

Making money from monsters

MARK DAVID RYAN



It seems Australia is the place to be at the moment when it comes to making and creating horror films. Mark David Ryan explains how you can get involved in this boom industry.

While horror films are not for everyone, each year millions of viewers around the world are lured to cinemas or dark lounge rooms to watch their worst nightmares on screen. Since the 1970s, Australian cinema has been best known for ocker comedies and quirky dramas such as *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), *The Man from Snowy River* (1982), and *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994). Aussie horror flicks about *Outback Vampires* (1987), man-eating razorbacks (*Razorback* 1984) and cars that eat people (*The Cars That Ate Paris* 1974) have been better known to international than domestic audiences. But in recent years there has been a major boom in Australian horror film production – trebling from less than 20 films in the 1990s to over 60 titles in the 2000s. The outback thriller *Wolf Creek* (2005), the Australian-created *Saw* franchise, the killer crocodile film *Rogue* (2007), the survival horror *Storm Warning* (2007) and *Dying Breed* (2008) [combining the folkloric legends of Tasmania’s cannibal convict Alexander Pierce and the Tasmanian Tiger] have achieved varying levels of worldwide cult popularity, mainstream visibility and commercial returns. *Wolf Creek* (2005), produced for a budget of \$1.4 million, has returned over \$50 million in earnings, while the *Saw* franchise has become the most successful horror franchise of all time, grossing over \$1 billion in worldwide cinema and DVD sales.

Consequently, Australian producers are now looking to cash in on monsters and mayhem. If you’re a writer with a passion for scary movies, a wordsmith who watches the occasional horror flick and writing your own has crossed your mind, or a writer with an interest in screenwriting, then there has never been a better time to write Aussie horror flicks.

A writer must know how the genre works: its core concerns and generic elements

Horror has a reputation for being an easy genre to write and while there may be truth to the adage that even bad horror sells, writing a good horror film is difficult and requires a good understanding of the genre and how it works. Horror is comprised of many subgenres – slasher, vampire, werewolf, and zombie films etc – each with specific and shared character types, plotlines, themes, narrative conflicts and so on. Horror films revolve around monsters and protagonists’ struggle for survival, fear of the unknown, fear of death (especially horrific ones) and many others. A horror film aims to scare an audience through ‘gross-out’ or ‘creep-out’ factors (some combine both). The former relates to evoking reactions to shocking portrayals of gore and violence, as represented by the

‘I think they’re also somewhat timeless ... there’s always a market for a good horror.’
(An interview with screenwriter Everett De Roche, November 2008).

graphic torture of backpackers in *Hostel* (2006) from limbs being hacked off to eyes being cut from nerve endings. The latter refers to crafting fear through mood and suspense without explicit bloodshed achieved brilliantly in *The Sixth Sense*’s (1999) chilling encounters with ‘dead people’. For creep-out films it is what you don’t see that is most disturbing. A good horror story balances formulaic convention and generic invention. *Saw* (2004) is a good example. Built upon an otherwise regular crime thriller plotline (detectives try to apprehend a mastermind serial killer), the film interweaves horror genre elements for shock value. Held captive inside an industrial bathroom, Dr Lawrence Gordon has a choice. Kill Adam, a fellow prisoner, before his wife and daughter die at 6pm, or saw off a foot with a hacksaw to escape. *Saw* also develops a novel serial killer (known as Jigsaw), a dying cancer patient who never directly kills victims but gives them a chance for survival based on their willingness to make horrific decisions.

Avoid cliché like cholera combined with plague

Veering away from cliché is an obstacle all writers face, but as horror and genre films more generally are highly formulaic, avoiding cliché is critical to a film’s reception in the marketplace. Horror audiences are highly knowledgeable about the genre’s intricacies, and letting them do the guesswork is central to their viewing experience. An unoriginal title will bitterly disappoint audiences. So what are major horror clichés to avoid? A group splitting up to find the bad guy, a killer’s rampage explained by his mother or childhood abuse, cars stalling at crucial times, the madman strolls calmly after his victims, flashlights fail before a killer attacks, and countless others. Fan-culture websites (such as www.fangoria.com) compile lists of the top-50 horror clichés. Be aware of such clichés and use them to subvert audience expectations. *Wolf Creek* (2005) follows a typical slasher plotline. Similar plotlines have been used in countless films from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) to the *House of Wax* (2005) remake. But *Wolf Creek*’s murderer, Mick Taylor, is not your typical slasher; he’s a dark version of *Crocodile Dundee*. The movie also has a two-act rather than a typical three-act structure, it steers away from spooky music foreshadowing an upcoming bad event, and the main female character or the ‘final girl’ to escape in a regular slasher is the first to die while the ‘final boy’ – certain to perish – survives the carnage.

