.

CONCLUSIONS

The inclusion of folk horror and gore aesthetics through the special effects work turns *When Evil Lurks* into a horror film of special interest within contemporary fantastic cinema. It is a work that, in addition to offering a second reading (the past world pandemic, the recent arrival of the political extreme right in Argentina, the problems with the use of pesticides in the rural areas, etc.), has been able to put Latin American fantastic cinema in the international spotlight (especially after its screening in Sitges). In this sense, it is a film whose phenomenon resembles the Spanish case of *[REC]* (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007), the Cuban case of *Juan of the Dead* (Alejandro Brugués, 2011), the Brazilian case of *As boas maneiras* (Marco Dutra and Juliana Rojas, 2017), or the Guatemalan case of *La llorona* (Jayro Bustamante, 2019), among others.

On the other hand, *When Evil Lurks* is a film that fuses subgenres, apart from folk horror. In this way, a different product with its own personality is created. Thus, we find the presence of subgenres such as hillbilly horror, zombies, dystopias, road movies, etc. All this, together with the influence of filmmakers such as Tobe Hooper, George A. Romero, Wes Craven, John Carpenter or Lucio Fulci, among many others. These aspects enrich the film, which differs from many others by moving away from night-time settings almost all the time, and avoiding the typical *jump scare* produced above all by the sound impacts on the audience. Finally, we can conclude that this milestone will happen again in the future of Latin American fantastic cinema. For this, large doses of horror, gore and special effects will be necessary, but enriched with a story that will engage the increasingly demanding audience.

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