

American Psychosis:

Freddy Krueger and the Dark Side of the Dream

From *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery*, Volume Two: "Millennial Blues," by Jake Horsley

In America, slaying the enemy is *the* ritual that defines our identity...

Here is the dark side of the American Dream.

—Rushing and Frenz

If Arnold Schwarzenegger embodies the idealized hero that America imagines itself to be, then Freddy Krueger might be seen as the dark reflection of such fantasies—the evil twin, as it were. He stands for the twisted vision of America's underbelly, the depraved monster that it actually is, perhaps; or at the very least, might someday become. The one, fantasy figure, is that projected by middle-class complacency and authority; the other, nightmare creature, is the same figure, as seen through the eyes of the disenfranchised misfit youth. Both are popular icons favored by adolescent males, images of both cover bedroom walls all over the world, and both are supernaturally endowed killers with a *penchant* for one-liners. Both in their own way are quintessentially "American," in so far as no other national psyche could possibly have *conceived* them (and, aside from the lack of latex rubber, Schwarzenegger is every bit as much a creation of Hollywood as Freddy Krueger). Round about here the similarities cease, however.

Freddy Krueger, unlike the Schwarzenegger franchise, was created by a single man, Wes Craven, who successfully tapped into a vein in the collective brain of the horror-movie public, and struck a chord in the market (and hit pay dirt so far as his own career went). Freddy Krueger was, in his prime (which may well be over) as big a franchise as Schwarzenegger—he was every bit as much an icon, and probably more so amongst the younger generations. If the children of America chose for their cult hero a deranged, scarred child-molester and mass-murderer who haunts teenagers' nightmares from beyond the grave, then they presumably knew what they were doing (just as Craven did). They found themselves the icon they deserved; or, to put it more charitably, *needed*. Psychologists could indeed have a field-day with "the Freddy phenomenon," because it is anything but isolated, being only the most remarkable and outstanding symptom (amidst a plethora of symptoms) of the seemingly insatiable desire of young minds to emulate and vicariously experience ever-descending depths of depravity, perversity, brutality and horror, all in the hallowed name of "entertainment." Beyond Eastwood, Stallone, Schwarzenegger, even beyond Woody Allen, Freddy Krueger is undoubtedly the American hero of the era. We might even tentatively offer up our vote, at this juncture, for Freddy Krueger as "the man of the millennium."

No other popular movie figure so intensely and perversely embodies a trend, a sensibility, a motion, and a mythos, as Freddy, and it can hardly be coincidental that this icon, on his own terms, *has* no actual physical existence. Freddy enjoys his own quasi-reality in the dream realms, and makes his home in the collective *psyche* of man (actually that of kids, but that's really just an indication that youth itself enjoys, or endures, a stronger, closer relation to the id). Freddy is—as Craven's last film in the series *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* so adeptly and slyly testified—a

dream made flesh. His reality, his existence, depends wholly upon *our* own capacity, or tendency, or desire, to breathe life *into* him, to imagine him into being. He is, in other words, the quintessential, ultimate, supreme “monster from the id” (he is, in fact, the dark side *of* the id itself). The wonderful irony of the situation is that Freddy comes into being *despite* all our most fervent desires that he *not* do so, because of course *fear*, as one of the strongest emotions, serves as it were to feed and nourish his being: through fear our imagination grows stronger and Freddy in turn becomes more real. Hence, knowing that he is “only” imaginary is no consolation at all, it’s a deadly trap. Just as when someone tell us “think of anything except elephants,” and *all* we can think of is elephants, so, by learning that only by fearing Freddy can we make him real, our fear grows all the greater. His intimacy with us is total, he is the final, fatal realization of “the enemy within.” Because wherever fear is, *he* is, as the monster-manifestation of this fear. As such do I suggest him to be the perfect embodiment of our age (which is an age of fear)—the living, breathing avatar of the unconscious, a savage Messiah for a materialist apocalypse, and the final answer (or solution?) to all our millennial blues.

