

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

By Nathan Wardinski

In the 1980s, American culture was on an emotional rebound. Following the traumas of Vietnam, gasoline shortages, race riots, and inflation, Americans embraced a fresh-faced optimism that promised traditional family values, health, and prosperity. This was reflected in the media of the time. John Hughes wrote and directed teenage comedies such as "The Breakfast Club," "Sixteen Candles" and "Some Kind of Wonderful." Many of the most popular television shows of the 1980s, namely "The Cosby Show" and "Who's The Boss?" and "Family Ties," were frivolous comedies about middle-class families in suburban neighborhoods where they lived effortlessly affluent lives. Their stories were wholesome, their finances were secure, and their problems were solved in under thirty minutes. This was Norman Rockwell reinterpreted for the era of Ronald Reagan.

And yet the lives of everyday Americans were not nearly as idealistic as domestic primetime fantasies would have it seem. Violent crime rose, the manufacturing industry was hollowed out and exported, the social safety net was eviscerated, and AIDS fomented into an epidemic.

Perhaps subconsciously responding to the dissonance between the reality of their lives and the idealistic propaganda on their televisions, Americans turned to slasher movies for entertainment. These pictures featured casts of attractive young people preyed upon by killers armed with edged weapons and the deaths were outrageous and gory. Slasher movies were castigated by moral watchdogs but the genre was immensely popular, profitable, and prolific. Supplying the new markets created



Robert Englund as Freddy Krueger in Wes Craven's "A Nightmare on Elm Street." Photo from the Library of Congress.

by cable television and home video, hundreds of these films were produced for an eager audience.

Enter filmmaker Wes Craven. An academic who emerged from a religious fundamentalist background, Craven had fallen into the horror field by chance but the genre allowed him to tell stories that explored the possibilities of cinema and probe social and philosophical issues.

1972's "The Last House on the Left" and 1977's "The Hills Have Eyes" were frightening and vicious but also intelligent; viewers don't have to look too hard into those movies to see the reflections of the Vietnam War, the counter culture, and the social unrest of that time. Craven's preoccupation with humanist ideas would continue in his later movies such as "The Serpent and the Rainbow," "The People Under the Stairs," and "Scream."

Craven had a brilliant idea that would bring the slasher genre into the realm of fantasy. "A Nightmare on Elm Street" was the tale of

suburban teenagers stalked in their dreams by Freddy Krueger, a child murderer whose weapon of choice was a glove with knives fashioned onto the fingertips. Freddy had been arrested for his crimes, freed on a technicality, and then burned alive by a mob of vigilante parents. He now haunted the dreams of the teenagers whose parents immolated him, killing the adolescents in their sleep.

According to film theorist Bruce Kawin, films and dreams fulfill a similar psychological function, realizing our fantasies and anxieties. Furthermore, Kawin connected horror films with nightmares. "Horror films function as nightmares for the individual viewer," Kawin wrote. "One goes to a horror film in order to have a nightmare – not simply a frightening dream, but a dream whose undercurrent of anxiety both presents and masks the desire to fulfill and be punished for conventionally or personally unacceptable impulses." Both individually and culturally, the horror film dramatizes our fears and provides a means to work them out.

"A Nightmare on Elm Street" literalizes Kawin's ideas. The film's concept speaks to something essential and cross-cultural which helps explain the picture's enduring popularity. But "A Nightmare on Elm Street" was also specific to its time. Freddy Krueger's backstory as a child predator spoke to an era that was obsessed with threats to children as evidenced by moral panics about "stranger danger" and the satanic ritual abuse hoax. Freddy's supernatural second act as a dream demon is a manifestation of the parents' guilt and their own repressed potential for evil. It's also significant that "A Nightmare on Elm Street" came a generation after the "white flight" migration that forged contemporary suburbia. The very conception and allure of the suburbs was their removal from the supposed dangers and debaucheries of racially integrated city life. These well-kept,

affluent, and predominantly white communities would be a new Garden of Eden where the American dream would be reborn. The sitcoms and teen dramas of the 1980s reflect this fantasy. Wes Craven turned it into a nightmare.

One of the requisite elements of the 1980s slasher film was the isolation of teenage characters from adult supervision. Stories were set at remote locations such as summer camps and sorority houses and authority figures were stupid, ineffectual, or killed. "A Nightmare on Elm Street" took the concept further. The teenage characters were trapped within their unconscious mind by a monster of their parent's making. Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp), the heroine of "A Nightmare on Elm Street," must elude the killer in her dreams and outwit the parents and guardians who keep insisting that Nancy go to sleep. The generational conflict and the suspicion of authority subvert the legal and moral order implicitly associated with suburban life. By the film's climax, Nancy has assumed the role of caregiver and protector, putting her alcoholic mother to bed and going off to confront Freddy by herself.

Although Nancy was the heroine of "A Nightmare on Elm Street," Freddy Krueger was the star. Played with sadistic relish by actor Robert Englund and featuring effective scarification makeup by David Miller, Freddy was not only one of the great horror villains but one of the major media personalities of the 1980s. Unlike the other cinematic killers of that decade, Freddy had a personality and his penchant for punctuating kills with a one-liner put him in the company of the action movie stars of the day. After "A Nightmare on Elm Street" was a success, New Line Cinema exploited the property with sequels and merchandise. Freddy was everywhere and the silhouette of Krueger with his glove and fedora became as iconic as James Bond in a gun barrel.

"A Nightmare on Elm Street's" status as one of the defining American horror stories only becomes stronger with hindsight. Wes Craven's creation literally and figuratively ripped through the ordered reality of 1980s suburbia. In doing so, "A Nightmare on Elm Street" shredded the veil of conservative idealism associated with that image. Freddy Krueger emerged from the cultural unconscious to embody our collective fears and repressed desires and he was a fitting bogeyman for an era that anointed Bill Cosby as "America's Dad." It may have been morning in America but "A Nightmare on Elm Street" haunted the American dream.

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"A Nightmare on Elm Street" was inducted into the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2021.