The Scream Trilogy

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As a trilogy with a belated fourth installment, the Scream films offer a tangible example of the tension between limitation and expansion that the tripartite form sustains. The films are also defined by the tension of self-reflexive genericity, where they achieve a double-voicing that makes explicit their recognition of the codes of the slasher film, while simultaneously mobilizing these codes to conventional effect. From the first sequel onwards, this double-voicing applies not only to the historical codes of the slasher genre but also to the self-reflexive codes of the “postmodern horror” genre that Scream (Wes Craven, 1996) itself made so popular in this way. The tautest examples of quotation in Scream 2 (Craven, 1997), Scream 3 (Craven, 2000), and Scream 4 (Craven, 2011) are therefore those that point backwards (and forwards) to themselves and their own conceit. This chapter will examine the intersection of these tensions in the Scream films to argue that they advance a triadic dialectic that is constituted – and maintained – not through interlocking narratives but through techniques of nesting and ekphrasis. Like a set of Russian dolls, each Scream film neatly fits within the installment that succeeds it, with Scream 4 (Scre4m) nesting, and thus consolidating, the whole original trilogy.

“The horror genre was destroyed by sequels”: limitation and multiplication

The tension between the impulses to limit and to expand the Scream trilogy is starkest in the reported attitudes of its producers, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. One account of the premiere of Scream 4 in April 2011 describes how Bob claimed in his opening remarks that “we’d be at Scream 30 if it was up to Harvey” (Abrams 19), while reports around the
release of the first and third films emphasize his and Craven’s commit-
ment to a contained, three-part series. Interviewed by *Cinefantastique*
upon the release of *Scream 3*, Craven emphasized how the films were
always imagined as a “limited edition”:

from the very beginning Bob has said very seriously that this is going
to be a three-part story and then out. I think that makes it a little bit
more of a treasure for the fans, because they know there’s not going
to be one next year... The sales will be more, just because of that... It’s
not going to be one of those things that is cranked out year after
year. (French 14)

*Scream 2* and *Scream 3* are in this way distinguished from what Craven
describes as “the typical type of genre sequel, where they usually bring
back the villain, whether it’s Freddy, Jason or Candyman, and then
troupe out a whole new cast of victims” (13). Scream is also positioned
as a specifically industrial brand of organic trilogy, the tripartite iden-
tity described as a strategy that appeals to a particular type of audi-
ence (fan) desire, and is ultimately designed to translate into box-office
returns.

For both Craven and Bob Weinstein (as the force behind the genre
label Dimension Films), the imagination and development of the
*Scream* films as a planned set was part of an effort to manage and *con-
trol* the slasher genre, which had fallen dormant between the late 1980s
and mid-1990s. Much of the commentary on the genre reflects on the
place of sequels within this process. Noting that teen slasher films orig-
inated the mainstream trend toward remakes, sequels, and spin-offs
in the 1970s and 1980s in franchises including *Halloween*, Friday the
13th, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*,
Carol Clover argues that the “compulsive,” unvaried duplication of
plots and circumstances in these films meant that, by the end of 1980s,
“the form was largely drained” (23). Carolyn Jess-Cooke also comments
on the function of sequelization in perceptions of the “derivative and
repetitious” nature of the genre, suggesting that the slasher film “both
exploits and contributes to the sequel’s (perceived) function as a mode
of cannibalizing old stories, zombie-fying dead texts, and altogether
’slashing’ traditional forms of originality” (53).

The sequels and franchises that sprang from his original films *The
Hills Have Eyes* (1977) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) demon-
strate Craven’s own negative experience of the process. While *The Hills
Have Eyes Part II* (1985) was made – by Craven’s admission – because