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You are all my children now!
—Freddy Krueger

In order to qualify this claim, to begin let us with note the fact that *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), the original Freddy Krueger movie (written and directed by Craven), took its title from a news article on the assassination of JFK: Elm Street being no less that the precise location, the very place, where *the dream ended* (according to contemporary folklore); and, logically, the place the American nightmare began. Observe also Freddy’s grungy but totally indispensable red-and-green-striped jersey, which bears an unmistakable resemblance to the American flag, being a kind of negative inversion of it no less (with green instead of red, dark red instead of white). Do you dismiss such details as coincidental? It matters not whether Craven was conscious of the creative, alchemical process which he was merely instrumental in bringing about, he was, after all, but a conveniently accessible and amenable psyche through which the demonic force now known as “Freddy Krueger” could manifest itself in the Earth realms, through the popular and harmless (heh-heh) medium of movies. Does the awful truth begin to dawn?

I am joking of course, but not without an ulterior reason—there is a method in my madness, as will become plain. Freddy is, cinematically speaking at least, but also I think culturally and even socially, the very spirit of anarchy of which we have been speaking so much of late. Which is precisely why—I believe—he has been embraced by the (ever rebellious) American youth as a *countercultural* hero, who serves as a tonic and a foil for the absurd, quasi-fascist macho posturing of Stallone/Schwarzenegger et al. (It’s amusing to imagine one of these *übermensches* faced with Freddy—they would be utterly out of their depth, and end up quite literally as so much mincemeat.¹) Freddy may be mean, cruel, sadistic and insane (rather like the Arab/homo villains of certain movies), but he is at least *an individual*. Rebellious, eccentric, with a perverse

¹. It’s interesting to note here Carol Clover’s comments on the horror *milieu* vs. that of the action film, in *Men Women and Chainsaws*: “If Rambo were to wander out of the action genre into a slasher film, he would end up dead.” (pg. 99.) In the horror film, excess masculinity is invariably seen to be pitifully inadequate in the face of the unknown, and is accordingly punished with extinction.

sense of humor, Freddy shows far more spontaneity, freedom, energy, personality, and just plain *spirit* than most of the stiff-necked, square-jawed *heroes* who plod and pose and pummel their way through the average Hollywood movie.

So, whence came this paragon of cultural protest and subversive action? Freddy Krueger was born—the first time around—through an act of negligence. He is described in the first film as “the bastard son of a thousand maniacs.” What happened is as follows: a nurse at the local mental asylum was mistakenly locked inside with the lunatics over the weekend (and what a nasty realization *that* must have been!), becoming their plaything for the ensuing 48 hours or so. When the staff returned on Monday morning, the nurse was a gibbering wreck who never recovered from her ordeal; more importantly, she was also large *with child*. This “original” story is about as luridly loopy as befits the birth of a dream-maniac, having about as much sense of logic as your average nightmare. Asylums don’t “close” for the weekend, for one thing, and the chances of such a “demonic” child ever being allowed to be born seem slim; even if it were (and it was), the fact is that only *one* spermatozoa from *one* maniac can really be said to have created the child, so so much for the “thousand maniacs” bit. Still, one can’t *expect* (much less demand) logic from a nightmare—it wouldn’t be a nightmare if you could—and it’s unfair to ask for coherence or plausibility from a myth or a fairy tale, especially one designed for a horror movie. So let’s let it go at that.