Be aware of market cycles

Possibly the worst way a writer can gain 'inspiration' for a horror script is to go to their local video store, hire out the latest horror films and try to replicate them. This retards the genre and produces cliché-ridden scripts. In recent years markets have been saturated with zombie, vampire and torture porn films. Market cycles ebb and flow, writing films at the beginning or in between cycles may give a script a better chance of being produced. Torture porn films in particular, revolving around the torture of helpless victims, witnessed a major surge in production following the success of *Saw* (2004) and have since exhausted themselves with audiences. But epidemic, gothic and supernatural films are less tired in the current marketplace. Also remember that a film's development/production takes several years so sub-genres that are 'fresh' now may be less so in a few years time.

A wellspring for horror: Australian folklore/cultural heritage

What the success of recent Aussie horror films illustrates is that Australian folklore is more interesting than the broader Australian film industry would lead us to believe. Our diverse untapped cultural heritage can spawn world-class horror tales. There are horrific true crimes such as the Belanglo Forest Backpacker Murders and a colonial past marked by brutal violence and cannibalism. Indigenous Australian Dreamtime stories and mythology provide a plethora of spirits, demons and monsters. Australia is an ancient landscape holding mysteries such as the Yowie, Min Min Lights and eerie natural phenomena such as the 'black rocks' in Northern Queensland, all perfect for the premise of a horror film.

Mixing generic conventions

One way of refreshing the genre, touched on above, is by mixing popular genres. Peter Jackson's *Bad Taste* (1987) and the Spierig Brothers' *Undead*, both achieving international cult status, are highly innovative films. *Bad Taste* mixes the plotlines of the zombie film with the alien invasion film, spliced with comedy and hard-core splatter (explicit portrayals of blood and guts). Similarly, *Undead* is an action-packed comedy, mixing elements of the western (musical scores and character archetypes such as the lone gunslinger) with a traditional zombie film. A writer must have an in-depth understanding of genres to manipulate them.

Selling your script/getting involved in the industry

Like any other form of writing, horror specialists in Australia are represented by talent agencies. These agencies organise pitching sessions, connect talent with producers and so on. Some production companies accept unsolicited screenplays, others advertise via websites or through industry magazines (*Encore*, *Inside Film Magazine* etc). Horror screenplay competitions are also emerging in Australia and there are many overseas competitions to enter. Finally, many indie filmmakers (do-it-yourself filmmakers) making low-budget horror flicks are

searching for quality scripts, providing a good avenue for screenwriters to have their first screenplay produced. ■

Further information

Australian Horror Writers Association

www.australianhorror.com/links.php?cat=2

Horror Films and the Gross-Out Scale
(with a link to Creep-Out scale)

www.strangehorizons.com/2005/20051031/gross-out-a.shtml

51 worst horror movie clichés

www.dreadcentral.com/story/51-worst-horror-movie-cliches

Sydney's horror screenwriting competition

www.anightofhorror.com/

Rubberroom – Australian Screen Industry Network

www.rubberroom.com.au

Digital Retribution – provides lists of indie horror producers and their films. www.digital-retribution.com

Mark David Ryan is a researcher at the Queensland University of Technology. His PhD, *A Dark New World: Anatomy of Australian Horror Films*, explores the recent boom in contemporary production. The author or co-author of reports, articles and book chapters on film and creative industries, Mark also produces short films and writes dark fiction.

Successful science writing & editing

15 July 2009 Brisbane



Would you like to be able to communicate complex information clearly and accurately?
Would you like to be able to use editing skills to improve your own and other people's work?

Biotext, a leader in the field of science writing and editing, runs a highly acclaimed training course for anyone who writes or edits material dealing with science and technology, for any audience.

Places are limited, so register soon at <http://biotextbrisbane.eventbrite.com/> See 'Services offered' at www.biotext.com.au for a course outline, or email hilary.cadman@biotext.com.au if you have any questions.

What participants say

"Best writing course I have ever attended."
Scott, Brisbane.

"Has helped immensely by providing a clear outline of what to be aware of when writing and editing."
Katherine, Brisbane