Freddy’s second birth, as a dream/ghost entity haunting the local psyche, came about in a slightly more obscure fashion. Freddy grew up to be—surprise surprise—a dedicated child molester and/or serial killer who terrorized the neighborhood until the day a group of outraged parents banded together (into your standard lynch mob), hunted Freddy down, and burned him alive, all in the “interests” of their children’s safety, of course. At which point, Freddy ceased to exist on the physical plane but, as we now know, lingered about the astral dimensions just waiting for his chance for revenge. All questions as to the plausibility of all this (as relating to occult esoterica) aside, the psychological/metaphorical subtext of this modern “legend” (in the movie at least it has become such, centering around the house and street where Freddy died) is fairly solid. Freddy of course represents the “sins of the fathers” which have been landed on the children for God knows how many generations (or sequels) to come. The idea of one person/people avenging/destroying an evil in order to protect another person/people otherwise uninvolved (and even unaware) *from* said evil, and thereby implicating them in it, is, (as this sentence amply demonstrates) an enormously complex idea. What I mean to say is—the parents act out of fear and hatred and destroy a “monster,” in order to protect their (innocent) children from it. In the process however, they create an emotional/spiritual tie *with* the “monster” (become one with it, just as Nietzsche warned us about); the tie is then passed on to the children, who naturally inherit the consequences of their parents’ misguided (though well-intentioned) deeds. Hence when Freddy “returns” it is through, and even *as*, the nightmares of the children (specifically Nancy, the daughter of the town sheriff—played by John Saxon—who headed the “posse”). Freddy therefore represents the secret, hidden corruption of the parents (and the town), in a word, their *conscience*, as it is awoken in the children, who are both accountable for, and *the judges of*, this secret sin. Hence, by attempting to *protect* the innocents from evil, the vengeful parents have in fact implicated them in *their own evil*, and brought it down on everybody’s heads. Or, to put it another way, by choosing to fight on their behalf, the parents have drawn the children into the battle.

Perhaps I am making this seem more complicated than it is, however. The Freddy films are fairly straightforward horror movies which nonetheless (and this is the secret of their success), by drawing upon mythological notions of sin/guilt and revenge/accountability, are above all psychodramas, more akin to films like *Blue Velvet* and *Taxi Driver* (in their underlying themes, though obviously not their quality as art) than to your average slasher flick. If they appear to be devoid of such complex subtexts, it's because, unlike the afore-mentioned psychodramas, the Freddy films are anything but character-driven (Freddy is the only real(!) personality in them), and hence the psychological truths which they explore are collective rather than individual, and so appear diffuse, obscure, and largely incidental. And to a great extent they may be unintentional too, on the part of the filmmakers (though I suspect that Craven at least had a fair idea what he was about). Of course to a certain extent, any genre movie (and especially horror movies) can be analyzed for its "deeper meanings" as a popular myth because, so far as it adheres to the conventions and formula of that myth, it is following and developing trends laid down, finally (and mysteriously), by the collective psyche of the public themselves. Generic fare has always responded to unconscious demand, and finds its form through trial and error and endless hit-and-miss variations, and films like *Die Hard* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* serve as outstanding examples of the formulas, hence can be analyzed to illustrate the trends/demands of which I speak.

A Nightmare on Elm Street, or more specifically the personal history of its protagonist, might be read as a (partial) blueprint for a specific side of the contemporary (American) psyche, directly relating to the teenage portion of the population, but also indirectly connected to the older generations. Picture this: the American government goes to war in Vietnam to protect—indirectly—its own people from the spreading "contamination" of Communism; it decides what is "evil," and then sets out to destroy this evil; it fails, because "evil" can never be *destroyed*, as such, but only checked in its progress, or otherwise displaced, relocated, or simply given another name (I'm precluding any possibility of redemption, seeing as once something's been named as *evil* it's already damned). In the process then, all it can do (this omnipotent, all-wise, protecting, parental State) is put its own people—those it pretended to want to save—through hell, a hell created by its own fears, effectively bringing this evil home to them. In more simple terms—all it can do is sacrifice the "innocents" to this "evil" by compelling them to do battle with it. So, just as the parents in *Nightmare* attempt to eradicate Freddy's "reign of terror," so the American government attempted to wipe out the encroaching "evil" of communism. And, precisely as this attempt only led to the infection of the children's dreams, and the endangerment of their lives and sanity, so were the American people "haunted" by the specter—the shame and horror and insanity—of the Vietnam war. *Not* communism, then, but America's *fear* of communism became the boogeyman, the curse, of the American people. And not Freddy Krueger (who was after all only mortal), but the over-protective, self-righteous parents' *fear* (and hatred) of Freddy becomes the nightmare ordeal—the "karma" if you will—of the children.

All this is a very long-winded way of saying that the *Nightmare* films, despite *appearing* to propagate the very kind of mayhem and mindless brutality which I have previously condemned in Schwarzenegger/Stallone action movies, are, in actual fact, subtly and profoundly *subverting* such ideas; are, in a word, a form of cultural *counter* propaganda. As if conceived in the younger generation's own psyches, the Freddy mythos serves as a defense against the quasi-Nazi bullshit which the media (as young people's only real connection to political agendas) is so relentlessly

dumping upon them. Which is why I call Freddy Krueger, as the anti-hero for the nihilistic age, the youth's very own answer to the all-American *Übermensch*.

Admittedly, Krueger—as a child-murderer and all-round sicko-pervert/sadist creep—is not exactly the role model we might wish for our children, and the fact that his scarred, leering face and razor-clawed right-hand adorns pin-ups in adolescent bedrooms all over the world may make one wonder just what these kids are growing up to *be*. But the point is, these kids' selection of Freddy as their “hero” is a deliberate, conscious and *direct* response to, and expression of, their disillusionment with the world as they perceive it to be. It is their *own* expression of cynicism, despair, horror and disgust at the state of things. And, as such, it is a healthy *reaction* to an extremely, and perhaps terminally, *unhealthy* situation. Freddy is only a symptom after all, and as such, distressing as it must undoubtedly sound, he's part of the “cure,” and not part of the disease. Rambo and Schwarzenegger and the All-American Family Unit, and Decency and Conformity and Mom's Apple Pie (equally embodied and propagated by films such as *Top Gun*, *Field of Dreams*, *Forrest Gump* etc.), the shiny, shopping mall surface of society, the “chrome-plated, depthless, high-tech, style-dominated, who-gives-a-damn postmodern world that Hollywood helps to construct...”²—*this* is the real disease. And it may be that the seething black mass of putrid bile and devouring, parasitical beetles that lurk and fester beneath the surface—the world which Freddy Krueger and Frank Booth call home—might be closer to the *real state* of affairs, to our own secret psyches, at this time. In which case, there's no getting away from it. As the poets say: where the disease *is*, there seek the cure. And, if no disease is terminal so long as you catch it in time, then the only really fatal condition—is ignorance.

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Better the devil we know than the God we don't
—Folk saying

The third film of the *Nightmare* series, subtitled *Dream Warriors* (and directed by Renny Harlin, from a story by Craven), is, I think, along with the last film, the best of the bunch. This is above all because it takes the surrealistic potential of Craven's original idea further than any of the other films, and because it portrays the kids not as victims but as the worthy opponents of the nightmare king, Freddy. The only way for the youthful, vibrant heroes and heroines to do battle with the monster of the id is, of course, to enter into their own dreams and meet him on common ground. In other words, they have to navigate the Id, and somehow keep their own egos, their sanity and personalities, intact. Once there, they find that what made Freddy seem so terrifying and so formidable to them is also what makes him vulnerable: he's not “just” a dream, he's as real as their own thoughts and fears, but he's also no *more* real, and as part of their own psyches, as a marauding and terrible figment of their imaginations, he's subject to their own *wills* also. Hence, in *Dream Warriors*, these “kids” learn the ancient shamanic art of “dream control” (popularly, “lucid dreaming”), they learn to master their dreams, to remain conscious while dreaming, to the point of being able to manipulate their consciousness. So, as easily as we change our minds or picture a sunset, they assume supernatural powers and mold the landscape of their dreams, thereby claiming the very power that Freddy had hitherto kept to himself. There can be

². Rushing and Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow*, pg. 6.

no greater, more poetic and more imaginative illustration in modern movies of the possibility (and necessity) of *recognizing the monster as ourselves*, and, in facing this monster on his own ground, inside the Id—on the dark, unknown side of our psyches—overcoming all our deepest fears.

I think this is why Freddy developed—as the series went on—a rather more cheery, affable, almost “pally” side to his nature; he never became less nasty or monstrous, but he became somehow less fearsome, more familiar, and though this didn’t really fit with the thrust of the films themselves (Freddy remained the monster, and there was never any hint of his being “redeemed”), it seems like an appropriate, indeed inevitable, development. Because, as the kids (in the film, and in the audience also) got to know Freddy better, he became less strange and therefore less fearful, and finally less powerful. His power being, after all, wholly dependent on his ability to convince us that he *is* real, and this he does through terror, the only currency he recognizes. Hence the more familiar he became, the less frightening also, the less real. The films accordingly became weaker, milder, more frivolous, and Freddy began to assume the innocuous, sanitized style of another commodity, or franchise, a kind of R-rated, ultra-nasty Dennis the Menace figure, complete with nine-inch nails.

Craven rightly attempted to correct this “development” with his “swan-song,” *Freddy’s New Nightmare*, in which he slyly and ingeniously blended ordinary reality with the cinematic fantasy, by introducing various actors from the first film into the action, playing themselves, and even playing a part *himself*, as the writer-director of the new film being made. The premise of the film is that, while making this last sequel, Freddy begins to *step over* from fantasy into reality, and stalk the actors and filmmakers involved in his “creation.” *Via* these films, then, as the steadily growing *image/idea* of Freddy gathers clarity and power in the collective (un-)consciousness, so the reality comes into being. The idea is worthy of Jung (to whom it is presumably indebted), as well as adhering fairly closely to occult lore of “inorganic entities” and whathaveyou (summoned by the various Necronomicon, like the spirit forces in *The Evil Dead*). Craven (as himself) explains that there exists an entity, a vast, interstellar awareness, without organic structure but alive, an ancient force of evil (from whence presumably originate all our *human* ideas of Devil, Satan etc.) which is now approaching once more the earth realm, and is *using* the minds of human beings to gain access to it. Hence, what it requires above all are ideas, thoughts and images that relate to and evoke the concept of evil, and the corresponding sensation/emotions of *fear*. The image, or collective archetype, that this force has found to be most firmly embedded and predominant in the collective Earth psyche, is not that of Satan, or even Adolf Hitler, but—wait for it—Freddy Krueger. And so Freddy is coming into his own at last—meaner, stronger, more vicious and ruthless, and most definitely *more real*, than ever before.

The “joke” here is devastatingly canny on Craven’s part; it positively takes one’s breath away, to the point that one may not feel much like laughing. With this premise, Craven is drawing on the deepest, most ancient and primal fears and beliefs of humanity, and tapping into a genuine fountain of “atavistic forces”—not of evil exactly, but of darkness and chaos certainly. This is a “force” so ancient and mysterious that to date the only name which modern science has come up with to describe it is: “the unconscious.” As a “name,” this is tantamount to admitting that *we don’t know what the hell we are talking about!* (But then “electricity” may be just as ancient and mysterious a force—today’s natural forces are yesterday’s gods.) “Ancient” man had other names for it of course, and religion still has a few; perhaps the most user-friendly (because the most

flattering) might be: “soul.” I think that, on reflection, Freddy Krueger may indeed be - after Old Nick at least—the purest, most archetypal and most accessible mythological figure of evil we’ve got; certainly, he’s the most widely recognized as a visual icon. And the *Nightmare* films, although for the most part depressingly devoid of artistic merit, and even short of much real imagination, remain perhaps the most “quintessential” horror movies of them all. Certainly the last in the series, even though it degenerates into schlock gore and special effects banality by the end, is a seminal work in the genre, and has what must be the final word on the subject.

We might, with not I trust an overly fanciful degree of elaboration, interpret its message thus: the Oversoul—it suggests—is coming back to claim its territory (Earth); this Oversoul is so unfamiliar to us that it can only be described as an interstellar entity. Psychologically speaking, the collective, race unconscious has become, from the point of view of a materialist society, verily cosmic in proportions: the Id has become the ultimate “space invader.” Rushing and Frenz write that “a communal soul cannot return without understanding how the very culture that mourns its loss is also constituted to resist its arrival.”³ This entity, then, finds our cluttered ego-minds to be so aberrant and confusing, so resistant to it, that the only suitable and appropriate archetype it can find, with enough life and resonance to serve as a vehicle of manifestation, whereby it can meet us on the earth plane—is a B movie monster. So say hello to your soul. And the soul replies, with a leery grin: “Pleased to meet ya! Hope you guessed my name!”

It’s enough to make you wonder if Wes Craven was working for the Devil, after all?

³. Ibid.